

PLAN YOUR



9+16
X

ESCAPE

No matter how you define "getaway," Florida options are endless when it comes to luxurious mini-vacations. We selected five of our favorite resorts, each close to home, each with its own flair, and each perfect for a long, lovely spring weekend.

Captiva Island is home to South Seas Island Resort, a perfect, pristine setting for relaxation and recreation.

Island Jewel

After undergoing a \$140 million renovation, the South Seas Island Resort defines the luxury resort experience. Surrounded by pristine water and two-and-a-half miles of powder-white beaches, this unpretentious jewel is nestled on the tiny island of Captiva. The 330-acre plantation-style resort offers 444 fully renovated accommodations, from hotel rooms and villa suites to three-bedroom beach homes and cottages.

The resort's panoramic view of the Gulf of Mexico and Captiva Island's strict codes — no mailboxes, stoplights, billboards, high-rises or fast-food restaurants — create the perfect environment for escape, relaxation and, if you wish, recreation.

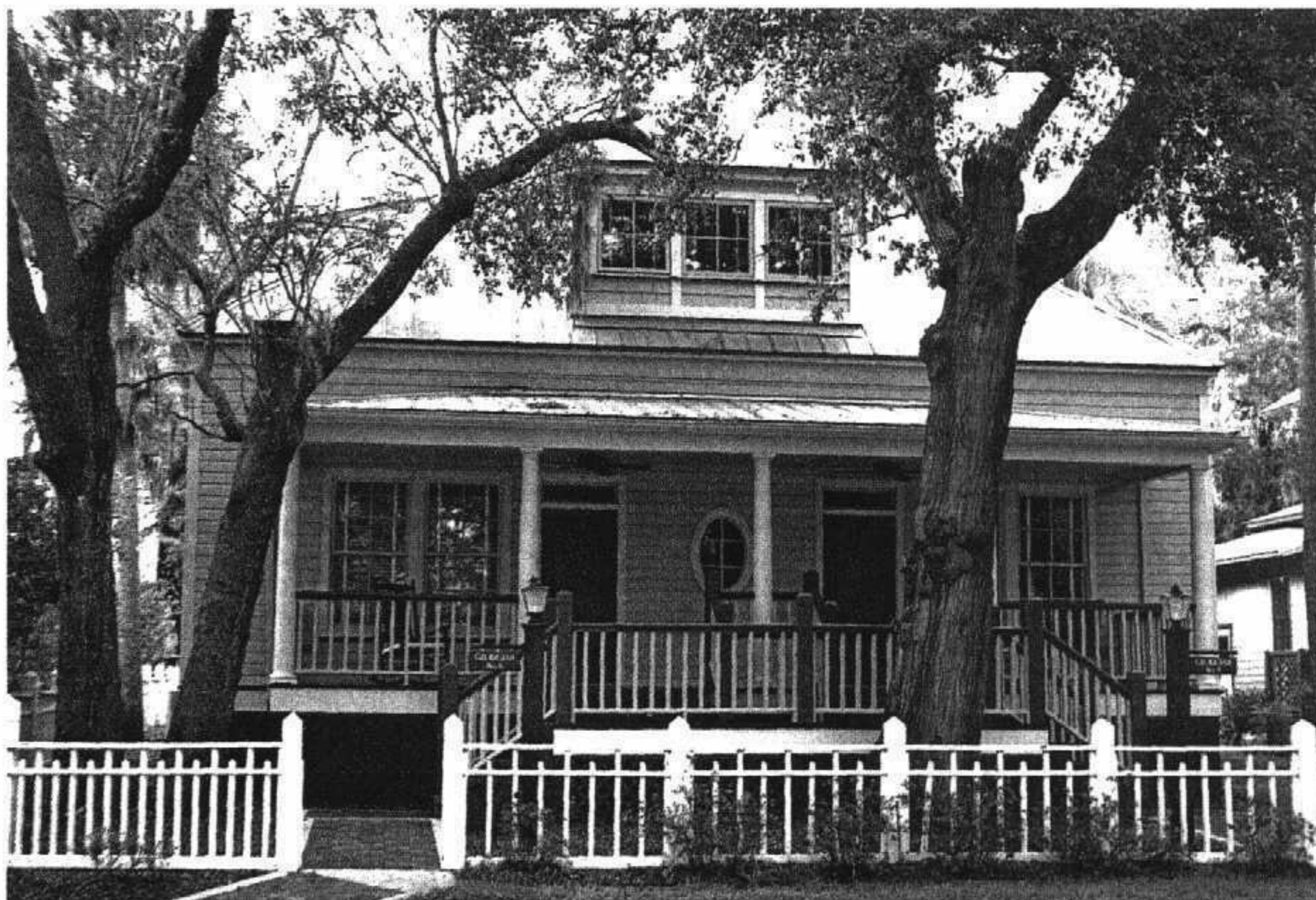
Kayaking by the bayside edges of the barrier island is a must-do. As you paddle by sandbars and mangroves, discovering osprey, cormorants and white ibis in their natural habitat, the protected, peaceful waters of the inlet will calm your soul.

Further unwind by heading to Sunset Beach with a gourmet picnic basket from the Harbourside Bar & Grill. Lounge on a beach chair and bask in the warmth of the sun, then stroll along the shoreline — famous for sea-shelling, with more than 400 varieties.

End the perfect day at the pier on Kings Point, the best place to spot manatee and dolphin and a haven for picturesque views of the sun setting over the gulf. 5400 Plantation Road, Captiva Island, southseas.com, 239-472-5111. — Renee Bradley

Riverside Delights

The toughest decision you'll need to consider at Steinhatchee Landing Resort is whether to relax indoors, perhaps in the spacious, invigorating spa tub, or to venture outside for equally inviting recreation. Our advice? Stay a while and do it all. Tucked under oaks and pines laced with Spanish moss, this Old Florida-style riverside village offers nearly three dozen fully outfitted vacation cottages, from cozy honeymoon suites to spacious homes perfect for families.



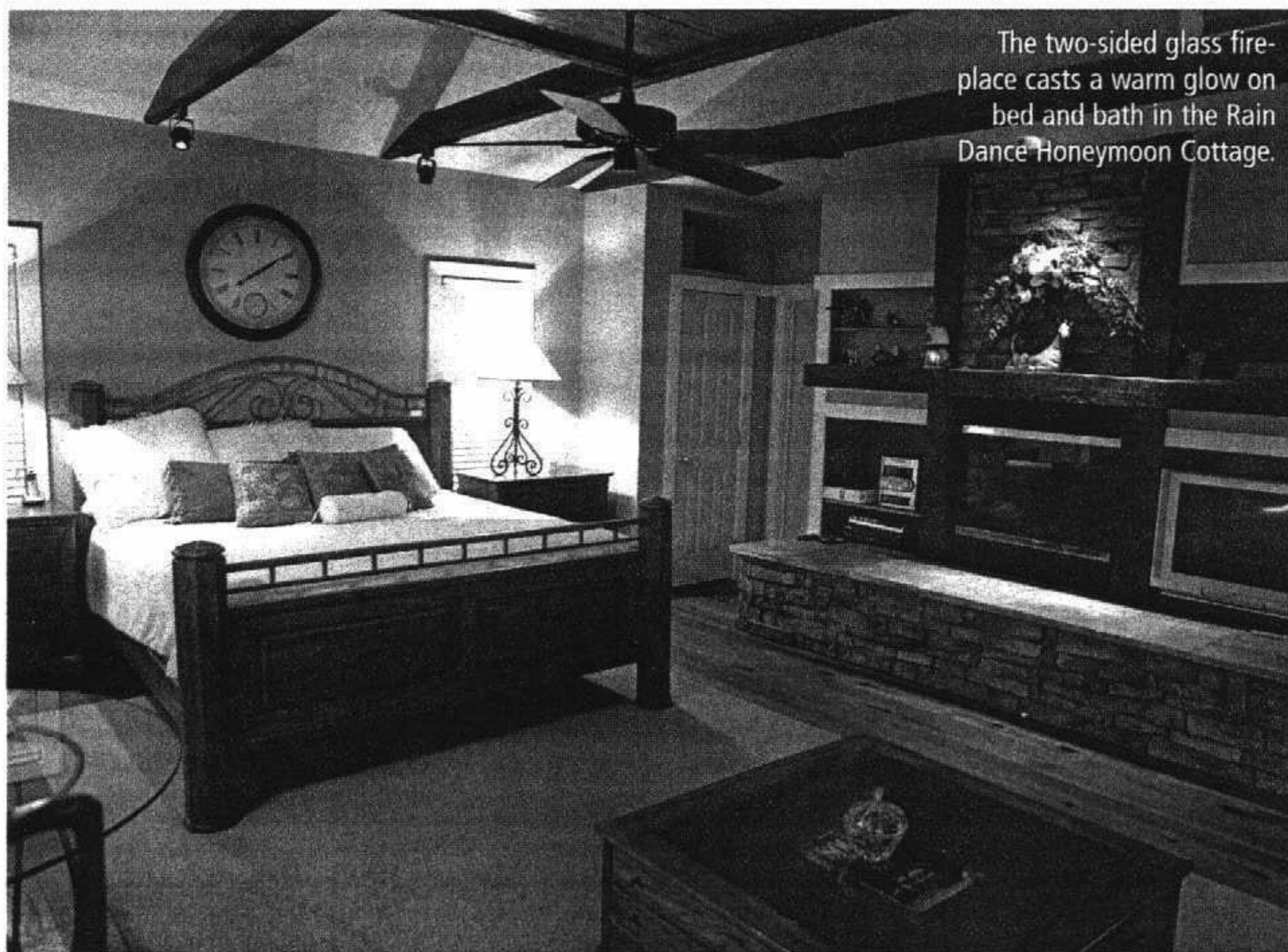
The Georgian Cottage at Steinhatchee Landing offers gracious Southern accommodations.

The tiny town of Steinhatchee, on the coast about three hours north of Tampa, becomes a hotspot for scalloping in late summer. Fishing is popular year-round, and the river and gulf offer a wealth of boating options. But it's the soothing, time-stands-still ambiance that draws guests again and again to Steinhatchee Landing. Waking to birdsong, walking under magnolias, strolling along the river — the pleasures are simple, but deeply gratifying.

It's no wonder the resort has become a wedding destination. Scores of couples have exchanged vows in the Dancing Waters Chapel, where Gothic-style architecture blends with antique wooden pews and contemporary touches include a gorgeous grand piano and bridal party dressing areas.

And after the ceremony, newlyweds — and those acting like newlyweds — can enjoy an exquisitely romantic stay. Perched along a peaceful, curved lane, each honeymoon cottage offers fresh flowers and scented candles on arrival. A two-sided glass fireplace casts its glow on both bed and marble-accented bath. A fully equipped kitchen and outdoor grill are ideal for the evenings you may opt to dine in at the intimate table-for-two.

Family vacations are equally pleasing, with canoes and kayaks, a swimming pool, and tennis courts; many homes are equipped with games and other diversions for the occasional rainy day. For families or festive group vacations, try one of the larger homes, including the Presidential Cottage, a spacious three-bedroom Victorian that not long ago welcomed President and Rosalynn Carter for a long



The two-sided glass fireplace casts a warm glow on bed and bath in the Rain Dance Honeymoon Cottage.

The Don CeSar Beach Resort on St. Pete Beach once welcomed guests including Al Capone and F. Scott Fitzgerald.



weekend. With gorgeous river views and gracious amenities, the cottage creates the backdrop for a perfect getaway. 203 Ryland Circle, Steinhatchee, steinhatcheelanding.com, 352-584-1709. — Wendy Malloy

The Beachfront Classic

Over late-night Mojitos and soft piano music at the lobby bar of the legendary Don CeSar Beach Resort, talk among guests often turns to tales of ghosts and other mysterious sightings. It's no wonder the Pink Palace spawns such stories. Built in 1928 on the sugary sands of St. Pete Beach, the hotel in its early days welcomed glamorous guests including F. Scott Fitzgerald and Al Capone. After the Depression, the hotel served as a hurricane shelter, a hospital and an army convalescent center — great fodder for stories of hauntings — before a series of restorations reclaimed the Don's luxurious early incarnation. But even today, longtime staff members believe developer Thomas Rowe roams the halls from time to time to ensure that his original vision of opulence remains intact.

And indeed it does. Two waterfront pools, 277 seaside Mediterranean-styled rooms and top-notch dining keep visitors content season after season. Dress in resort-chic attire and head to the Maritana Grille, a four-diamond signature restaurant, which features a breathtaking backdrop of 1,500 gallons of blue saltwater aquariums filled with indigenous Florida fish. Pick a New American dish prepared over a pecan and cherry wood grill, and pair it with a fine wine from more than 200 selections.

For something more low-key, pick up a pair of sunglasses at Necessaries, one of the Don's many boutiques, and head barefoot to the Beachcomber Grill, an outdoor spot that delivers tasty dishes poolside. Order light appetizers and a round of strawberry daiquiris to cool down a hot afternoon.

Relaxation is key at the new, freestanding spa facility, expected to be complete late this year. Until then, enjoy soothing sea scrubs and rejuvenating massages at the 4,000-square-foot Beach Club & Spa, located on the hotel's first floor.



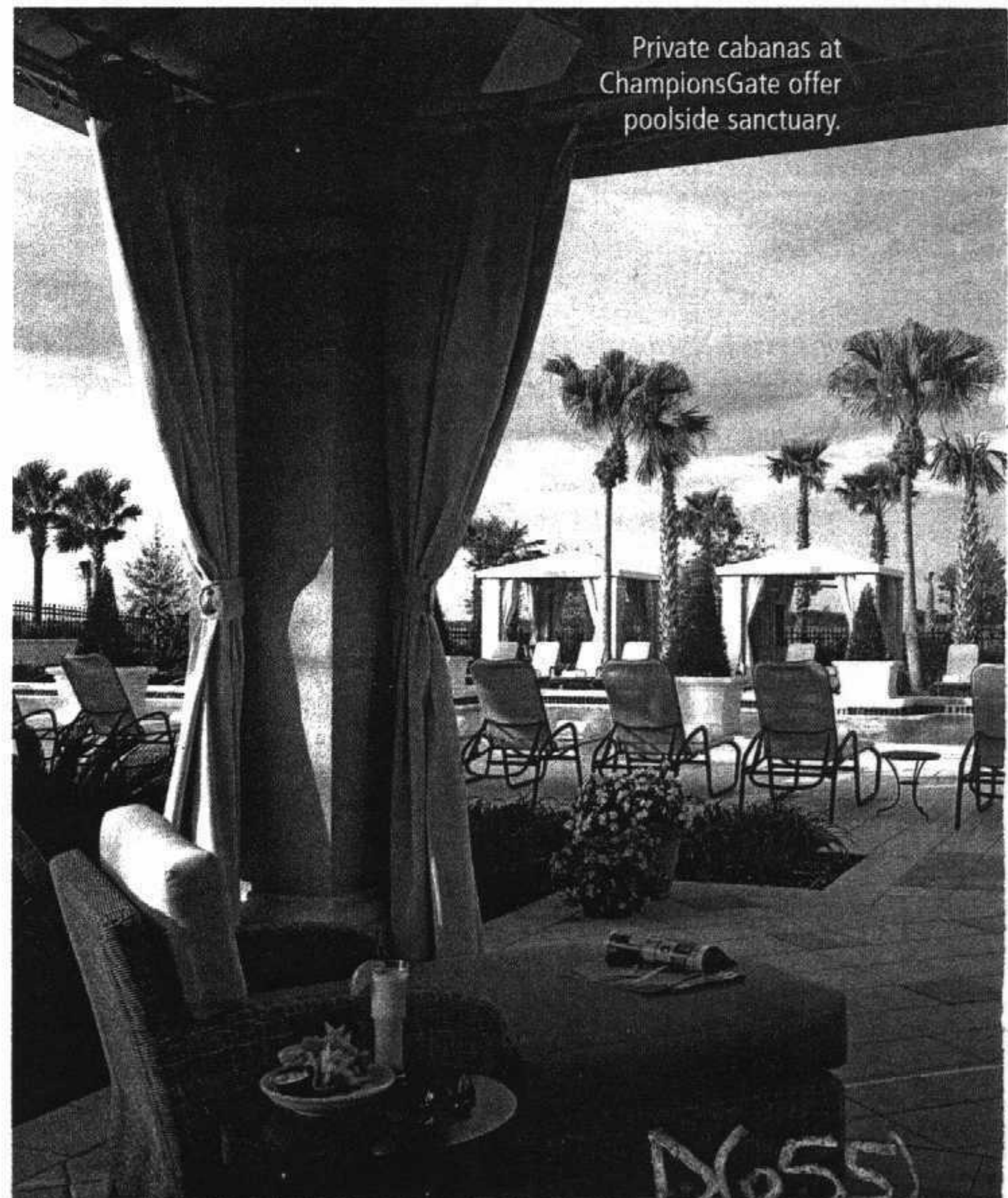
The Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate features two Greg Norman-designed golf courses.

After a long day of indulgence, there is one last view you must take in: At sunset, stroll to the north or south terrace and behold the Gulf of Mexico as the sun casts a spell over the gentle waves. Spectacular. 3400 Gulf Boulevard, St. Pete Beach, doncesar.com, 727-360-1881. — Melinda Tam

Golfer's Paradise

The Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate is golf heaven. Home of the MBNA WorldPoints Father/Son Challenge, broadcast on NBC, the golf club offers two unique courses designed by Greg Norman and frequented by such legends as Nick Price and Ernie Els. Golfers can practice their games on four acres of double-sided driving range or brush up on skills with a private lesson at the world headquarters of the David Leadbetter Academy, also situated on the property.

Non-golfing companions will be just as entertained on the resort's 15 acres of land brimming with leisure activities. The zero-entry family pool, with slides and fountains, provides a quick cool down from the sun's hot rays, while the formal pool offers private cabanas complete with televisions, refreshments and comfy seating. Spritz



Private cabanas at ChampionsGate offer poolside sanctuary.

