



by LEIGH CORT

FIRST COAST TRAVELS

Finding *peace* at the Riverview Hotel



The Riverview Hotel's second-story verandah offers a view of the St. Marys River and Cumberland Island.

PHOTOS BY LEIGH CORT

Yes, it's quiet in St. Marys, Georgia! This tiny hamlet with a very unique historic district on the St. Marys River has been the gateway to Cumberland Island — “American’s Most Beautiful Wilderness Beach” — for decades. This is a “picket fence” kind of town that was established in 1787 when a group of 19 men bought four blocks of land each at a cost of \$38. The town’s original name was Buttermilk Bluff. Then, and still today, all of the streets in St. Marys’ historic district are named for these men — and by 1790, there were 305 residents when they took the first census. The picket fences, popularly used since America’s earliest colonial era, are abundantly dotted around St. Marys. They still symbolically depict an ideal “family homestead” that surround gardens and landmarks.

It’s easy to imagine this being the “jewel in the crown” of the Colonial Coast of Georgia. Newcomers and visitors confess, “I have found peace here.” It’s a feeling that is within your grasp during the hush of eventide or morning serenity, when you can take a lazy stroll down to the waterfront without any concern for traffic or noise. The tranquil river offers dolphins dancing in the distance and the Cumberland Princess ferry that transports visitors toting coolers, wearing backpacks and some preparing for overnight camping on the National Seashore of Cumberland Island.

A small town that continues to represent Colonial-era American history since its birthright established in 1787, it’s had its share of post-war recoveries, rebuilding when one of its major industries shifted to shipping by rail instead of ships, reveling in progress until the Great Depression, papermills bringing new people and jobs and the Navy establishing Kings Bay Submarine Base — a visit to St. Marys is fascinating and heartwarming. By 2004, HGTV selected the town as the site to build its 2004 “Dream House” — following on the heels of being named “The No. 1 Boom Town in America” in 1996 by Money Magazine.

Step into the vintage lobby of the 1916 Riverview Hotel and feel the timeless heartbeat of its past long before you delve into its history. There’s a lengthy saga from a century ago whose pedigree is apparent as you gaze around the lobby — from the Old-World front desk to the ancient photos and heart pine staircase leading to 18 bedrooms on the second floor. It’s a hideaway to a place where you can leave today behind as you climb the polished staircase and enter a bedroom that pays homage to visitors from yesteryear. Imagine Andrew Carnegie, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Admiral Chester Nimitz or weatherman Willard Scott sleeping here long before you discovered the Riverview; it’s fun to enter a cozy room with antiques of the era that captures your imagination.

When the Riverview Hotel was purchased by the three Brandon sisters in 1920, Sallie, Miss Semara and Miss Ethel, their reputation as Southern hostesses drew guests to their dining room tables and caring hospitality. True entrepreneurs at that time, they operated the hotel, their restaurant, a pharmacy, antique shop and beauty parlor

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RIVERVIEW

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— and also started the first telephone company in St. Marys! Notably, their brother George Washington Brandon owned several sawmills in Georgia, exporting hardwoods and providing much of the material for the hotel itself.

Remaining in the Brandon family for 88 years until 2019, the new owners Bert Guy and Chandra Yadav envisioned retaining the building's majestic history while bringing it gently into the 21st Century — room by room. Pairing Guy's career as Superior Court Judge of Glynn County with Yadav's international hotel background, they are today's generation of futurists bringing contemporary progress both to the overnight and dining guests that are very pleasing.

Seagle's, the hotel restaurant, is an oasis for drinking, dining and catching up. It's been a local's gathering place for a century, and today's reincarnation is a major part of the hotel's charm. In less than a year, Guy and Yadav restored the restaurant's front door to its 1916 charm, added pressed tin ceilings throughout, redesigned the bright interior with many inviting seating options and added outdoor tables under a wide awning. Seagle's has recaptured its prominent position as a landmark that boasts an unobstructed view of the waterfront to watch the town's homespun activities, festivals and special events.

If you're searching for a glitzy contemporary vibe, change gears. Antique lovers enjoy vintage photos dotting the walls that depict old days at the hotel, founding families, the 1800s bustling seaport and relics of smugglers and pirates. Adopt a great spot for your nightcap by walking through the old telephone booth that has become a door-



Riverview Hotel owner Bert Guy

way from the restaurant into the speakeasy bar. Indulge in a St. Marys-inspired cocktail that puts you in the mood with Captain Seagle's Cooler, The Buoy or a Tidal Wave!

Chefs Samie Woods and Jose Baez are the key to Seagle's delicious new reputation for dining at the Riverview Hotel. Their combined creativity of Southern Soul plus Puerto Rican Passion tempt guests for lunch, dinner and catered events daily. The menu, offered in the hotel's saloon and Seagle's, is a cornucopia of local seafood prepared in their own unique style. Baskets of oysters, shrimp, scallops — crabcakes to die for — even seafood-stuffed potatoes won't break the bank. Cajun seafood pasta is a rich combination of linguine, creamy Cajun alfredo sauce and topped with any fish on the daily menu. For the lighter appetite, soups are created by Sami and Jose along with crispy salads and sandwiches inspired by the water's bounty. My favorite: juicy grilled scallops with bacon jam! Burger and steak lovers won't be disappointed since the kitchen prides itself on feeding guests with the same attention as satisfying the owners and their families.

If you're a first-time visitor to romantic St. Marys, at first glance it looks so small



Samie Woods (pictured) and Jose Baez are the reason dining at the Riverview Hotel is so popular.

PHOTOS BY LEIGH CORT

that you might wonder how to explore and uncover its hidden secrets. It's easy — stop at the Visitor Center only two blocks from the Riverview Hotel. There won't be a crowd clamoring for information about what to do. Whomever greets you will personally open the door to this picturesque town, offer a superb 20-minute video and present a self-guided tour booklet. (Also see visitstmarys.com.)

Leaving St. Marys and the Riverview Hotel isn't easy. Once again, the quiet morning sounds, images of seagulls taking flight on their way to remote barrier islands and picket fences clicking open to invite the day onto welcoming porches are great memories to take home. Various stewards of the original settlement gave their love and dedication to this tiny hamlet through the centuries. Lucky for us that we can capture its spirit in just a brief moment through its richness of preservation and people.

For further information, go to riverviewhotelstmarys.com.

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