



GRAND *Getaways*

The Willcox

DISCOVER THE BEAUTY OF WESTERN SOUTH CAROLINA'S HORSE COUNTRY WITH A STAY AT THE WILLCOX, WHERE A GILDED AGE PAST MINGLES WITH A DISTINCTIVE, MODERN WORLD. BY Marie Baxley | PHOTOGRAPHY BY William Dickey

- AS SEEN IN -
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Perhaps the first hint that The Willcox is different from most hotels is the traditional brass room key and shiny polished door lock that clicks with an authority no plastic entry card can summon. But the feeling of rarefied air soon follows as you explore the history and spaces that lie within this white-pillared Colonial Revival that rests in the heart of South Carolina's equestrian country.

"Everyone has a story about The Willcox," says Shannon Ellis, who with husband Geoff has owned The Willcox since 2009, when a serendipitous sequence of events led to their purchase of the property near Aiken's downtown. "This is a really special place. It's one of the last standing wooden hotels in the country."

Like most 19th-century buildings, The Willcox has its eccentricities, but the cozy paneled lobby with two fireplaces boasts a busy bar and restaurant that buzzes with visitors

and locals alike. Catering to the local equestrian community is unavoidable, as people even come on horseback from Hitchcock Woods to enjoy a beverage delivered to them in their saddle or brunch on the stately front porch with steeds hitched nearby.

It's a scene that's quintessentially Aiken, once a winter colony for wealthy Northerners with names like Roosevelt, Goodyear, Vanderbilt, Astor, and Grace. Elizabeth Arden, Winston Churchill, and Bing Crosby are among those who have stayed at the resort, which is a half-hour drive from Augusta, Georgia, home of The Masters golf tournament each April.

Polo, equestrian vaulting (gymnastics on horseback), foxhunting, steeplechase, dressage, and a multitude of equine events are part of daily life here. Horses have the right of way as roads feature horse crossings and sandy side paths stamped with hoof prints. Magazines left in local stores as



Whether visiting Aiken for equestrian sport, golf, or simply to explore the Central Savannah River Area, The Willcox offers 19th-century charm with a wide variety of contemporary amenities. Guests can enjoy a cardio room, bicycles to cruise about town, and a 24-hour concierge with services for dogs and horses. The Willcox Restaurant offers fine dining under Chef Ed DeFelice, with seasonal American fare and a smattering of international flavors served in the stylish dining room, poolside, and in the lobby's cozy gastropub environs. In its earliest days, Aiken attracted a steady flow of East Coast visitors who came to enjoy its delightful climate and spring waters. Many brought their horses for pleasure and sport, including polo, which is as popular today as it was in the 1800s. Another favorite pastime is scouting the trails of Hitchcock Woods, an urban forest spanning some 2,000 acres.





well as the hotel's rooms and spa include *Equestrian Living* and those from various polo clubs. A popular downtown boutique has the moniker Equine Divine.

Tina McCarthy, general manager, says the hotel is still very much a winter colony, drawing clientele from Canada and New York, but business also comes from equestrian interests in Florida and leisure travelers within a three-hour drive. The staff's effort to make everyone feel at home is evident from the front desk to the spa, which is small but offers a full selection of services such as hair styling, massage, and bridal specials. Every evening, there is a complimentary turndown service with a pitcher of citrus-infused ice water, a chocolate mint, and a cashmere-wrapped hot water bottle for each guest to tuck into their bed.

Twenty-three rooms are well-appointed with crown molding and traditional furnishings, like four-poster beds and throwback slimline push-button phones. Books line



mantels and shelves for a read near a crackling fire, or you can enjoy a library of DVDs that feature Academy Award-winning films from 1939 to 2016. Each bathroom has a luxurious soaker tub with plush towels and a robe, perfect for relaxing after a day on the trails.

A menu of extra services seeks to fulfill any need a patron can devise, from guided horseback tours and oxygen inhalation therapy to chocolate-covered strawberries and The Ultimate Aiken Experience—a package that includes a three-course meal perched atop the viewing pavilion at Whitney Polo Field.

Geoff says it's hospitality, not just service, his team strives for daily. "It's going the extra mile. There's a culture within

these walls that people feel on a regular basis when they are here," he says. There has been little turnover in management since the couple rescued The Willcox from being shut down a decade ago.

The hotel, located in a residential neighborhood, has an illustrious history from its opening in 1900 by Englishman Frederick Willcox and his Swedish wife, Elise. It stayed in the Willcox family until 1957, hosting European royalty, American politicians, leading socialites and industrialists. In the 1970s, the building fell into disrepair and was shuttered until it was reopened nearly two decades later. Subsequent owners closed it again for a \$10 million renovation completed in 2002, fully restoring the building before starting anew.

In 2009, the Ellises were restaurateurs in New Zealand, but wanted to move back Stateside. Geoff's parents had moved from New York to Aiken in the 1980s as he went off to college. He had spent summers in his youth at an uncle's horse farm there and loved the area.

Shannon and Geoff leased the public spaces of The Willcox (chiefly the lobby and restaurant), making a huge investment in a new lobby bar and kitchen improvements. About four months later, the hotel owners announced they were going to close The Willcox in less than a month unless the right buyer (all cash) could be found.

"It was a totally crazy situation," says Geoff, noting they stood to lose the amount they had spent. While it wasn't in their plans, the couple bought The Willcox with the help of a family friend from Shannon's hometown in Canada, who lent them the money with the stipulation they pay him back in six months with interest. The investor, the late Latham C. Burns, has his portrait in the lobby and a suite named after him.

Once they bought the entire property, the couple immediately changed the motto to: "The living room of the community." As restaurateurs, they knew they had to rely on local business. "One of the biggest challenges of this place was that it saw itself as a destination property that was exclusive of the community," Shannon says.

The Willcox now has a fine-dining restaurant, live music, and specials to attract locals, who inevitably intermingle with visitors. Weddings are high on the event list and, in addition to the main accommodations, seven area cottages are available for rent. The Masters remains a major attraction to the area, as are horse trails and other events like Joye in

Aiken, a festival in March that brings world-class actors, dancers, and musicians primarily from New York City's Juilliard School to perform and mentor schoolchildren.

For those seeking outdoor ventures, the Hopelands Gardens botanical park is a short drive away, and Hitchcock Woods, a few blocks from The Willcox, remains a major draw. The Woods, an urban forest larger than New York City's Central Park, allows only foot traffic and hosts the Blessing of the Hounds on Thanksgiving Day. Downtown Aiken, a quick walk from the hotel, features restaurants, museums, and specialty shops like Cyndi's Sweet Shoppe, Aiken Embroidery & Design, and Downtown Dog.

While promoting the history of the area, Shannon and Geoff take their jobs as stewards of The Willcox seriously and view maintaining the long-lived property as essential. "She requires patience, and she requires a lot of attention," says Geoff, who remembers when the building was boarded up. "We have a really good relationship with her, and she lets us know when she has an area that needs some attention. We take care of her."

"And," Shannon quickly adds, "she takes care of us."

For information, visit thewillcox.com.

