

THE FORD *Plantation*

American industrialist and founder of the Ford Motor Company, the iconic Henry Ford sets root near the southern town of Savannah, Georgia a century ago and his legacy lives

011. BY ROSANNE ZINNIGER

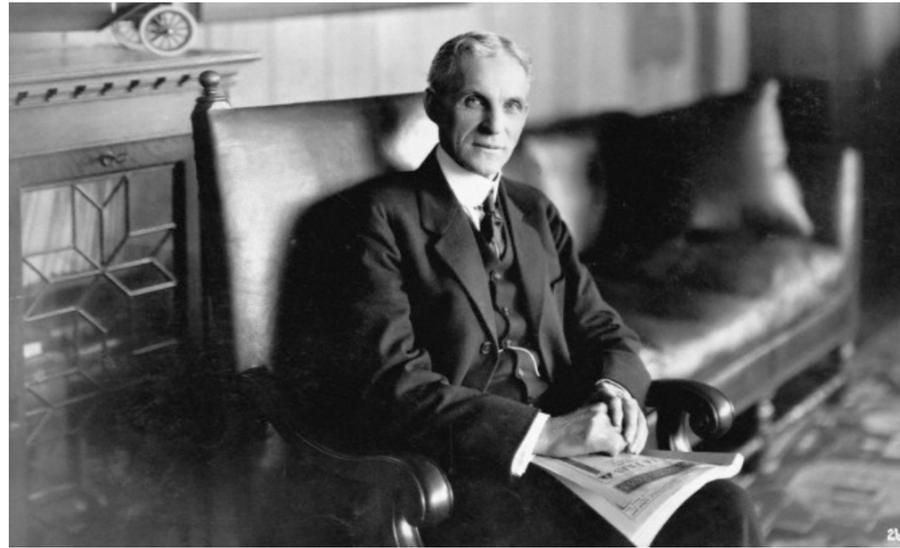
Sitting on the back balcony of the old Ford house, overlooking the Ogeechee River, a warm breeze rustles the moss of 17th century oak trees. The squawk of a soaring turkey vulture is the only sound in the late afternoon.

A panoramic view from the balcony reveals these same live oaks spanning the shoreline of the river from left to right, with an old rice mill and oyster house off to the right. This is Ford Plantation, located in Richmond Hill just 15 minutes from Savannah in the southern part of Georgia, and is a private golf and sports community. But it was not always so.

Automaker extraordinaire, Henry Ford, bought the property in the 1920's, and was determined to restore the devastated and neglected plantation land. Ford was very passionate about nature and set out to protect the environment, repair the original Cherry Hill Estate, and eventually built a new custom home in 1936 for his wife Clara, which he made his winter home. Today, the main house – named Richmond Hill and Clara's house, is the hub of the plantation community that allows members to come, enjoy tea in the afternoon, sit on the balcony, or relax in the library with a good book. The 1800-acre estate is private, offering prime real estate and all the amenities expected of an upscale community set within easy reach of the historic district of Savannah.

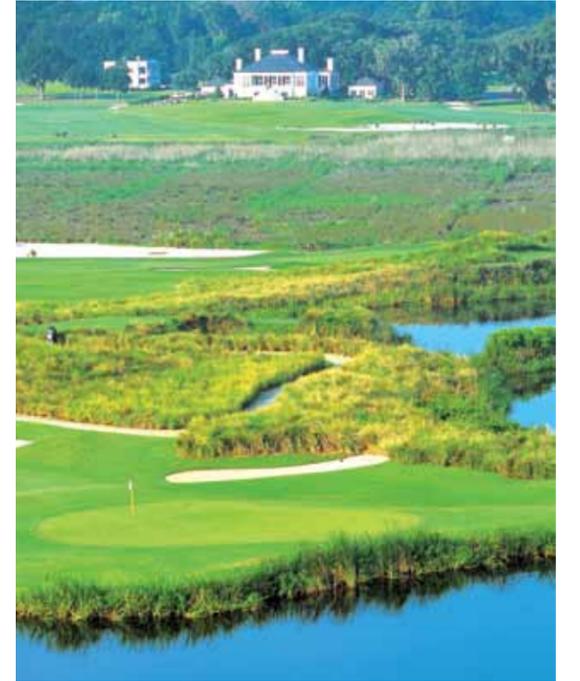
The main house's expansive bedrooms accommodate six couples with the option to rent a vacationing member's house for those that prefer a visit to give them a feel of plantation living. A marina, sports facility, spa, equestrian stables, golf club with championship golf course, and wildlife rescue is all on property along with 24-hour security. And, three full-time guides for fishing, hunting and hiking are available here.

Once three separate plantations established in the 1700s, named Dublin (renamed Richmond), Cherry Hill, and Silk Hope, they produced upland cotton and tidal rice, which was their primary crop. As you drive in past the security stop and white gates, imagine the three-quarter-century plantation struggles that included the 1860's Civil War, which brought down economic and agricultural devastation. The driveway view now reveals breathtaking and massive live oak, mossy trees among white corralled horse grounds that lead you to the



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historic Ford main house and little remains of the tortured past now except those self-same live oaks and structural splendour of the property.

A stay at the main house estate is very much like a colonial style bed-and-breakfast, where the beds are comfy, the staff is personable, and the home, welcoming. A large formal dining and living room with parlour and majestic fireplace, breakfast room with paned windows, and library are maintained in the original Ford design, with old photographs of the Fords and the plantation in earlier years adorning its walls. In addition to the spectacular colonial style architecture and smell of timber that is used to build the home, the décor transports visitors back to a time when life was lived at a much slower pace. That same

philosophy is true at the plantation today.

The early morning sun streams in paned windows and the bustle of staff in the kitchen below, along with the heavenly scent of their homemade blueberry muffins and aromatic coffee announces the start of the day.

Take breakfast on the balcony overlooking the river or in the breakfast room with a view of the rose garden and Old 1870's Rice Mill. The old mill was converted by Ford into his part-time research laboratory, which also provided steam to the Richmond Estate Home, and is now privately-owned and occupied. After breakfast, a round of golf is in order and perhaps a little fishing as well. It is not unheard of a member shooting a couple of holes of golf and then taking a break to fish in the lake, and then shoot a few more holes of golf and fish. The pace is that laidback. Just the same, a short golf cart ride to the golf club will take you through some quaint neighbourhoods, revealing custom homes, some of which emulate the main house.

In the evening, have a pre-dinner drink and relax by a majestic fireplace in the Colonial-styled parlour of the main house, before savouring international cuisine by executive chef Juan Carlos. Fresh ingredients from the plantation are incorporated in a customised daily menu that includes the "catch of the day" from surrounding waters – both river and ocean.

There is usually no need for a tee time at the Plantation course as the membership is small. The Pete Dye designed 18-hole par 72 golf course was commissioned in 1984 by a wealthy Saudi businessman, Garth Pharaon, also one of the many landowners here at the plantation, with an unlimited

budget and free hand to do whatever is necessary.

Pharaon desired to build a course in the tradition of Bobby Jones's Augusta National Golf Course and took 3 years to complete. Then called 'The Sterling Bluff Golf Course', it is divided by Lake Clara at Hole 10, and Hole 1 is situated near the clubhouse and Rose Hill Community where the first Ford home was inhabited. Majestic live oaks and over 250 acres of freshwater lakes contribute to this scenic landscape in which the first nine holes were designed after a parkland style golf course, and the back nine Scottish links-style layout created on once plantation rice fields before Ford himself turned them to lettuce fields.

Presently, it is maintained to the original 1980's design with deviations and changes to bunkers and greens over the years due to owner changes and challenges with consistent upkeep, especially since the back nine was built in the middle of the Cherry Hill rice fields. But the course is also undergoing a restoration project that will take another year to rebuild beginning this fall. The plan, to top US\$7 million, includes constant involvement with Pete Dye, and will focus on restoring the exact detail of his sculptured bunkers, greens and fairways.

C.W. Canfield, golf professional at the Plantation, commented: "With an aging golf course, we've had to be creative with our agronomic practices. One of the biggest improvements came with fertilisation efficiency. We use GPS tracking via soil samples to only fertilize areas that are in need of nutrients."

Nelson Caron, golf course superintendent, makes sure that his greens are quick, and at times, unforgiving. While it may all change next fall, some of the course highlights

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include Hole 5, a par 4 at 383 yards, with a blind tee shot that the venerable golf architect replicated from the original 14th hole at Prestwick, Scotland; the 8th, a fun, trouble-filled par 3 that is 193-yard long with a majestic 250-year-old oak looming directly behind; the 448-yard par 4 13th with cord grass and water along the fairway that doglegs to the right where many water fowl, the occasional alligator, and jumping mullet fish flying out of the water can be sighted; and the final hole, a 534-yard par 5 that leads up through a slightly elevated terrain with water on the right.

No matter how it plays later on, it will certainly proffer strategic golf through a forest of immense oak trees, pines,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Fuzzy Davis shrimp net of fish; Mike Womble with blue crab; Ro with baby alligator; Mercer Williams House Museum.

and palmettos, hills and bunkers, and large lakes with natural fauna like an osprey or eagle soaring above. Thereafter, sit by the Lake Dye Grill and enjoy a fresh shrimp salad and beverage on the veranda with a lakeside view.

As mentioned, there are three guides here at Ford Plantation offering various guided trips from hiking to bird watching to fishing. Naturalist Mike Womble, Outdoor Pursuits Director Fuzzy Davies and a river cruise captain who simply goes by the name, Danny.

Womble's guided walks take guests through journeys like McAllister Trail which is a hike that starts at Oyster House and winds along the Ogeechee River around the wildlife and bird sanctuary, or the Lake Clara Trail that leads from the main house to the marina and segregates the Ogeechee River and Lake Clara, while former US Coast Guard captain and radio talk show host Fuzzy Davis recommends visiting and fishing at Lake Clara with its unique brackish estuary that contains an amazing diversity of shrimps, redfish, crabs and largemouth bass. Live catch, while available all year, is dependent on the salinity of the water here.

Davis shares, "The amount of shrimp in Lake Clara is directly related to the salinity in the Ogeechee River which feeds the lake. Last year, we had a tremendous amount of rain late in the summer and that affected the shrimp harvest but the crabs, flounder and redfish love the low salinity and our members have been able to experience some great crabbing and fishing."

And finally, a scenic river cruise along with cruise captain Danny, offers a chance to spot some of the famous inhabitants of the area. Danny, who is a local lad, knows his way around the river and can confidently spot the gators and point out the resident birds while winding through the maze of old plantation fields toward open ocean.

"Spring is one of our most popular times of the year with a lot of activity in our natural community. Flowers are blooming, fish are spawning, and birds are busy nesting; we have documented over 230 species of birds that use Ford throughout the year," says Womble who also oversees the Oyster House and Naturalist Center here.

He continues, "One of the more unusual nesters here is our resident pair of bald eagles. They decided to nest right in the center of the property. We really enjoy watching these birds as they raise their young right in front of us. It is truly an amazing sight."

Moving indoors, Ford Plantation's Day Spa is a great way to end the afternoon. This transformed, old carriage house where Henry Ford parked his Model Ts, was renovated into a two-storey house to match the main one, and serves as the spa where massage therapy with one of their highly trained therapists will boost immunity, ease muscle tension and stress, and promote full mind and body rejuvenation. To complete the experience, do a facial treatment using German-made Dr. Babor Skin Care Product Line that is manufactured without parabens, synthetic dyes and chemicals, and relax in the sauna before finishing with a revitalizing Vichy shower.

The whole Ford Plantation and Savannah experience is much more than a vacation, as one is welcomed in the great tradition of the South. Nick Casala, CEO and General Manager best sums it up with, "Ford Plantation is truly southern living at its finest and takes full advantage of its authentic low country setting to deliver some amazing experiential opportunities for members and guests to enjoy. The community has a true "sense of place" and the informal, relaxed service delivery is a key component to the social atmosphere that resonates throughout the property. No one ever feels like a stranger here." 

www.fordplantation.com

Additionally, visit www.savannahvisit.com for a full listing of restaurants, shopping, entertainment, and tours/attractions in the historic district of Savannah.