“Simple Elegance” in North Carolina

Thomas Carney

Wayne Mosley is a lieutenant for the Fayetteville, North Carolina, Fire Department. He is also very ambitious. Since he only has to be on that job 10 days a month, he runs a landscape service to help fill his extra time and his wallet. But once autumn rolls around, there’s not much landscaping to be done until spring. What’s an ambitious guy to do?

Whenever the call goes out, Mosley transports his English pointer Sally and his English setters Bee and Buck approximately 40 miles to the George Hi Plantation hunting lodge in Garland. There he and the dogs lead guests on one of the eight hunting courses currently available as they enjoy some quail hunting in a very agreeable place in the world.

Prior to the American Revolution, the King of England granted the first owners the original tract of land along the Coharie River, nearly 5,000 acres. Eventually, it fell into the hands of the George Highsmith family, became home to a cotton growing operation and a place where quail were hunted prior to the War Between the States. The restored 1855 Plantation Home is one physical remnant of that family’s legacy here. Other cultural remnants drift into the scene every now and then. For example, one physical remnant of that family’s legacy here. Other cultural remnants drift into the scene every now and then. For example, for example, a wrap-around porch. “But it’s tidy, neat, clean and comfortable. Roomy but not overpowering. The eight guest rooms can sleep two apiece, with six rooms having two double beds and two rooms having queen-sized beds. Several pairs of adjoining rooms share the bathroom facilities with each other. The double bed rooms provide enough space for two hunters to house their gear but not to spread out with it. Guns go in the wooden gun racks. The selling point of these rooms, however, is the beds. When outfitting the rooms, the folks at George Hi paid attention to an important maxim: A person can have a rotten time hunting, it can be raining or sleeting out, he can feel miserable, but the only thing he’d remember is if he had a terrible bed. As a result, they have made sure that the mattresses in the guest rooms are high quality, firm and … uh … agreeable.

OK, instead of continually calling everything here “agreeable,” let’s just cut to the chase. Once when DuBose was interviewing a candidate to be the operation’s chef, the candidate asked what type of cuisine he preferred. DuBose told him he wanted “simple elegance.” And that term applies to just about every aspect a guest encounters with a visit to George Hi. At the end of the lounging area opposite the porch, a big screen TV sits beside the modestly sized but nicely stocked bar. The lodge has the feel of comfort that anyone would want is the lounging area, complete with leather couches and some oversized chairs so soft and all-enveloping that they make it hard for some people to extricate themselves from their grasps. The hard pine floors and woodwork carry that classic, “simply elegant but natural” feel, contrary to the air of formality one senses at other lodges where dark cherry wood or mahogany woodwork prevails. On each side of that imaginary line one finds the dining area with two large circular tables.

From the grounds, to the lodge with its fireplaces and sporting art, the tremendously comfy beds, and, of course, the food, everything is top-notch but not ostentatious. Simple, yet elegant in its own way. The rooms and modest but well-equipped kitchen take up about half of the lodge. The other half is the great room. The other half is the great room. The George Hi Plantation, an Orvis-endorsed lodge, is located on land originally granted by the King of England. It’s supported quail hunting since before the Civil War.

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itself in the authentic Southern cuisine George Hi is famous for. Breakfast at the lodge is served buffet style and always includes the Southern staple, homemade grits. The hot lunch and dinner are served as plated meals, with the focus on good, solid main dishes. Usually, one dinner during a stay will include filet mignons shipped in from Chicago. When the weather permits, groups might meet at the pavilion about 50 yards away from the lodge for what the folks at George Hi call “an open-air cookout experience.”

Across the pond from the lodge, the Plantation House is available for guests who want something a little more special. The house is let to individual parties only, and as George Hi’s general manager Dan O’Connor explains, it’s nice for couples who want to set up a trip together and stay in special lodging with a chef of their own.

In 2011, DuBose wanted to take the next step in developing George Hi as a destination for hunters: He did what he needed in order to become an “Orvis-Endorsed Lodge.” In the late summer of 2013, he brought aboard O’Connor, formerly the Director of Outside Services for Orvis. Under O’Connor’s management, the finer things at the plantation have changed for the better – at least as far as sportsmen/guests should be concerned.

One policy O’Connor initiated: only breech-loading shotguns are allowed, no pumps or semi-automatic shotguns. This helps to bring about a more classic feel to the hunts themselves. For hunters without an over-under or side-by-side or for those who fly in and don’t want to bother transporting their guns, O’Connor has assembled a nice selection of about a dozen beautiful guns to borrow, Brownings and Berettas, in 20- and 28-gauges, even .410 caliber.

Also, O’Connor is developing a team of guides with various strengths and abilities so he can easily match them with hunters of various abilities and hunting experience. This way, George Hi can offer a custom and complete experience to hunters, from the novice to the well seasoned. For example, he might set up older, slower or less aggressive hunters with a guide with a matching “let’s just mosey along” demeanor. On the other hand, O’Connor often pairs hunters who are real go-getters with Wayne Mosley’s young legs and exuberant spirit. And he’ll often team up Mosley with guide Bryan Hargrove, also of Fayetteville, and Hargrove’s cocker spaniel Ranger.

That combination highlights another spin O’Connor is bringing to the fore at George Hi. “Unless guests ask us not to, we’re going to be pairing flushing dogs – cockers – with each team of pointing dogs. It just adds a little different flair to the experience for them. Of course, if they want to hunt their own dogs, we’ll leave the cockers behind.”

And that leads to another point O’Connor wants to make, “Dogs are welcome!” Unlike many lodges that force hunters to kennel their dogs with the masses or leave them in their vehicles, George Hi allows crated dogs to stay in the rooms with their owners. Since they will often be dirty or wet, O’Connor mentions that a single $75 dollar cleaning fee applies for hunters who bring their dogs into their guest rooms.

On one hunt, Mosley and Hargrove led O’Connor and guest Joe Healy through the “Horseshoe Course,” 55 acres of pines scattered among grassy flatlands that had been pounded pretty much into submission by an abnormal abundance of snow North Carolina had experienced.

It’s surprising how many birds such a comparatively small area can hold. The group made several passes through and around Horseshoe, with nearly non-stop action as Sally, Bee and Buck – sometimes all three at once – held birds for Ranger to flush.

At one juncture during the hunt, Sally zoomed across a plowed field, and the men observed she had slammed onto point. After crossing the field themselves, they realized Sally
was actually on the other side of a ditch with water too deep for them to cross. O’Connor and Healy – a left-handed and right-handed shooter, respectively – positioned themselves to their collective best advantage, gave Hargrove the nod, and he released Ranger. Seconds later, the dog pounced, the bird flushed and flew mightily; in unison the hunters raised their shotguns and fired. There was such a flurry of dogs rushing at the downed bird it’s tough to remember who made the retrieve. Moments later, though, the troupe marched on to the next spot to repeat the performance.

Relishing the day’s hunting a half-hour later, O’Connor smiled. “Well, our convoluted plan at the ditch worked out after all.”

It was difficult not to be pleased with the day, for the dogs had performed beautifully. The birds flew hard enough to confound the hunters about half the time. And the hunters made enough good shots to ease the pain of the easy shots that left the birds flying for the far end of the plantation.

In addition to the fine quail hunting he constantly improving with off-season habitat management, O’Connor also designed and built a five stand shooting course with a covered and elevated shooting platform – just the thing for whiling away those rainy afternoons.

Hunting package prices per hunter at George Hi are as follows:

- Half day, no lodging: $295, includes seven quail, guides, dogs, vehicles and lunch.
- Half day with lodging: $595 per hunter, includes seven quail, lodging, breakfast, lunch and dinner, guides, dogs and vehicles.
- Full day, no lodging: $590, includes 12 quail, guides, dogs, vehicles and lunch.
- Full day with lodging: $895, includes 12 quail, lodging, breakfast, lunch and dinner, guides, dogs and vehicles.

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While the normal hunting plan at George Hi calls for pointing dogs and cocker spaniels, guests can always request something else. Here guide, Jeff Howell walks a young Irish red and white setter who needs practice finding and retrieving birds on her own.

DuBose welcomes his extended family to experience the quail hunting at George Hi each year from October through March 31.

For more information: George Hi Plantation, Dan O’Connor, 910-564-5860, www.georgehi.com, hunt@georgehi.com.