

Palmetto Ponderings

Fock 1: Hilton Headgames

From Brevard, it would not have been unreasonable to backtrack east and get back onto the Interstates to head for Sacramento. It sounds unreasonable, I suppose – going east from Carolina to drive to California – but 75 mph on the Interstates probably would have outrun the narrow, twisting – albeit more direct -- roads through the forested mountains around the NC-SC border. The highways would not, however, have outdone those roads for character. The cut through SC was brief enough, just 60 miles or so, but the contrast to some previous South Carolina experiences was striking.



Hanging a left at the town of Rosman, Blue Man and I steered for Sassafras Mountain. It is the highest point in South Carolina, and sits just across the border from NC on Highway 178. That road was classic. I have to drive it again sometime.

As NC began to run out of road, Route 178, a two-lane road that would like a drunken python up and down coolly wooded hillsides, became like an old age home for trucks. Worn-out, rusted truck cabs seemed to gaze longingly at the road from every turn. The forgotten rigs sat in forlorn disuse, looking able but, sadly, replaced.

Then, not far inside South Carolina, there was Bob's Place. Half of me wishes that I had stopped there, but the other half is damn glad I didn't. Bob's Place was about the size of small mobile home, but was more of a wooden shack. A Pabst sign hung unevenly from the front corner. A rebel flag draped proudly across the front wall, and four loud-looking motorcycles parked by the door were the only indications that people might have been inside.

Behind the bar building was a fairly large and open backyard that led to The Roadkill Grill. It was nothing more than four posts, a shanty roof, a big old couch, and a barbecue grill. A couple of thoughts crossed my mind as I eyed the place: (1) I bet there would be one kickass Fourth of July party in that yard the next day, and (2) my northern ass and my give-away NY tags would NOT be welcome here. They might as well have posted a sign: "Tourists and Yankees need not apply."

As I toured those NC/SC backroads, it occurred to me that, if I lived there, I would be a Jeep kinda guy. Not a pickup truck, a Jeep. And probably not a Wagoneer or a Cherokee, just your basic, high-abuse, zoom-around, soft-top-with-a-roll-bar, yeee-ha Jeep. It'd be redneck enough.



South Carolina is known as the Palmetto State, being named after a type of tree that is common there. It also flutters proudly on their state flag. Clearly, they like that tree.

I liked it too, but mainly because of the new life environment it symbolized when this native New Englander made a half-blind relocation to Hilton Head Island.

Hilton Head is about as much South Carolina as Tampa is. It is a truism that a region is often not represented well by its most popular spots. Nevada is not Las Vegas. New York State is not New York City, and wouldn't want to be.

And Hilton Head Island, though it is part of South Carolina, is definitely NOT representative of the rest of the state.

It lies just off the coast at the southern tip of South Carolina, almost as if it were trying to sneak away, or hoping to be mistaken for a part of Georgia or Florida. It is far from the landlocked cities of Greenville, Spartanburg, Columbia, and Florence, and the Civil War Memorials and monuments that bespeak their roles in American history, their distinctive character, and their southern charm.

Hilton Head is a paradise for golf, tennis, and beach vacations. It is the upscale part-time home for those who are Somebody on the east coast. It is the caste system at its best: the privileged class, who own the homes and the memberships at the elite country clubs, live in tightly gated communities, safely walled away from the servant class that collect minimum wage while catering to their whims.

The island also lures the upper middle class tourists from the north who rush in large numbers to flee the overlong winters and break out the sticks in short sleeve shirts on sunny fairways in March, or to delay winter's onset and prolong summer's passions into November. They also drink, and bartenders thrive in those key vernal and autumnal months. Eighty-hour workweeks are common because it is Time To Garner Income. You bust, bust, and eschew sleep as being "for pussies" because you need to make twelve months' worth of wages and tips in those two three-month periods. Summer is just too darn hot for golf and tennis (though the beaches still seem to work pretty well), and Winter is not quite warm enough to keep snowbirds from flying right on by to Florida.

This place is not the real world. And that is precisely why its well-to-do residents and visitors go there.

Professional golf and tennis tournaments bring the all-seeing eyes of television to this once-idyllic spot, and the island floods with spectators, media, and the just-plain curious. Corporate junkets and boondoggles abound, and the excessive in-season hotel rates prove no obstacle to expense-accounted guests.

It is an exclusive place, and too often in my eight-month life there I felt too excluded. Interstate 278 serves as the central artery of the island, connecting it to the less-affluent mainland, and feeding traffic almost to the southern end. Despite the road's alpha-numeric designation, I'm sure the HHI Chamber of Commerce would prefer to use the word "parkway" rather than "highway" to describe their carefully landscaped centerpiece. It has a wide meridian that is bedecked with trees, shrubs, and flowers. The stores and malls and whatnot that line it on both sides are limited by strict codes of appearance, which includes a prohibition on electric signage, thus eliminating the garish or meretricious glow; all signs had to be of carved wood and spotlighted from below. The road truly does look very, very nice, and you have plenty of time to savor the aesthetics because it is choking with cars!!

Since almost all the roads that branch off 278 lead to gated communities where random riff-raff (like me) is not welcome, that central artery gags with vehicle overdose. Those none-shall-pass booths take away the serene pastime of just cruisin' around a nice neighborhood and appreciating the beautiful homes.

We always used the word "cruisin'" to simply mean "aimless driving" – it had nothing to do with the quest for sex. Whether it was slowly rolling around wooded dirt roads, or exploring affluent residential areas, a cruise was just a way of



diggin' tunes, coppin' a buzz, and watching some very nice views coast by. Many times, Richie, Big Joe and I would actually go so far as to get out of the car and give an extra nice house a standing ovation. The three of us would just stand in the street, and give a hearty round of applause in appreciation of the homeowner's efforts, the landscaper's skills, and the architect's vision. We would applaud for up to a minute for the best homes. Nobody ever seemed to wonder, or even notice. Probably just as well...

The southern tip of Hilton Head is the snobbiest. It may not still be the elitest, but it definitely is the most elitist. It's called Sea Pines, and what bothered me about it was that you had to pay a three-dollar fee just to enter that area, which included Harbortown, a quaint and very pricey little town and marina. Like you weren't going to spend enough money down there as it was. I guess they wanted to keep out the riff-raff like me, but I foiled them. I rode my bike in. They still wanted to charge me, so I used different ploys to dodge the fee. After all, three dollars was a beer!

Sometimes, I would wait until the toll troll was dealing with a car that was entering, and I would slip by on the Exit side. But usually, I just wound up to my highest gear, got a full 30 MPH head of steam up, and zoomed by, oblivious to the shouts of protest.

One time after I did that though, I saw my 1993 candidates for Stupidest Parents Of The Year. Hilton Head Island has gators. Yes, alligators. It's not exactly the Everglades, but they are gators just the same. Even Indigo Run, the country club I bartended at, had some gators in the ponds. I only saw a couple of little baby ones myself.

Well, anyway, next to one of the ponds in Sea Pines, a decent sized alligator was just chillin' out on a summer afternoon, takin' in some rays. This was not particularly unusual. There were signs everywhere cautioning the public to keep away from the gators.

But, the Stupidest Parents Of The Year thought it would make for a cute photo to have their five-year-old son and four-year-old daughter pose for a picture, standing about fifteen feet from the gator! And it wasn't like they said, "Quick, kids, go near that alligator for one second and we'll snap your picture." Nooooo, the damn retards were actually fiddling with the camera, and motioning the kids to get closer so they'd fit in the picture better. I could practically see the gator thinking, "yesss, you tasty morsels, come jussst a littttle closerrrr...."

I wheeled my bike around, went right up to the SPOTY, and in a voice that was urgent, but not loud and violent (didn't want to rile up Mr. Gator), I berated them for their ignorance, and then commanded the children to get away from the beast forthwith. Seeing my urgency, the kids quickly complied. The boy even had a kind of look on his face that said "See, Dad, I told you it was bad idea."

The HHI traffic is easier in June, July, August, and even early September because it is just too beastly hot in the Carolinas for any tourist with any sense to come for a visit. The golf courses look like empty pastureland, and without golfers, clubhouses can get by with less staff, so hours get cut. And without guests, the hotels don't book as many parties and banquets, so those folks get some "time off."

I had two bartending jobs when I was there – one at a hotel, and one at a golf course -- and the draining overworked weeks of Springtime barely kept me going through the 25-hour work weeks of summer. The leisure time was nice, but the lack of income was a tad irksome.

Indigo Run Golf Club, where I was hired as part of the original bar staff when they opened in the Spring of '93, offered FREE GOLF to their employees, and I used those empty summer hours to play on their empty summer course. It's a great course, and I usually found myself alone on it. I would tend the bar through lunchtime, and get released around 3:00. I'd procure a free golf cart, zoom to the first tee, and swing away. That July, daily highs topped 100° on 17 of the 31 days, and I'd wager that the others reached 95° easily. Dew points were in the mid-70's or higher. It was oppressive. Only a moron would be out on a golf course on such days.

So, there I was, the only moron on the course, with some beers in the bag, a good chill at hand, a plentiful supply of golf balls, and, unfortunately, a golf game that was in serious need of help. Had I come upon this job when my game was in a good groove, my skills would have improved remarkably. No such luck though; my game was in the gutter – apart from a couple of accidentally good rounds – and the more I swung, the worse my swing got. It added aggravation to the afternoon, but it was still a grand place to be.

An 18-hole round would take me less than two hours. I once played 36 holes in 3½ hours. Sometimes I would amuse myself by playing EQTM's (Equipment Quality Test Matches) -- Titleist vs. Maxfli, or Pinnacle vs. Top-Flite – to see which ball really did perform better. Research did, in fact, indicate that I didn't suck quite as much with the Titleist as I did with the other brands.

Being a brand new development, Indigo Run still had many vacant lots, and its membership roles were far from full. Most of the members were nice people, who looked upon the bartender as somebody who was there to offer a smile, an ear, and a well-mixed drink, and they tipped graciously.

Others, however, like Betty Raley, seemed to thrive on the belief that we were there to smooch her big fat white butt. Probably in her upper fifties, overweight, large-cheeked, and round-eyed, Betty would make her entrance into the clubhouse with an air of utter disdain for us, and would spend her lunchtime seeking reasons to complain. Her dark-haired husband accompanied her and sat across the table from her. I never heard him utter a word. Betty would order his lunch for him, and even use condescending phrases like, "oh, no, that's right, you can't eat that," or "no, I don't suppose you'd like that, would you??" I almost – almost, that is – felt sorry for the obsequious little dweeb, but I figured he must have married her for her money, and now he was paying the fine.

One of Rag Raley's reliable bitches was that her tea was cold. So this one day, I took a teacup full of water, and nuked it till it was bubbling, appropriately, like a witch's cauldron. When I came back to clear the lunch plates away, she did not complain about the tea. She did, however, bitch me out because the bottom of her sandwich roll was burnt. I apologized, as always, and made a show of searching for the roll to investigate. She snorted indignantly that she had eaten it anyway! I calmly replied that, if she wanted, I would examine her sandwich all over next time to be sure no such singing had taken place. She seemed contented for the moment, but probably realized after she left that I had simply volunteered to fondle her lunch with my grubby servant's hands.