

Why Bluffton is the perfect walkable Southern escape | Exclusive

Josephine Johnson For the Savannah Morning News

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Full disclosure: As a working musician, I've been to Bluffton, South Carolina, more times than I can count. A little over 25 miles from Savannah, the town's proximity makes gigging there fairly easy. But, in the 10 years since I've been traveling back and forth, I have never explored Bluffton beyond the places I play.

All that changed when Vincent and Danielle Harrison invited me for a two-night stay at their meticulously curated, 14-room boutique hotel, the [Old Town Bluffton Inn](#).



30 Photos

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One Tank Trip: A stroll through Bluffton's food, shops and inns

One Tank Trip: Explore Bluffton's walkable streets, award-winning dining, local shops, rich history and cozy inn along the scenic May River.

On the August morning I arrived, Vincent, bright-eyed and beaming, greeted me at the door. He swiftly ushered me to the front desk where his wife Danielle was, that day, fielding incoming phone calls. I noted a subtle floral fragrance floating lightly in the parlor and a little beige poodle tucked neatly upon a nearby couch. The tableau conveyed charming sophistication, while still feeling welcoming, relaxing.

Vincent showed me around the three-story accommodation, pointing out Danielle's penchant for creative decor. Each room appointed in unique furniture and cozy color schemes, all boasted luxurious walk-in showers and floor-to-ceiling bathroom mirrors—the culmination of Danielle's refined aesthetic sense.

After our tour, Vincent and I climbed into his work truck, and we briefly drove around Bluffton for a glimpse of the shops and restaurants I could explore later by foot. We stopped at the [Bluffton Oyster Factory](#) where I was introduced to Larry and Tina

Toomer. Larry is the mayor of Bluffton, and the oyster processing facility has been in his family since 1913. The day I met him, he was clad in jeans and t-shirt, managing details of the day's catch. Tina was busy in the market. They sell a range of local seafood, with oysters available Sept. 1 through May 15. I was lucky enough to be at the dock when one of their boats returned with fresh blue crabs.



Back entrance from the parking lot to Old Town Bluffton Inn. Josephine Johnson For The Savannah Morning News

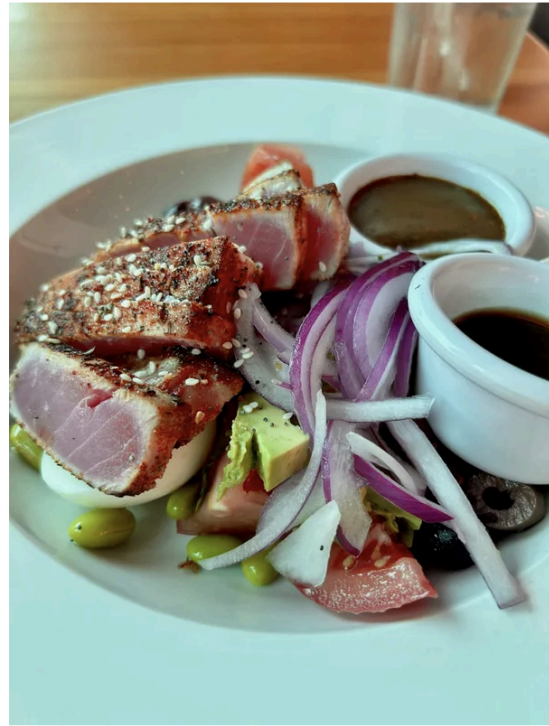
Once Vincent and I parted ways, I was on my own. One thing I especially adore about Old Town Bluffton is its walkability. With my vehicle safely parked at the inn, I was car-free for two days.

Walking up Calhoun Street toward the May River, local businesses lined both sides of the lazy thoroughfare. I popped into [Fiddle and Shine](#), a boutique focused on all things plants and propagation. [High Tide Beads](#) then beckoned where owner and artist, Steven Mardell, not only sells everything necessary for making necklaces and earrings, but also creates spectacular, multi-layered glass beads. Nearby, the [Calhoun Street Gallery](#) boasted lots of local artists' work plus exquisite fair trade silk scarves from around the world.



A boat with fresh blue crabs returns to the dock at Bluffton Oyster Factory on the May River. *Josephine Johnson For The Savannah Morning News*

My rumbling stomach indicated it was time for lunch. Luckily, I snagged the last open two-top on the porch of [Cottage Cafe, Bakery & Tea Room](#). Opened in 2009 within the historic Carson Cottage, owner and chef, Leslie Rohland, has garnered numerous accolades, including a USA TODAY 10 Best Readers' Choice Award. In 2024, Rohland was named South Carolina Chef Ambassador by the South Carolina governor and Department of Agriculture.



Naked Tuna salad at Cottage Cafe, Bakery & Tea Room, traditionally served with Chef Leslie Rohland's award-winning Caesar dressing.
Josephine Johnson For The Savannah Morning News

I opted for the Naked Tuna Salad, with seared tuna, avocado, olive, edamame, egg, onion, and tomato. Traditionally, this dish is served with Chef Rohland's acclaimed Caesar dressing, which contains dairy, but the team at The Cottage was able to switch it up for my order with a delicious dairy-free and gluten-free alternative. If you can do dairy and gluten, be sure to check out dessert. Locals swear by the Key Lime Banana Coconut cake that taunted me from the pastry case.

After lunch, I made my way to [La Petite Gallery](#), then Okan Bluffton for sorbet, and finally to the end of Calhoun Street where [The Church of the Cross](#) rises from the bluff above the May River. Completed in 1857 this Carpenter Gothic style building was one of the few structures Union forces spared when they burned most of the town in 1863. Today, the historic Anglican church looks and functions much as it always has, its exterior still clad in unpainted wood siding, with services Saturday nights and Sunday mornings. Docent-guided tours are available Monday through Thursday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and are free.



Exterior of The Church of the Cross overlooking the May River, Bluffton, South Carolina. Built in 1857, the structure survived the near complete burning of the town in 1863 during the Civil War. *Josephine Johnson For The Savannah Morning News*

Outside the church, the sky quickly began growing dark. It was time to get back to the inn. The first fat raindrops were just falling as I placed my entry card on the reader at the front door. Four hours and two thunderstorms later, it was still raining. Thankfully, Old Town Bluffton Inn has an assortment of sturdy umbrellas. I grabbed one and walked down the street to [Okan Bluffton](#) for dinner.

Friends have been raving about Okan Bluffton's food since it opened in summer 2023, so I knew it was going to be tasty. My server, Twyla, navigated the menu to recommend an appetizer of Crispy Shrooms, a fried assortment of mushrooms; side of Callaloo Rice, collards, garlic, callaloo (Caribbean leafy greens), and coconut milk; entree of Djon Djon Noodles, black mushrooms, trumpet mushrooms, beech mushrooms, spinach, green onions, and rice noodles. Everything she recommended was dairy-free and gluten-free. In fact, many items are also vegan and gluten-free. Meat-eaters have many options as well, dishes with beef, pork, seafood, goat and oxtail.



The writer's meal at Okan Bluffton--a side of Callaloo Rice, entree of Djon Djon Noodles, and appetizer of Crispy Noodles, flavorful, healthy, delicious
Josephine Johnson For The Savannah Morning News

I enjoyed the Crispy Shrooms so much I nearly ate all of them before the entree arrived. The Callaloo Rice was flavorful without being too heavy, and the Djon Djon Noodles were an exceptional taste experience unlike anything I'd ever had. Chef Bernard Bennett explained the rice noodles are black and earthy-tasting because of how they are prepared with the djon djon mushrooms native to Haiti. He went on to explain how each different mushroom variety adds to the unique flavor profile of the dish and how the entree itself reflects the cultural mixing that has taken place in the Caribbean for generations.

Arriving in Bluffton by way of Michigan and Chicago, Executive Chef Bernard Bennett is on a mission to use the freshest, locally-sourced ingredients in taking guests on a culinary quest through West African cooking traditions. In 2023, Bennet was recognized as a Semifinalist for Emerging Chef by the James Beard Foundation.



Chef Bernard Bennett and the writer at Okan Bluffton. *Josephine Johnson For The Savannah Morning News*

The next morning I walked to Wright Family Park where a pair of rope swings keep watch over the May River. A wedge of egrets and an osprey flew just above the sun-kissed water, and I climbed upon one of the wooden seats, quietly taking in the goings on of the verdant marsh.

Soon, I was walking to the [Bluffton Gullah Cultural Heritage Center](#), but it was closed for a private tour, so I checked out other buildings on the campus. A market and event space, [Backus Bakery](#), Ma Daisy's Porch, big trees, and ample outdoor seating make this property unique, comfortable, and fun. [Ma Daisy's Porch](#) is recognized for their signature Southern-style seafood dishes and, according to locals, serves the best scratch-made sweet potato *anything*—waffles, pie, pudding, cheese cake—all prepared next door at Backus Bakery.



Side view of the Bluffton Gullah Heritage Center.
Josephine Johnson For The Savannah Morning News

I made it to the [Bluffton Bookshop](#), which also serves ice cream, before the sky again grew dark. Perusing new titles made waiting out another summer rain storm much more enjoyable. Then, I was walking back to the Calhoun Street Promenade to check out art, boutiques, and eateries on the square.

If a walkable getaway with great food, cozy accommodations, and key American history sounds enticing, then spending a few days in Bluffton, South Carolina, is the destination for you.



One of the pair of commemorative swings perched beside the May River at Wright Family Park, Bluffton, South Carolina. *Josephine Johnson For The Savannah Morning News*
