

# The Other Side *of the Sound*

The lure of Daufuskie lies in its detachment from the world beyond

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Haig Point,  
Daufuskie Island



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## the story of

Daufuskie Island, a 5-mile-long sea island tucked between Hilton Head, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia, is as multi-layered and tangled as the Spanish moss and clustered forests that run wild at its center. Residents who live on the island today will often say that they can tell pretty quickly whether someone is going to take to life on Daufuskie—with no bridge and very few cars (golf carts are the preferred mode of transportation), no true grocery store, convenience marts, hotels, or restaurants, it's the kind of island where living comfortably takes effort. But for those who want to escape the conventionalities of modern living and connect closely with the land they live upon and the marshes and ocean that surround them, this is exactly the spot.

For visitors, on the other hand, a trip to the island can be a sweet little taste of that life—with or without a few ferry rides back to the mainland. Depending on whether you're into it for an afternoon, a few days, or a fully immersive week, the wilds of Daufuskie allow you to shed the modern world and breathe a little more deeply on an island lost in time.

### *Day Tripping*

You'll hear renowned author Pat Conroy's name whispered on the wind

and shared in story after story upon reaching Daufuskie. His 1972 novelized memoir, *The Water is Wide*, documents the year he spent teaching in a two-room schoolhouse on the island—the book was released fifty years ago this year. Though Conroy changed many details, like the name of the island and some characters, his time there is still very much an active storyline.

Sallie Ann Robinson, a sixth-generation islander, was one of Conroy's students and smiles fondly about her time with him. "Pat taught us so much because he took us beyond the island," she says. "We could learn about Washington or current events in a book but you cannot connect with something you don't know. It was very important that he allowed us to get to know these other places."

Robinson's story is intrinsically tied to Daufuskie. She was born in a Gullah cottage, built by the freed slaves who are credited with returning to Daufuskie after Emancipation and shaping the customs and traditions now known as the Gullah Geechee culture. (According to Robinson, Gullah Geechee are the descendents of the enslaved living along the Carolina and Georgia coasts who often speak in a Creole-English dialect.) Her family foraged, grew, hunted, and fished for their food and she learned how to cook on a woodstove by her mother's side. The first time she left the island was when Conroy organized a trip to the mainland when she was a schoolgirl. Though she eventually departed Daufuskie to get her education and pursue nursing, she returned and started writing—she's since authored four books, including three cookbooks.

Today, Robinson is the person to seek out when you land on the island. Hop on a **Daufuskie Island Ferry** (they depart from Buckingham Landing, which sits off Highway 278, just before the bridge over to Hilton Head Island) and book a ride on **Sallie Ann's Authentic Gullah Tour**, which runs twice a day Tuesday through Saturday, and provides an intimate and detailed understanding of Gullah Geechee life here. What's more, the funds she

collects from the tour go toward preservation: Her goal is to restore the handful of Gullah homes that still stand on the island and to clean up and preserve the **Mary Field Cemetery**. “It bothers me to see those houses not being useful, to see the graveyard being overgrown. I see it getting lost. So, I’m doing all this for the next generation,” she says. “[They] need to know about their heritage.”

In a small passenger van, Robinson drives visitors to several historical points of interest, like the **Mary Fields School** she attended as Conroy’s student, which is now occupied by an indigo-dyeing studio and a coffee shop, and the **First Union African Baptist Church**, which her sixth-great grandfather helped construct. She’ll drive past the cemetery, the island’s largest Gullah graveyard, with headstones going back to the 1920s. There’s also the **Oyster Union Society Hall**—Daufuskie’s once booming oyster industry sent oysters around the world, even to the Tsar of Russia, before the cannery closed in 1903; the hall still stands to honor the oyster workers who created a benevolent and burial society. While the Gullah population on the island once reached up to 2,000 people, the closure of the nearby oyster beds, along with a number of other losses caused many to leave the island for other work. Today, only about twenty Gullah individuals live on the island—and Robinson, for one, is doing what she can to keep the culture intact.

Whether you’re with Robinson or on your own, consider renting a golf cart for a few hours—just be sure to confirm, if they’re electric, that they’re fully charged—and head to the **Daufuskie Island Historical Museum**, set within a former Baptist church, which shares the story of Sarah Grant, once the island’s midwife who was married to the island’s undertaker (and later became one herself). Nearby, there’s the **Jane Hamilton School**, which now houses the Gullah Learning Center and community library. Trail maps will guide you to these spots as well as any number

of historical houses around the island—and for a day-long visit, that’ll give you just a glimpse of Daufuskie’s charm.

### A Wilder Getaway

Chase Allen has lived on Daufuskie for close to twenty years—he came here from the Charlotte, North Carolina, area and never looked back. It’s a story you hear often from the 400 or so residents that occupy the island today. Allen is the artist behind **Iron Fish Gallery**, which crafts striking pieces of coastal art (think: mermaids, stingrays, crabs, fish) from sheets of steel, and sends those pieces far and wide. He’s seen a lot of acclaim over the years, from Martha Stewart to the *Wall Street Journal*, but a visit to his modest studio doesn’t let on. In fact, he works on the honor system: If you like a piece, take it with you. His Venmo account is handwritten on a piece of paper by his office window, or you can just mail him a check.

Over the years, Allen has lived in various houses on the island, one of which—the **Oyster Cottage**—sits directly beside his studio and is available to rent through Airbnb. For those looking to spend a few nights on Daufuskie, a handful of rental properties like this are available. The long-standing structure, now a three-bedroom cabin, has the very first staircase ever built on the island, the steps comprised of a dozen or so narrow boards that lead to an upstairs bedroom. Quaintly rustic, the space has been updated with modern appliances in the kitchen, a cozy living room, and a screened-in dining porch.

Clockwise from top left: School Grounds Coffee; Daufuskie Island Rum Company; Rhonda Davis of Daufuskie Blues; Community Farm.



There’s a grill and a fire pit out back for low-key evenings and there’s a golf cart. It’s just the kind of place to stay if you want to feel like an islander for a few days.

If that’s the getaway you seek, be sure to come prepared. Restaurant meals are few and far between, but Allen will give you some recommendations to get started. His first might be a short distance down the road, where this summer will see the opening of **Geneva’s Joint**, once called Lucy Bell’s. It’s mostly a collection of patio furniture set under the shade of a few live oaks, but on the menu, you might see deeply seasoned fish fillet sandwiches, a few soul food items, casual burgers, and more.

Allen might also clue you into a few fishing spots along the island, but for a true taste of Daufuskie, keep an eye out for handwritten signs announcing deviled crab. “A few women and one young man on the island still make it regularly—you just have to know who to ask and where to look,” he’ll say with a smile.

Otherwise, you’ll want to bring all the groceries you might need from the mainland for a few days’ visit. There are provisions to be found at the **Freeport General Store**, set right beside the marina, or at **D’Fuskies**, which carries eggs, dairy, fresh and frozen seafood and offers a few options for mealtime, like taco Thursdays and a burger bar on Saturdays.

If a daily caffeine fix is part of your routine, make your way to **School Grounds Coffee**, set at the back of the Mary Fields School. From a takeout window, you can grab an iced latte, a frozen lemonade, or one of the daily coffee or pastry offerings. While you’re there, pop into **Daufuskie Blues**, which occupies the front of the school. There, craftswomen Leanne Coulter and Rhonda Davis happily educate visitors on what was once one of the island’s main outputs, indigo. The leafy plant once fueled a robust industry along the coast that sent millions of pounds of indigo cakes out of the state’s ports in

Haig Point Lighthouse



the 1700s. The pair occasionally offers three-hour workshops for groups, more so in the slower seasons, but also sell a number of indigo-dyed garments, as well as other crafts. Take home sleekly carved wooden spoons and cutting boards, culled from island wood, or beaded jewelry from a local jewelry maker—the craftspeople themselves are often hanging around the studio.

Afternoons are for whiling away, getting lost, and people watching. A good place to do that is **Daufuskie Island Rum Company**. Opened by islanders Tony and Kristin Chase in 2013, the distillery sees as many as 250 visitors a day during the high summer season—they come in for a taste of one of the seven rums, two vodkas, and bourbon produced on site and often leave with a bottle or two in hand. Try one of their cocktails for a true island experience. The Chases moved here, like many, to retire; Tony ran a pharmacy business with multiple locations before landing on Daufuskie. Though he's still working, he says, "at least I've slowed down. My commute is about fifteen minutes and we live on the most beautiful beach in the country. I'd say it's a pretty great lifestyle."

The couple lives down by Bloody Point, the southernmost tip of the island, which is named for a devastating 1715 battle between the Yamasee Indians and the European settlers who had come to occupy the island; the natives were eventually driven off. Today, a residential community sits on this tip of land, which protects a windswept, white sand beach, but you can get a sense of the history of this part of the island with a visit to the **Bloody Point Lighthouse**, which still stands as a historical marker.

As for the rest of your time, use it to watch for more than 160 species of birds that visit the island annually, or do some shell hunting. One of the greatest gifts the island offers is an escape from the noise of the modern world—the most peaceful way to spend your time is doing nothing but listening.

### ***Living a Resort-Like Life***

In the 1980s, developers set to work

transforming the historic 1,100-acre plantation known as **Haig Point** into a luxury residential community. In 2001, the development became member-owned and today, the 270 or so homes on the property are filled with about 100 full-time resident families and several dozen more who reside there part of the year. With its own ferry system and embarkation site on Hilton Head, a **29-hole Rees Jones-designed golf course**, an equestrian center, and even a Starbucks, Haig Point puts a more modern spin on Daufuskie living.

Visitors can get a taste of the Haig Point lifestyle through discovery visits—there are golf and equestrian packages that give you access to a number of member amenities. While the visits are not for everyone, they do afford guests an up-close view of what it means for some to live here year round. You might stay in one of several condos in the property, or at the **Strachan Mansion**, a community hub for Haig Point that was originally built on St. Simons Island in 1910 and moved to Daufuskie in 1986; four spacious bedrooms on the second floor, each with a private bath, are available to members and their guests.

The mansion is where you'll find the Starbucks, as well as the community mailroom. A new mercantile was added this spring, selling local crafts and goods, as well as the signature **Haig Point wine collection**, which is produced and bottled in Italy. Set right across from the Haig Point ferry docks, it's a somewhat bustling hub—as bustling as a sleepy island community can get—where members bring in their groceries, or visitors, or golf clubs, or head out for doctors' appointments, errands, and nights out on Hilton Head. Besides the hourly ferry, a water taxi operates throughout the day and into the night, giving members easy access to **Harbour Town** in Hilton Head's Sea Pines community.

While Haig Point is significantly more modern than most of the rest of the island, the community still maintains that wild charm—ancient live oaks and palmettos shade many of the homes while a tidal marsh rims

the land mass' edge along most of the shoreline. A long, unpaved road stretches down one section of the shore, where a length of the beach is punctuated by a few Adirondack chairs and hammocks.

Residents and guests have the benefit of a few more dining options here, including at **the Clubhouse**, which has a grill with ample outdoor seating—a good spot to catch the sunning alligators—and post-round fare like club sandwiches, a cobb salad, and hearty burgers. Along that beach road, you'll find the **Beach Club**, which has a pool and event space as well as a second-story restaurant, the **Calibogue Club**, named for the sound it overlooks. This is the spot for a more refined meal with dishes like Sapelo Island clams in a broth made heady by tasso ham and peppers, mushrooms stuffed with crab, or shrimp and grits layered with tomatoes and a cajun sauce.

With a water taxi at your service, the ten-minute trip to Sea Pines is worth it for a meal inside the newly renovated **Quarterdeck**. The two-story space features bars upstairs and down, as well as a wide outdoor deck that overlooks the harbor. An extensive menu means you might start with oysters on the half shell and South Florida rock shrimp laced with a lip-tingling "firecracker" sauce, then move on to a market catch of golden tilefish laid over potatoes au gratin and ember-roasted vegetables. Time your visit for unobstructed views of the sunset, which happens to go down right behind Daufuskie.

No matter how you choose to take in life on Daufuskie, be prepared for the effort to get here—and then relish it when you arrive. Whether you're carting around the island at less than twenty miles an hour, biking along an unpaved path, or simply walking the shell-lined beaches, the island forces the days, and you, to slow down and even disappear for a bit. Take time to enjoy the rustic life—and complete detachment from the world on the other side of the sound.

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