

The Cloister at Sea Island, in Georgia, was recently rebuilt after being razed in 2003. Architect Peter Capone strove to capture but not mimic the storied 1928 original, designed by Addison Mizner. "The challenge," he says, "was that there was such a fond history." BELOW: The main entrance.

"Everything we did had to have a tie-in to Sea Island and to the old Cloister," says interior designer Pamela Hughes. RIGHT: Two arcaded galleries provide access to the guest suites and overlook the Colonial Lounge. Old World Weavers wing chair stripe and green cut velvet, at right.



HOTELS

The Cloister at Sea Island

DISTILLING THE MAGIC OF ADDISON MIZNER IN GEORGIA

Architecture by Peter Capone, AIA/Interior Design by Pamela Hughes
Text by Jeff Turrentine/Photography by Mary E. Nichols

A year before the 1920s gave their last, tumultuous roar, a remarkable hotel opened its doors on the south Georgia coast, on tiny Sea Island, adjacent to St. Simons Island. It had been originally imagined by its owner—automobile magnate Howard Coffin—as a relatively modest overnight inn for visitors interested in purchasing nearby real estate. Later, Coffin figured, he would erect the grand hotel of his dreams, once

the development was up and running. But there was nothing modest about the public response to The Cloister in October 1928. Though Coffin had concerns about building on a parcel of land that even proud locals described as “swampy, mosquito-infested and of little economic value,” those concerns were quickly alleviated by the waves of pleasure-seeking guests who arrived immediately from up and down the eastern seaboard.









LEFT: The solarium. Scalamandré love seat. Cowtan & Tout chintz on Hamilton wing chairs. Pillow fabric from Clarence House. Nobilis stripe. **RIGHT:** The Spanish Lounge was re-created with original materials and furnishings, such as the windows and the ceiling lanterns.

BELOW: The carpet in the Georgian Room, one of two dining rooms, was handmade in Thailand. Weighing 2,000 pounds, it features all of the flora and fauna of Sea Island. Old World Weavers dining chair cotton blend. Jim Thompson fabric on custom-made O. Henry House sofa.



Thanks to the architecture of Addison Mizner, whose designs had already helped turn Palm Beach and Boca Raton into destinations for the well heeled, The Cloister transformed this hitherto sleepy slice of the South into a vacationer's playground. Coffin's business acumen helped the hotel survive the Great Depression, and it went on to enjoy many decades as a jewel favored by celebrities, tycoons and heads of state (as well as regular folks who longed to live like them, if only for a weekend).

Some three-quarters of a century later, the crowds were still coming. But a few years ago the hotel's chief executive officer, Bill Jones III, representing the fourth generation of family members to run it

(Coffin was a distant cousin, and Jones's father and grandfather were at the helm before he took over), decided that the time had finally arrived to make The Cloister into the truly grand hotel that Coffin had always wanted it to be. After much painful deliberation, Jones acknowledged that the original building would have to go, to be replaced by a new one. But history had to be respected: Jones's ancestors, not to mention the many guests who kept coming back, would never forgive him if he ran roughshod over their shared legacy.

Throughout, Jones walked a fine line between reverence and realism. "I'm naturally the guy who would be the most emotional about tearing down the building,



LEFT: Among the main building's 30 suites is the Sea Island Suite, which includes a spacious living room. Lee Jofa sofa fabric. Bergamo pillow fabric. Julia Gray low table. O. Henry House green lounge chairs. Scalamandré ottoman, near fireplace, and wing chair and drapery fabrics.

BELOW LEFT: The Sea Island Suite faces the Black Banks River. In one of its two bedrooms, the four-poster, bench and night table are from Hamilton. Samuel & Sons pillow tassel. Brunswick & Fils stand. Lee Jofa drapery fabric. Casa del Bianco bed linens. Schumacher floor lamp.



because my grandfather built it," he says. "But I didn't have much of an emotional problem with it, for a couple of reasons. One, I didn't feel like we had any choice. And two, I know it's exactly what my grandfather would have done. He was a businessman, and he was always the first guy to say, 'Don't get emotionally attached to something that doesn't make sense.'"

To undertake this delicate enterprise, Jones enlisted architect Peter Capone, whose relationship with Sea Island and The Cloister goes back a dozen years. In that time, Capone says, he and his client have developed an enviable dynamic. "He tells me what he wants, then leaves me alone to deliver it," Capone says of Jones.

"In other words, he'll tell me if I'm there, but he never tells me how to get there."

The ghost of Mizner loomed large over the project. Though he lacked formal architectural training, this son of a United States envoy to Central America (and the brother and sometime accomplice of the famed scoundrel Wilson Mizner) nevertheless became one of the most sought-after society architects of the 1920s. Mizner "had an eclectic style that violated principles," says Capone. "He cut corners all the time. But he was extremely clever."

Working closely with his longtime associate, Michael L. Ramsey, Capone set about constructing a new hotel that would honor the spirit of Mizner's design through

a thoughtful distillation of his ideas but not fall under the category of slavish replication. For starters, Capone and his team moved the main entrance from its original site, facing the Black Banks River, to what used to be the rear of the hotel. Now guests arrive under the porte cochere and register in a modest vestibule before entering the Colonial Lounge, a multistory marvel in which guest suites are hidden behind the arcaded tiers of the second and third floors. A topmost clerestory floods the space with light; visible outside the French doors, just beyond a shaded terrace where nightly cocktails are served, is the river.

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Of the original Cloister, Jones asked Capone to maintain a beloved front parlor known as the Spanish Lounge. Another architect might have settled for a facsimile; Capone went further and actually re-created the room using the original materials, down to the timber beams and roof decking, that were used in 1928. Except for a few pieces of wood that needed to be replaced, this is the same room that Mizner imagined and erected.

Designer Pamela Hughes's mandate from Jones was as daunting as it was simple: "Every little corner needed to have some sort of special element," she says. "In every place your eye might rest, something of interest or beauty." To fulfill her mission, she used elements of widely disparate origin. Many of the hotel's trims were custom-designed and crafted in Portugal or England. Most of the fabrics were imported. And under the auspices of her friend, rug specialist George Jevremovic, more than 650 area rugs were custom-designed and woven in villages throughout Turkey. "Nowhere in the world will you see a collection like this," she says, adding that it seemed as if "all of Turkey knew about The Cloister."

Always guiding them, say both designer and architect, were the many preferences and passions that visitors had made clear to Jones, his father and his grandfather. "Bill knows exactly how his guests like to live when they're at The Cloister," says Hughes. "He'd walk into the solarium while we were working and say: 'OK, they'll want to sit here in the morning, in this spot, at this angle, while they have their coffee.' He just knew. And he was exactly right."

For Peter Capone, who had to answer not only to his client but to eagle-eyed guests and the watchful spirit of Addison Mizner, the finished hotel is the kind of triumph every architect dreams of: a building that offers visitors instant, ineffable pleasure upon entering. "People don't need to know why they feel good in a building; they just need to feel good," he says. "It's the architect's job to know why." □

The Cloister at Sea Island

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Although the ocean is nearby, "we felt strongly that the hotel should have a relationship with the river," remarks Capone. The landscape design is by Vassa Cate. THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE BELOW RIGHT: The social terrace. Furnishings in left and right foreground from Giati.

