



## HILTON HEAD ISLAND

# Adventure Deconstructed

STORY Cindy Whitman

### Part 1 —————

Okay, let's cut to the chase. Or, in this case, the lack thereof.  
Hilton Head is only a twelve-mile island.  
There's not a lot to chase.  
No heli-pad required.  
No Sherpa.  
No shoes.  
That's the beauty part.  
You get caught ... up.  
It's an adventure for the soul.  
A barefooted history lesson.  
It's breath taking.  
And it's quiet.  
Quiet.  
Quiet.  
Quiet.  
That's when the adventure begins.

### Part 2 —————

To do Hilton Head deconstructed right, it's wise to take advantage of the luxury hard work has afforded and book a first row beach house for the entire month of October. This is the Island's best kept secret. The tourists, the heat, the humidity, and hurricane season have all come and gone and the entire month is one long seventy-five and sunny Indian summer day. Best of all, everything there is to learn and to love about this historic sea island remains, including twelve miles of pristine, protected, and suddenly oh, so deliciously private public beaches. The island tide swings six to eight feet every day, and when it's out, the beach is wide and flat and the sand is hard and packed, making it ideal for biking and jogging and sea gull and dolphin and shrimp boat and sun-dappled water gazing. The few people one does meet along the way are smile-and-a-brief-wave friendly but never intrusive, partly because there's tons of room for everyone, but mostly because they have deconstructed and are quietly drinking it all in, too.





### Part 3

When it comes to Hilton Head, beauty is in the eye of the desensitized beholder. It's not crayon-colored like Disneyland. It's not sexy like South Beach. The sand isn't a blinding white, the water isn't turquoise, and by decree, the infrastructure color palate, both business and residential, is brown, tan, and beige and tucked behind and in between the trees. There's a wattage regulation for local business light signage, and once the sun sets the island is pretty much plunged into complete darkness so that the sea turtles will follow the natural path of the moon up onto the beach, lay their eggs, and then follow the pull of the tide back out to sea. Make no mistake: The loggerheads, and the blue herons, and the egrets, and the pelicans, and the cranes, and bald eagles, and the dolphins, and the shrimp, and the oysters, and the alligators, and the salt marshes, and the palm trees, and the Spanish moss, and the live oaks, and the beaches — all of God's natural creations great and small — are the island's most important guests. They always have been. They always will be.

Hilton Head doesn't pop.

It doesn't buzz.

It doesn't sizzle.

And yet, to those who know and love it, this twelve-mile island is paradise in its purest, most perfect, and most protected form. The sea water isn't crystal clear because it's teeming with rich nutrients that feed the local shrimp and the teeming oyster beds, and fill the air with rejuvenating negative ions that feed the senses. The island's naturally muted color palate is a sight for sore, over stimulated eyes. It soothes. The unique Lowcountry convergence of three distinct eco-systems — woodlands, salt marsh, and ocean — offers an exhilarating environmental adventure unlike any other in the United States.



### Part 4

4,000 years ago a small tribe of Yemasee Indians sat around a campfire in what is now the Sea Pines Forest Preserve, shucking and sucking down these succulent morsels of briny protein and tossing the empty shells (it would seem to reason) over their shoulders, creating an ancient Indian shell ring that still stands today, preserved and protected with the same reverence and respect for the island's history.

It doesn't have to be October, but if one desires to deconstruct a dozen of these local beauties on the half shell or to

experience the hands-on adventure of standing outside at a tall rustic wooden table with shirtsleeves shoved up to the elbows, oyster knife in hand, shucking a bucket of freshly harvested and roasted heaven and chasing them down with ice cold beer while a local band serenades the feast, the adventure must be planned during an "r" month, because that's when the local oysters are in season.

It's the tourist season rule of thumb:

September through April: Yes, yes, yes.

May, June, July, and August: No, no, no, no.





## Part 5

It's a little-known historical fact that, as it drew to a close, the civil war that divided our country, often pitting brother against brother, dovetailed here on this tiny, twelve-mile barrier island. In October 1861, The Union Army sailed into Port Royal Sound with a fleet of 60 ships and 20,000 troops, and, after a brief battle, Hilton Head fell. A little more than a year later, President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation prompting Union General Ormsby Mitchel to cede a portion of the land that his troops had cleared to the newly freed sea island slaves. The first self-governed freedmen settlement in America, the town of Mitchelville served as a model for freedmen everywhere. The success of the settlement's adventuresome founders — including the enactment of the first compulsory education law for black children — so impressed President Lincoln that he sent Harriet Tubman to Hilton Head to deconstruct the township's plan and carry it to other freedmen settlements. Thanks to the efforts of the Mitchelville Preservation Society, visitors to Hilton Head will one day be able to relive this part of the island's rich and storied Civil War history through exciting exhibits and reenactments. For now, all that's needed is to stand very still under the canopy of massive, century old, moss-dripping live oak trees in Fish Haul Creek Park and be quiet.

Quiet.

Quiet.

Quiet.

Deconstruct and listen for ... the singsong Gullah-Geechee dialect of the hopeful slaves as they picked sea island plantation cotton and whispered encouraging words to one another: *Salvation is coming. Soon we will be free* ... the slow crunch of loaded cotton wagons on sun-bleached tabby shell roads ... the clear tones of a bugle calling 20,000 Union troops to morning muster ... the steady staccato of gunfire over Port Royal Sound ... the sound of slavery's chains breaking ... let freedom ring.



## Part 6

150 years later, Hilton Head Island retains its historical fondness for breaking chains. There are more than 200 restaurants on the island and nearly nary a recognizable dining establishment logo among them. Even the largest restaurant group on the island has deconstructed the corporate chain restaurant model, choosing instead to empower the managers and employees of each individual establishment to first help set the themed course for, and to then steer their own ships. Of course, the 2.6 million tourists who flock to Hilton Head each year are chiefly to thank for this bountiful feast — make no doubt, without tourism and its 900 million dollars spent here each year, Hilton Head Island doesn't work, deconstructed or otherwise — but during the off-season, there's the added luxury of not having to endure the inexorable two hour summer waits for a table.

For a taste of local flavor, try The Sea Shack, which is exactly that. Don't over think it: If it's in season, order the shrimp. Order it fried. With hush puppies. Enjoy. For a fun casual dining adventure, pay a visit to Pete over at Fat Baby's Pizza, where the motto printed on the back of the local favorite's employee tee shirts pretty much speaks for the island: Play nice. For dessert, head over to The Purple Cow where Pete's sister, Bernie, serves up her signature Baby Cakes (mini cheesecakes), cookies and cocktails. Finally, although even during the off-season you'll stand in line alongside sweaty construction workers and deconstructed businessmen dressed in khaki shorts, slightly starched button-down shirts, and flip flops at both Fiesta Fresh locations at lunch time, the first bite of a spicy burrito or crispy fish taco is enough said. Really, at the end of a deconstructed day, high end or low end, breakfast, lunch, or dinner, it's hard to go wrong. Just take a tip from local history and break the chains.

## Part 7

As with most resort islands, drinking establishments abound on Hilton Head, but one is hard pressed to find a happier — or more deconstructed — cocktail hour than at the tiny outdoor Hurricane Bar in Palmetto Bay Marina. It's a local haunt so it's wise to get there early. Grab a table or a stool and plan to eavesdrop. Everyone does. That's how news travels. Guests to the island can also pick up a plethora of great tips on how best to enjoy their deconstructed island adventure from the friendly locals. In fact, it doesn't take long for visitors to discover that most of the locals are not only able but quite willing to serve; it's how most of them make their living after all. That said, here's a friendly word of caution from someone who learned the hard way (me): In order to both receive and retain a truly warm local welcome wherever you choose to dine or drink or stay — and it truly is part of this tiny island's deconstructed charm — it's a very good idea to toss any and all sense of money-spending tourist entitlement into the Cross Island toll booth receptacle along with the required five quarters upon arrival. Yes, the locals live to serve. But they also live on the island. Hilton Head is their home. And though they love to show it off, they don't cotton to cantankerousness and they don't cater to credit cards.

Be a good guest.

Relax.

Enjoy the view.

Say please and thank you.

As they say at Fat Baby's: *Play nice.*





## Part 8

According to local lore — and I happen to know this to be true because it happened to yours truly — while it is possible for one to live on the island and then return to the real world once ... maybe twice ... three times is the proverbial charm. City wattage is just too bright. It's hard to fall asleep at night. It's never quiet, quiet, quiet. Or maybe it's simply a matter of sea level gravitational pull. Whatever the island's irresistible beck and call may be, it's not surprising that, at the end of a week or two of deconstructed days, a disproportionate number of Hilton Head Island visitors who come here to play decide they just can't bear to tear themselves away. And so they stay. The young and eager get jobs and build businesses and families. Those who are older, wiser, and ready for retirement purchase stately homes tucked inside quietly graceful gated plantations. And a majority of those who do return to their own homes, once they've discovered this deconstructed fountain of rejuvenation, choose to return year after year after year. Generations of families still vacation here. There's just something about this twelve-mile island. It's like no other place.

It has a certain mystery.  
A certain history.  
A grace.

## Part 9

Oh.  
Right.  
And there's golf. KA



# Confidential Cuisine

### Rasika

Rasika in Penn Quarter took the Washington food scene by storm when it opened a decade ago and a *Washington Post* food critic instantly dubbed it “the best modern Indian restaurant in the country.” Now, with a second Rasika location across town (the name is Sanskrit for “flavors”), the rave reviews just keep on coming. Try the flash-fried spinach appetizer with sweet yogurt and chutney. Unforgettable.

633 D St. NW | 202.637.1222 | [rasikarestaurant.com](http://rasikarestaurant.com)

### Garrison

With new eateries opening seemingly every week, this welcoming American-themed restaurant, located in the DC's historic Capitol Hill neighborhood, is already included on top 10 lists, with an emphasis on creative cocktails and farm-to-table vegetarian offerings that prompt lots of plate sharing across tables.

524 Eighth St. SE | 202.506.2445 | [garrisondc.com](http://garrisondc.com)

### In The Capital City **REVIEW** Belle Elving

Washington, long known for its clubby K Street martini- and-steak houses where lawmakers and lobbyists mix pleasure with business, has in recent years become a gustatory feast for serious foodies, brimming with acclaimed chefs, globe-spanning cuisine, and discerning patrons. Here are a few all-stars to consider when planning a visit to the nation's capital. Note: It's wise to make reservations well in advance of your trip.

### Le Diplomate

Le Diplomate is Washington's current biggest crush — a relative newcomer but already considered an old friend, affectionately nicknamed Le Dip. More than a restaurant, it's an evening in Paris, complete with bistro-cozy leather banquettes, sidewalk tables, perfectionist cocktails, and classic comfort food with a French accent featuring oven-fresh baguettes with soft butter, onion soup gratinée, glistening escargot, steak au poivre, and a lovely wine list. Packed and praised since opening two years ago, Le Dip is the undisputed crown jewel of the city's resurgent 14th Street corridor, one of the liveliest restaurant districts in town. This warm and welcoming brasserie is a beacon for hipsters, socialites, politicians and people-watchers. (Michelle Obama dropped in for an evening with friends the night before a state dinner with French President Françoise Hollande last year. Need we say more?) Romantic enough for anniversaries, animated enough for millennials, quiet enough for conversationalists, and much less expensive than flying to France, Le Diplomate is a de rigueur D.C. dining destination.

1601 14th St. NW | 202.332.3333 | [lediplomatedc.com](http://lediplomatedc.com)

### Fiola Mare

Commanding as an ocean liner docked on the Georgetown waterfront, with expansive views of the Kennedy Center glimmering across the Potomac River, Fiola Mare is a visual feast celebrating the cuisine of coastal Italy, with seafood dishes and a selection of fine wines that may make it Washington's most memorable dining experience. The seasonal menu changes daily and creatively.

3050 K St. NW | 202.628.0065 | [fiolamaredc.com](http://fiolamaredc.com)

### On The Avenue **REVIEW** Sabra Turnbull

#### Ilili

Ilili, a creatively tweaked Lebanese restaurant, is what passes for a hidden gem in New York City. That means you only need to book your table a week or two ahead. Still, it is conveniently located on Fifth Avenue a little below midtown. Although many consider it pricey for “ethnic” food, it comes in well below most of the fashionable restaurants, and the food is surprisingly inventive. Standards such as the pita, labne (thick yogurt), and tabbouleh are high quality versions of traditional Lebanese cuisine.

The kitchen has a way with vegetables using traditional ingredients in new ways. The warm eggplant, thin slices sautéed with tamarind molasses, and brussels sprouts with spiced yogurt, walnuts, and grapes are a revelation to meat and potatoes eaters. Meat dishes include duck shawarma served with fig jam, green onion and garlic whip and lamb chops with zaatar (a Mediterranean herb mix) and roasted tomatoes.

While the food menu is extensive and unusual, cocktails and even mocktails are also creative and delicious. The wood and glass décor is modern and noisy on busy evenings. “Quiet restaurant” is an oxymoron in New York. Nevertheless, the servers are friendly and knowledgeable about the food and drinks, and their suggestions may take you out of your comfort zone into a revelatory and welcome experience.

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