

# THE RADAR REALTY!

BY TRAVIS NEIGHBOR WARD



CALL OF THE WILD: Residents and guests often embark at Moreland's Dock, shown here at dusk.

## NO BLUFF!

*South Carolina's Palmetto Bluff is telling the truth when it claims to offer a new model for Lowcountry real estate development.*

The first time you arrive at the gate of Palmetto Bluff, the 20,000-acre private community, resort and nature preserve in Bluffton, South Carolina, between Hilton Head and Savannah, a guard hands you a CD narrated by an on-site naturalist. The audio tour is perfectly timed to accompany your drive through the tall, dark forest that unfolds around you as the highway becomes distant. And just as scenes from *Jurassic Park* spring to mind, you arrive at a wooden bridge leading to Wilson Village, the newly constructed, well-manicured neighborhood sitting on the banks of the May River. Real gas lamps flicker on brick sidewalks with cut granite curbs, and spacious houses boast deep wrap-around porches and shed roofs. A post office, real estate office and café hug one side of the town square; on the other side—across the Village Green past ruins of an old mansion and a giant, hand-woven sculpture by artist Patrick Dougherty—sits the Inn at Palmetto Bluff, the only Auberge-managed resort in the Southeast. A shack full of bicycles and a three-lane saltwater swimming pool complex with a modest workout center round out the scene. Nearby, guests sit on Adirondack chairs, gaze at the water and roast marshmallows in a fire pit, before traipsing down paths leading to rental cottages or driving to their second homes nearby.

Sounds idyllic? It is—as long as you're an outdoorsman and not a sun worshipper hell bent on getting eight hours of beach time a day. And in approximately 12 years, when construction is complete and about \$1 billion has been spent building it, Palmetto Bluff is sure to be one of those Southern hotspots you wish you invested in when lots were still available.

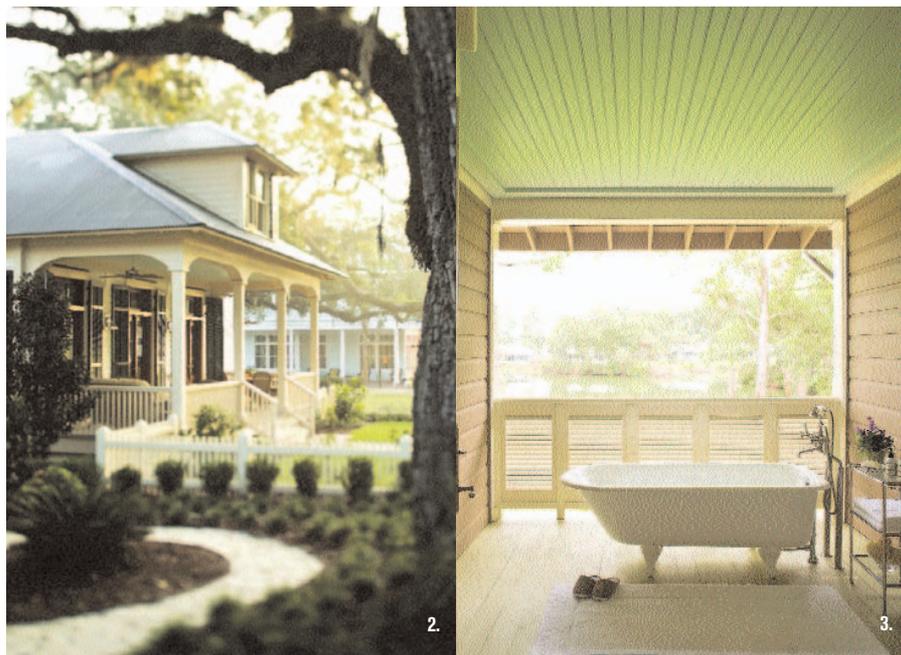
At the helm of this massive project located on 32 miles of river frontage is Georgia Tech grad Jim Mozley, president and CEO of Palmetto

Bluff LLC and senior vice president of Crescent Resources LLC, a real estate and land management company based in Charlotte, North Carolina. Mozley's attitude is atypical among developers in the area: Rather than applying a subdivision model, he has opted for a more old-fashioned approach he compares to the way small towns in France or Italy were built surrounded by agricultural fields—one he says connects more authentically with Lowcountry tradition. "Historically most of the development patterns in the Lowcountry revolved around water," Mozley says. "The rivers were roadways and the pattern of development was rural villages along them and a rural landscape. In Palmetto Bluff we decided this is a great maritime forest and at the end of the day that should dominate. Here you can live in a village and connect to people, but escape to very wild places where nothing's built."

And don't bother trying to compare it to places like Hilton Head—in his opinion they're apples and oranges since most of the developments near Palmetto Bluff are golf country club subdivisions. "We think that's your father's Buick—very linear, very boring," he says. "People bought [into them] because they had no other option." Besides that, there is the issue of density. Hilton Head has about 45,000 homes and hotel rooms. "Palmetto Bluff will only be 3,000 homes—and it's two-thirds the size [of Hilton Head]," he says. "We have substantially more units approved, but over 50 percent will stay preserved in open space. Of that, two-thirds will be pristine open space and one-half will be park-like and user-friendly. And I'm not even counting the golf course. If you threw in all our open space, it's much more than half [of Palmetto Bluff]." (That's not to say Mozley

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**PALMETTO BLUFF: 1. Interior of Village Home #32. 2. Exterior of the River House. 3. Private veranda at the spa.**



...CONTINUED eschews country clubs entirely: He still has a membership in the Capital City Club in Atlanta. And density, he says, "is not all bad. Clustering is a great way to save the land. I'm not against density; I'm against sprawl.")

Ultimately, the difference boils down to core values. At the heart of Palmetto Bluff's team is a passion for nature. When Mozley got the call from Crescent Resources, the architecture grad and "closet environmentalist" was running a 60,000-acre cattle ranch on Molokai in Hawaii, where he lived with his wife, a painter, and their two children. These days he entertains a few groups of developers each week who want to kick Palmetto Bluff's tires and find out how Mozley's making money. "So much of the development industry is people who have more of a financial background than art, architecture or environmental studies," he says. "It's so easy to do what developers usually do. Our group takes an environmental ethic that says context is what really matters, and questions what is authentic. We don't do artificially developed themes. We try to copy good ideas; we don't try to mimic history." (His team took a trip to Nantucket, he adds, to study the marina village there.)

The proof is in the numbers. Last year Palmetto Bluff made more than \$100 million in sales, and Mozley estimates this year's sales will be at least that high. At presstime, there were only 15 lots available. Generally lots range from \$500,000 to \$4 million but come with restrictions. The \$4 million lots can be as large as 20 acres but include conservation easements. On "family compound lots," buyers can build multiple houses—but the largest cannot exceed 5,000 square feet. Buyers are based all over the United States, and tend to be affluent, "innovative thinkers" under 50 years old "and more ideal-oriented than status-oriented." And, like Mozley's development team, buyers tend to get away from "the McMansion ego thing. They're not trying to show they've been there, done that."

In a nutshell: It's bustling around here. Work is underway for the next town (unnamed at presstime) that will be larger than Wilson Village and

include a marina, yacht club and lake. The outdoor covered arena in the equestrian section is under construction and will be situated near a dressage arena, 5-acre event field and barns with 38 stallion-ready stalls. A gas station and chichi general store are already open, and at the latter you can purchase everything from Alaskan crab and fresh ahi to Starbucks coffee and organic produce. In the spring, the first five boutiques will open, and will probably offer things like women's resort wear and shoes.

In the meantime, pioneer homeowners and resort guests satisfy themselves by indulging in all that the Inn at Palmetto Bluff has to offer: renting bikes, canoes and kayaks; going freshwater and saltwater fishing; taking guided nature hikes and history excursions; and playing golf on the 18-hole Jack Nicklaus Signature course, among others. For pure relaxation, they head to the 9,500-square-foot spa to take scented baths with names like Playful Passion and Sweet Living, or get the Warm River Stone massage.

At lunch and dinner they head to the Inn's River House Restaurant, where executive chef and Napa Valley transplant, Paul Wade, applies progressive American-style cuisine philosophy to local ingredients, including pan-roasted pink sea trout served with fennel and lobster spoon bread. It's the same food they can order from the in-room dining menu, toted to their houses by resort staff via golf cart. Or they can check out the Palmetto Bluff Lowcountry Celebration November 16 through 18, three days of oyster roasts, block parties and tastings hosted by celebrity chef—and South Carolina native—Tyler Florence, who was married on the property. And when homeowners aren't here, they can rent out their houses under the Auberge management, which stocks bathrooms with Auberge-brand soaps, takes care of housekeeping with first-class zeal and manages all of the smaller rental cottages located behind the River House main building.

For Mozley, it's icing on the cake; his focus stays on making Palmetto Bluff greener as time goes on. His team is currently looking into the possibility of making every new building on site solar-ready. "It's great to imagine your second home meter running backward when you're not there and giving power back to the grid," he says. And why not? After all, he says, giving back "is fun to do." ▣

*Palmetto Bluff, 843.757.3333 or [www.palmetto-bluff.com](http://www.palmetto-bluff.com). The Inn at Palmetto Bluff, 866.706.6565 or [www.palmettobluffresort.com](http://www.palmettobluffresort.com). Rental cottages start at \$625 per night in October; Village homes range from \$900 to \$1,800 per night. Rates for the Lowcountry Celebration start at \$1,600 for single and \$2,150 for double occupancy. 866.706.6565 or [www.musicityourmouth2007.com](http://www.musicityourmouth2007.com).*