



BY WILLIAM BALDWIN | FEB/MARCH 09

# Plantation Escape

Travel back to another era at Mansfield Plantation in South Carolina's Lowcountry

Down here IN THE South, land is about families. It was that way from the beginning. As Scarlett's daddy explained it to her: Clark Gable might come and go, but Tara is forever. And John Parker of Mansfield Plantation is another case in point—only a true-to-life one.

Since childhood, John Parker had his eye on a single property, a large tract of land that had belonged to his ancestors for centuries but fell out of the family in 1912 when it passed into the hands of wealthy Northern duck hunters. This is a familiar story. In this Lowcountry section of South Carolina, it's close to being the rule. What's unusual is that ninety years later, Parker was able to buy Mansfield Plantation back and hence accept both the pleasure and considerable responsibility of being a modern-day custodian.

Mansfield is a former rice plantation located just north of Georgetown, South Carolina, with about seven hundred acres of manicured uplands and three hundred acres of black-water rice fields, both crossed by miles of nature trails. A forest of soaring longleaf pines borders the entry road on both sides, giving way to a live-oak avenue flanked by slave cabins, leading to a handsomely restored 1815 plantation house and guest house. All of this operates as nature preserve and bed-and-breakfast. And as a family home.

When I first visited Mansfield, I spotted someone moving across a nearby field with a metal detector. His name was Hal McGirt, a retired telephone lineman who often comes here searching for artifacts. And finds them. When asked for results, he opened his palm. He'd just found a small button inscribed "U.S.A. Continental Army, 1777." Some of his most intricate finds are from uniforms, both Revolutionary and Civil War. "The men were quite the dandies," Hal explained. "Probably put the women to shame."

Both John and wife Sallie are descended from signers of the Declaration of Independence—and John from a signer of an Ordinance of Secession that led to the Civil War. John Parker is a thoroughly successful modern businessman, but gentle in manner. His petite wife has an engaging energy, the yin for her husband's yang. Her mother was the famed wildlife painter Sallie Middleton, whose prints adorn the guests' bedrooms. So she's called Sallie Middleton, Jr. It doesn't get any more Southern than that.

On my latest visit to Mansfield, I arose at dawn and walked the rice-field dikes for an hour, admiring the restful stretches of light and shadow. Unseen ducks called to each other in the mist. A grove of small golden-leaved cypress glowed brightly on a foggy gray morning—well worth the modest price of admission.

Not surprisingly, Mansfield has its regulars. People come for freedom from stress. One businesswoman comes once a month on doctor's orders. And of course, there are birders. Over two hundred species have been spotted here. Photographers love Mansfield; painters too, and moviemakers. The house was featured in *The Patriot* as the home of Mel Gibson's sister-in-law.

According to Sallie, they've had only two unhappy customers. One woman said she was bored out of her mind and kept asking about the malls. The other was too frightened to get out of the car. She thought her husband had brought her to the end of the world.

It's a compliment of sorts, this notion that Mansfield is that removed from the so-called safety of the modern world. But actually, although it feels remote, surrounded on all sides by hundreds of thousands of acres of private, state, and federally managed wildlife preserves, the historic port of Georgetown, with its fine restaurants, art galleries, and boutiques, is less than ten minutes away. Myrtle Beach, with its amusement parks and world-class golf courses, is about an hour to the north and the cobblestoned streets of Charleston an equal distance to the south. Still, Mansfield is in the "wilds" or as close as you can get in this century, a haven for people and animals alike.