

## Except for the par threes, all holes are slight doglegs, a succession of grassy equations for the player to puzzle over

cola, Florida. Except for the par-3s, all holes are slight doglegs, a succession of grassy equations for the player to puzzle over. Sam Snead, Julius Boros and Byron Nelson, among other greats, have conducted clinics on this proving ground, and Jerry Pate sneaked in a few rounds during his honeymoon at the Grand.

I opted to play golf alone, which, on a course this wealthy in nature's gifts, can be an almost mystical experience. Undistracted by quibbling over gimme putts, wagering, expletives after sliced tee shots, the scale of golf patois, I played three balls per hole in an inner sanctum, privy to myself and the game and things that grow from the earth and their inhabitants—the sights and sounds that golfers too often overlook. This is swamp land, and word has it that in the mid-forties, when sand was being pumped into what was destined to be fairways and greens, riflemen were hired to shoot emerging clusters of angry black water moccasins.

Even today the course has a distinctive bayou quality. Wooden bridges cross over lazy little creeks. There is the constant humming and chirping of locusts and crickets. An alligator resides in a lagoon on the Dogwood nine.

To accentuate this beauty, starting times are not required, a luxury afforded by the wide range of other activities offered the visitor—from skeet shooting to sailing—and the fact that playing privileges are restricted to hotel guests.

One afternoon I broke my allegiance to golf when I agreed to play tennis with Ray Tirador, maitre d'hotel and aspiring amateur net champion, or whatever you call someone who excels in that game. Not knowing the difference between love and matchpoint and simply liking someone a lot, I nevertheless bounced about on the court, in golf socks and jeans, furiously swatting away at that illusive object—air. After two hours of battle and a score in his favor of 50-0, or something like that, we relaxed with a soft drink in the gazebo-like refreshment center. And then he turned to me,

the agony of defeat written on my flushed, perspiring face, and said, "You look tired. Why don't we move on to something more relaxing, like horseback riding."

Ever the iron-willed competitor, I wiped some Gatorade from my chin with the back of my fist, stared him straight in the eye and said, "Lookie here, buddy, I'm in this thing for keeps. I don't give up easy. As Chris Evert would say, 'I'm going to concentrate on my backhand and forehand and serve and basically just hitting the ball to smear you all over the clay.'"

So we played for another hour, and I'm pleased to report that I, because of my swift and coordinated analysis of the task at hand, returned a shot that led to an amazing five-second volley.

Toward dusk I would go to my suite, a warm, rustic haven with a picture-window view of the bay, and dress for dinner. Noah Zobrist had been so kind as to ask me what type of alcoholic refreshment I would like sent to my room, compliments of the hotel, and I think he was thinking in terms of something very demure, like champagne or perhaps a vintage white wine.

"Beer," I said, trying to flutter my eyelashes and act as if that were a perfectly logical choice for a Southern lady.

So I would nurse a bottle of Michelob and listen to the nightly news while showering and changing (Women generally prefer long skirts, gowns or dressy pantsuits for evening, while men always don a coat and tie.) And then, as an hors d'oeuvre, I would circulate among my favorite members of the staff, the Grand Hotel's secret weapon in funneling trade from other resorts. Employees become institutions here, 30- and 40-year veterans who are encouraged to converse with guests at timely intervals, remember names and penchants as if they carried computerized cards, and, for the most part, come from a long and proud line of grandfathers, aunts and uncles who had, during their childhood on Point Clear, dreamed of someday

working at the hallowed and sumptuous Grand Hotel. A dormitory on the grounds houses about a third of the personnel, and there are actual neighborhoods of maids, waitresses, gardeners and desk clerks.

Eddie Allen, bell captain, has worked at the hotel since 1947, and he reflects on the more leisurely era, before the trendy two and three-day stays, when guests brought stacks of luggage for an extended winter holiday and strolled from room to room, mingling with new and old acquaintances, cocktails in hand.

"I've seen a couple of generations come and go. Back when I first started here, I walked to work everyday. That was before they had paved roads leading to the hotel. I've become very attached to some of our regular visitors."

In the Bird Cage Lounge I would sip Cold Duck on the rocks, become mesmerized by the sun's dwindling spotlight on the bay and converse with Bucky Miller, waiter-célèbre. People who remember him from years past call and ask, "Is Bucky still there?" And when they hear that yes indeed he is alive and well and serving drinks and the vociferous cheer that is his trademark, airline reservations are made a little sooner and bags are packed faster.

"I'm born and bred in Point Clear," he nods. "I'm 60 years old and I came to work here as a bellman when I was 23. Me and a bunch of boys used to walk down here and crab and fish and swim, and I always figured I'd have a job at the Grand when I grew up."

Following a four-course repast in the dining room, a showcase for piquant, homecooked-style fare that is enhanced by dark woods, brightly colored wicker and floral seat cushions, I would listen to the mellifluous chords of Jack Normand, a former Bourbon Street jazzman who traveled here for a two-week stint 27 years ago and decided to stay.

After five days in the soothing arms of Alabama's premier retreat, I wanted to stay, too. □