



COURTESY HAMPTON ISLAND. PHOTO BY JAKE MEYER

BRIDGE TO PARADISE: Hampton Island, an exclusive community being developed south of Savannah, is a mix of maritime forest, marsh and pasture interrupted by lakes and winding waterways.

BY RICH WITTISH

Coastal Elegance

CHAMPAGNE and boiled peanuts.

That unlikely but pleasing combination was enjoyed by some of the guests attending a private celebration last autumn at Hampton Island — an exclusive community being developed south of Savannah near Riceboro.

It's a combination that speaks volumes about the 4,000-acre community, which seeks to blend the luxury of state-of-the-art amenities with the charm of rural living, coastal Georgia-style.

On a Saturday evening in late October, about 150 guests of Hampton Island's developers attended a get-together heralding the donation of 826 acres of the island to the Coastal Georgia Land Trust — a gift that placed the acreage in a conservation easement allowing its continued preservation.

A sumptuous, outdoor dinner was

presented at the Old Shed, a rustic setting deep in the oak tree-studded heart of the heavily wooded island. Beforehand, with dusk settling in, champagne and hors d'oeuvres were served, and a few of the guests, flutes of the bubbly in hand, gravitated to the rocking chairs that ringed a fire pit where oysters were being roasted. There, by the rocking chairs, those lucky guests found little metal buckets filled to their brims with boiled peanuts.

Champagne and boiled peanuts.

It's a combination that also popped up during dinner — symbolically, at least — when Atlantian E. Wade Shealy Jr., managing partner of Hampton Island, introduced two featured guests. One was Robert M. Mondavi Jr., who owns a stewardship at Hampton Island and who flew in from his family's winery in Napa Valley, Calif., to coordinate the dinner — a meal featuring quail that was prepared by Sarah Scott, the winery's head chef.

The other was Sonny Perdue, who is the governor of Georgia and an agribusinessman from the little Houston County town of Bonaire — and a fellow who seems the sort who might just have a liking for boiled peanuts.

Perdue accepted the donation of the 826 acres on behalf of the Land Trust, which was founded in 1992 with the aim of protecting resources of natural, scenic, historic, productive, recreational or educational value in Bryan, Camden, Chatham, Effingham, Glynn, Liberty, Long and McIntosh counties.



COURTESY HAMPTON ISLAND, PHOTO BY ROBIN DAVIS

GUEST ACCOMMODATIONS: Butterfly Cottage serves as a welcoming retreat for visitors to the island.

Also on hand for the celebration were professional golfer Davis Love III and Ray Goff, the former head football coach of the University of Georgia. However, the celebrity that folks came to see — movie actor Ben Affleck, who owns two homes at Hampton Island — didn't show. He was at Fenway Park in Boston, cuddling with girlfriend Jennifer Garner and rooting on his beloved Red Sox during Game 1 of baseball's 2004 World Series.

But back to the island, and its champagne-and-boiled-peanuts charisma.

The community is about 35 miles south of Savannah and can be reached via Exit 67 of Interstate Highway 95. The bulk of the acreage is on the eastern side of the interstate, with much of the area bordered by 12 linear miles of rivers and tidal saltwater marshes, and the whole shootin' match is only a few miles west of St. Catherines Sound and the Atlantic Ocean.

The land is a mix of maritime forest, marsh and pasture that's interrupted here and there by lakes and winding waterways. The principals of Hampton Island vow that most of the acreage will remain as is, with 80 percent of the island being placed into conservation

easements guaranteeing it will not be developed.

As of mid-December, a total of 26 home sites, most ranging in size from 1 acre to 3 acres, had been sold, with prices starting at \$850,000. Included in those sales were six horse farms, each covering in excess of 80 acres. Plans called for 113 home sites to be offered, with the next phase of sites to be released in June of 2005. The island's infrastructure — including the crushed limestone roadways intended to lend the community a rural touch — are scheduled to be completed by January 2007.

Also available are 130 one-time club memberships known as stewardships such as the one owned by Robert Mondavi. Stewards have, in the words of Hampton Island's public relations people, "the opportunity to enjoy the island without making a land purchase." Stewardships are priced at \$250,000.

Among the amenities aimed at making Hampton Island "a piece of paradise for a privileged few" are a world-class equestrian center and 25 miles of bridal paths; an 18-hole golf course designed by the aforementioned Davis Love; and the use of a Cessna Caravan float plane that lands on a 2,300-foot-long illuminated

waterway — hyped as the only operational runway of its kind in the United States.

There's a spa facility designed by Lydia Mondavi, the founder of The Abernathy Group, whose clients have included the Old Edwards Inn and Spa of Highlands, N.C., and Faberge due Solely of Rutherford, Calif. Homeowners and stewards will also have the prospect of benefiting from fishing and hunting expeditions; the expertise of naturalists; a private 16-acre organic farm; a community dock that can accommodate yachts of up to 150 feet in length; a 60-acre freshwater fishing pond and sailing lake; and 24-hour concierge services.

The homeowners association will own 13 guest homes including the Hampton House, which will have eight bedrooms and a Robert Mondavi wine cellar. The homes will be for the use of members of the association "at any time," according to Hampton Island spokespeople.

The island reportedly was the site of a rice and cotton plantation in the 18th and 19th centuries, and it was purchased by retired private money manager John Morgan of Atlanta in 1997. While preserving the natural integrity of the land, Morgan built a few significant structures on the island, including "The Big House," a 10,000-square-foot plantation-style home that's now owned by Ben Affleck.

Wade Shealy — a University of Georgia graduate who sold real estate on Hilton Head Island, S.C., during the 1980s — "discovered" Hampton Island in January 2002 while scouting for land for Intrawest, a developer of resorts throughout North America whom he served as a vice president of sales and marketing.

After settling on the idea of purchasing and developing Hampton Island on his own, Shealy gathered a group of investors and closed the purchase in April 2003. The sale price was \$19 million.

Said Shealy in December of the progress being made in crafting his dream development: "We envisioned creating a low-density, one-of-a-kind environmentally sensitive community that serves as a living testament to the magic of the land. As the year 2004 closes, we have much in which to be thankful. We have accomplished much in a short period of time, and Hampton Island's vision is becoming a reality." ■