

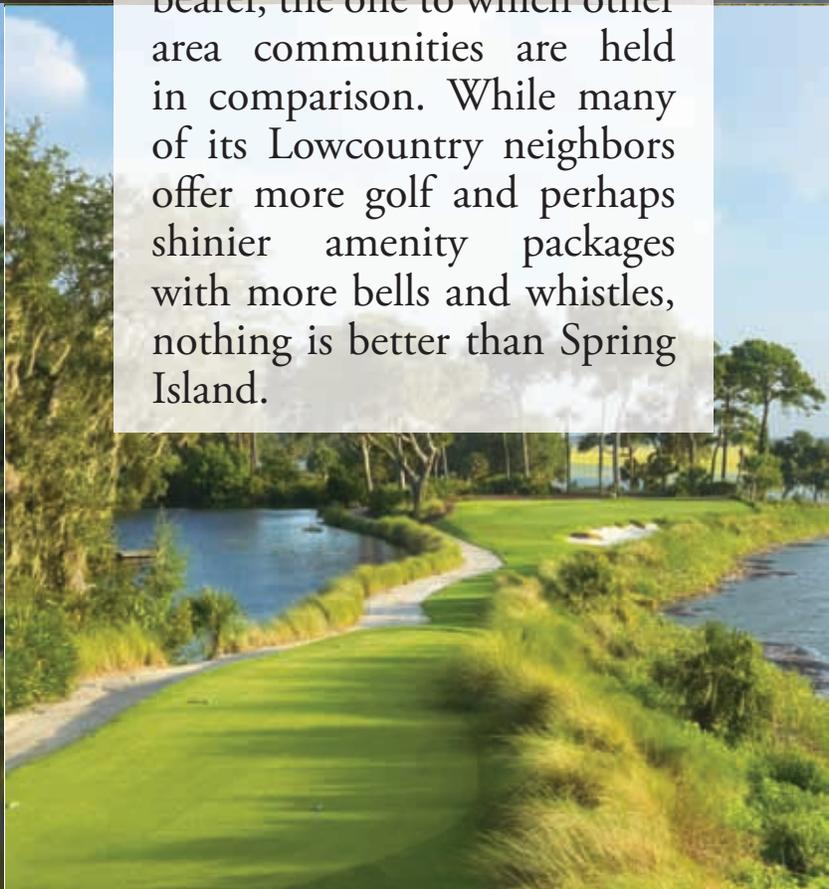
Old Tabby Links:

Architectural Royalty

By Joel Zuckerman



Spring Island, in the tiny burgh of Okatie, just north of Bluffton, is just another golf-real estate community like Smith & Wollensky is just another steakhouse, or Meryl Streep just another Oscar winner. This is the standard-bearer, the one to which other area communities are held in comparison. While many of its Lowcountry neighbors offer more golf and perhaps shinier amenity packages with more bells and whistles, nothing is better than Spring Island.



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Arnold Palmer's Old Tabby Links is the golf centerpiece of Spring Island, and the hard truth is "The King" has never really been considered architectural royalty, certainly not in comparison to other golf stars-turned-architects named Crenshaw, Weiskopf, and some guy named Nicklaus. But Palmer has done some exquisite work at this woody retreat, particularly after a recent renovation, and each delightful circuit of this bucolic and immaculately conditioned gem reinforces the notion that this mostly-undiscovered jewel is at the pinnacle of the region's pecking order. But here's the real news: There's much more to Spring Island than just golf.

Old Tabby Links, compelling experience that it is, is little more than a tablecloth on a football field in the scheme of things. Because Spring Island in total is in excess of 3,000 acres of live oaks and Spanish moss, tall marshland grasses, surrounding tidal creeks and rivers, freshwater and saltwater ponds.

There are residents, to be certain, but not nearly as many as there might have been. Because preserving the island's biological integrity was what appealed to developer Jim Chaffin of Chaffin/Light Associates. In the late 1980s, he heard of a proposed development plan for Spring Island that called for the construction of 5,000 homes and two golf courses. But he envisioned something quite different—a low-impact community with nature as its core. Today, Spring Island has just under 400 home sites. In addition, 1,200 acres have been set aside into a nature preserve, allowing for residents to appreciate Chaffin's description of the island development: "Spring Island is a park with a community in it, as opposed to a community with a park in it." The developer's commitment and ultimate realization of its original plan has earned Spring Island the Urban Land Institute's Sensitive Development Award.

It would be disingenuous to say that whacking the white ball through that marvelous meadow isn't one of Spring Island's primary appeals. But other activities abound, keeping long-time Director of Golf Bill Sampson's pro shop buzzing, but not overrun. Regarding other outdoor diversions, fishermen drop lines in 20 freshwater ponds, where bass and bream abound. In the saltwater ponds, redfish, flounder and striped bass are the prey. The rivers and creeks surrounding Spring Island are home to Cobia, tarpon, red fish and sea trout, while 30 minutes by boat to Port Royal Sound and the Atlantic Ocean afford the chance to catch blue marlin, Wahoo, king mackerel and dolphin.

An equestrian center covers 30-plus acres, with an additional 30 miles of serene riding trails. The state of the art Sports Complex includes two aerobics salons, two massage rooms and fully equipped, staffed exercise center, two pools, tennis courts and an outstanding croquet lawn. Other outdoor pursuits include target shooting at the on island clay range and quail hunting at a nearby plantation.

Besides fishing in both freshwater and saltwater, ocean-access within a 30 minute boat ride, hiking and horses, golf is one of Spring Island's primary appeals. Holes like the ninth, a par-5 with the namesake old tabby ruins of a plantation house adjacent to the green, and the all-world 17th, a beautiful and treacherous waterside par-3, provide the playing thrills for members and their fortunate guests.

"One of the major focuses of our golf course renovation was to re-grass the greens with a more modern strain, and move our greens an average of about ten yards to alleviate shading problems," begins Bill Sampson, who has been on the job for nearly twenty years. "Because the philosophy here is to offer as little disturbance as possible to the natural setting, there would have been very little support for cutting down the trees necessary to allow more light to the greens, particularly as many of them are magnificent live oaks, and other specimen trees."

Other subtleties now in place include more contours added to greens that were formerly a bit flatter, and the addition of shaved areas around the greens, allowing for a variety of recovery options. While the previous method was simply a "hack-out" from thick rough, now players can pitch, putt, flop or bump their way back to the putting surface.

"Some greens have gotten larger, others smaller, still others with some added elevation," continues Sampson, a Tennessee native. "The driving force behind the renovation was to update our irrigation system, which now uses less water overall, and can be targeted more effectively."

The course bunkering was the subject of another major overhaul. The square footage of the bunkers was actually cut in half, from 140,000 to 70,000 square feet. But despite the shrinkage, many were repositioned in a way that makes them more penal to the flight of a wayward ball. In addition, a gravel base was installed beneath the sand surface to promote better drainage.

While it is hard to imagine a back-to-nature property like this to be in any more of an organic state than what exists already, the fact is that there are now far greater numbers of indigenous plants and shrubbery that have been planted on the premises since the course renovation. And while fairways are roomier, thanks mainly to the aforementioned reduction of bunkering, the inclusion of these plant species means there's less overall grass on the course, which now requires less water than the prior standard. All said, Spring Island's Old Tabby Links continues to raise the bar in regards to beauty, sustainability and serenity, serving as a model for most any golf-real estate community in the southeast.