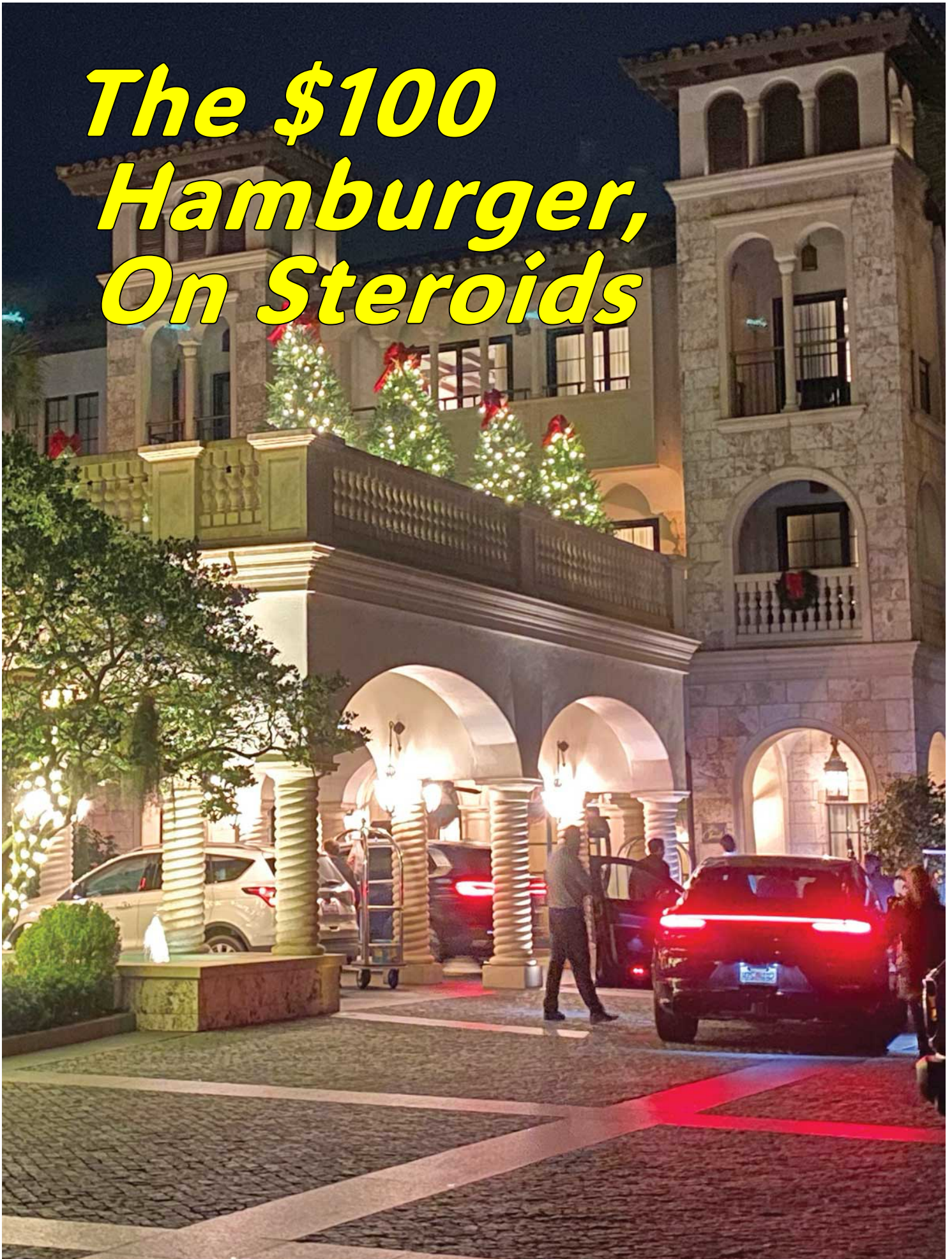


The \$100 Hamburger, On Steroids



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By Mike Jones

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Forty three years is a long time. I am more than mildly proud that my almost-sainted wife and I have just celebrated our wedding anniversary of that number. We still like each other. Sporadically, we even talk. It's a matrimonial miracle made even more entertaining by the fact the actual date of the anniversary is Christmas eve.

That Christmas eve thing also is a problem for us. What do we buy as a gift? Is it an anniversary gift or a Christmas gift? Or something combined? Over the years we, like many couples, have developed a few rules which have helped us preserve our sanity and avoid gunplay under the Christmas tree. Never buy anything that comes in a size; like a particular nightgown from Victoria's Secret. I'll always get both the size and the fashion wrong. Additionally: never give anything that needs to be assembled. And never, ever give a device that needs to be plugged in. Oddly, Annie doesn't need these rules, but I do.

That rechargeable car vacuum under the tree in 1982? Not a good idea, not even then. Good thing it was stolen out of the car after a few weeks, otherwise I probably would still be sleeping on the couch.

But this year, as the twin dates of anniversary and Christmas loomed ever closer, my bride and I decided a short vacation was in order, and that would be

our gift to each other. A week away from the dogs, the neighbors, and the laptops would boost our mental health.



The Booking

Casual friends had mentioned that Georgia was pleasant at this time of year. After a little research I booked us into a spot on the shore, just north of Jacksonville. The hotel purportedly was right on the ocean and offered shuttle services between the hotel and the town's snappy little airport with its 6,000 foot runway. In our Cessna the trip would be about 90 minutes, barely enough to warm the cylinders. It also would be a fine demonstration for my wife of safety and efficacy of the new scimitar props I had just installed on the nose of the Cessna (see last month's edition of this newspaper for the sordid details of that ill-fated overhaul).

"Hey, sweetie, I booked us into The Cloisters," I announced proudly.

"Never heard of it," she replied as she scooped up the paperwork I had downloaded. "Hmmm... looks nice.... elegant... there's golf...." She murmured approvingly. Then she got to the page with all the numbers on it.

“Well, at these prices, this had better be one amazing hamburger,” she said, shaking her head at my profligacy. “I was thinking of a Best Western.” Once again, I blessed my stars I had chosen a wonderful wife.

Christmas Day came and went exactly on schedule, and on Boxing Day (my wife is Scottish, so every day is a saint’s holiday and every house has a name) we debouched from North Carolina into some moderately ugly weather; no convective activity but rain and low clouds. Our route pretty much followed Interstate 95 as it meanders south through the Carolina low country. The airport (KSSI) was busy with corporate jets swishing bigwigs to and from their Christmas beach houses and Very Important Meetings. In the fullness of time, we were in the driveway of our hotel.

Walking into The Cloisters was like stepping back in time, or at least stepping into the sound stage of a Hercule Poirot detective mystery. It was built in the late 1920s by a fabulously wealthy chap named Howard E. Coffin who was one of the founders of the Hudson Motor Car Company.¹ Hudson mass-produced cars that sold for under \$1,000, and the company was a stand-out success in a time when hundreds of companies were producing automobiles. In fact, by 1926 Hudson was the third largest car maker in the U.S., after Ford and Chevrolet.

Coffin was a peer of and a competitor to Henry Ford, and almost as rich. He was a glamorous celebrity, an outdoorsman, an industrial “fixer” during the First World War, an early environmentalist, and a frequent winner in the car races.² He was enraptured with the beauty of the desolate and remote beach

¹ The corporate descendants of the Hudson Company survive today. American Motors Corp. was formed when Hudson merged with Nash-Kelvinator Corp. in 1954. At the time, it was the largest corporate merger in U.S. history and designed to create an automotive behemoth which could compete against GM and Ford. AMC offered a full line of cars such as the Rambler, the Gremlin, the Pacer, and the Javelin. After a few intermittent successes under chief executive George W. Romney, followed by years of deepening losses under his successors, the company was ultimately acquired by Chrysler in 1987 which is known today as Stellantis.

² Glamour and lifestyle will only get you so far. Wikipedia reports a detail the hotel neglected to mention in its glowing history of Coffin and his hotel: that Coffin inadvertently killed himself at Sea Island in 1937, the result of a gunshot wound from his favorite rifle. He and his wife are buried on the island.

islands of Georgia. After the State had built bridges and causeways he bought several of the islands and built a “friendly little inn” with just 100 rooms he called The Cloisters.



The hotel opened in 1928 and President Calvin Coolidge was one of the first guests. Celebrities attract publicity, and publicity attracts guests, and the hotel bloomed even through the Great Depression. The luminaries who have rested their heads on the pillows of The Cloisters include Dwight Eisenhower, Margaret Thatcher, George Bush, Tony Blair of the UK, Gerhard Schroeder of Germany, a weasel-faced chap named Vladimir Putin, and now me and She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed.

The original hotel was demolished in 2008 and rebuilt on the same site in the same style but with modern amenities. The Cloisters 2.0 added more and larger guest suites, a huge spa, and a less formal beach club, along with modern infrastructure like thermal windows, energy-efficient HVAC, giant showers and WIFI. Our room was in the North Wing, overlooking spectacular wetlands that separate Sea Island from St. Simmons Island. Enormous and ancient oaks crowd the buildings and Spanish moss drapes from anything that stands still for a few minutes.



The FBO at St. Simons Island Airport is modern, clean and very professional. I like the putting green, too, which links the airport to the fun and the history of this resort town.

The Flip-Flop Ban

My wife and I have travelled all over the world and stayed in some spectacular hotels, but this experience topped them all. Without sounding too much like a TripAdvisor review, The Cloisters is magnificent. The hotel is formal, elegant and proper. Men wear jackets at dinner; flip-flops are not allowed, and there are brass signs on the doors requesting gentlemen to “remove their headgear before entering.”

The lobby atrium has an enormous fireplace and the ceiling soars four stories. An enormous Christmas tree brightened the hall and dozens — I

literally mean dozens — of Christmas trees filled the halls to the guestrooms. With arched hallways and beamed ceilings the entire hotel has the look and feel of 14th century Verona, only with good plumbing. Our hotel room was larger than our living room at home, and the bathroom was more nicely equipped. Sitting on the veranda in the room, I watched jets and Cessnas descend into the airport. Life is good.



This impressive hall is The Spanish Room and is the only surviving portion of the original hotel; everything else was demolished in 2008 to create the current facility. The historical artifacts on display made it a “must see” stop for me. The four white papers on the far wall, for example, are printed drafts of the U.S. Constitution with hand-scribbled annotations and corrections made by Gov. Oglethorpe, who represented Georgia and was one of the signers of that document.

There is a lot of magic at The Cloisters. The staff is uniformly polite, well-trained, and determined to please; there was no request they would not attempt to satisfy. Then there is the history of the place: one spacious hall of the original hotel was saved from demolition. Used as an event space today it features photos

and memorabilia going back to one of the signers of the Constitution from Georgia. Then there is the well-protected environment: ocean on one side, salt-water marshes on the other, every tree spotlighted for its natural charm, the entire island protected from the travails of high-density over-development. Lastly, there is the silence. Even the surf tumbles quietly. The loudest noise you

will hear is the gentle rumble of the occasional car, moving slowly because all the roads are cobblestone.

Despite its posh Downton Abbey feel, The Cloisters is both pet-friendly and child-friendly to an amazing degree, carrying on a tradition of the founders. The wine list may feature burgundies with prices in four figures, but the chef will sizzle a hot dog for your finicky little ones. One particular afternoon the lobby was filled with tiny girls, all dressed in sparkling fairy princess gowns, ready for a special party in the grand ballroom. We probably met twenty dogs of all different sizes and vintages, strolling through the lobby on their way to

“do their business” on the perfectly manicured lawns.

The atrium-style lobby combines medieval charm with Edwardian comfort. Live music is offered every evening, tapestries line the walls, and parents, kids and dogs sit in the comfortable furniture, planning their days.



Seaside Golf

One of the joys of owning a Centurion is the load-carrying capacity of that SUV-with-wings; squeezing two sets of golf clubs into the plane is a breeze even when one's spouse overpacks. The golf at The Cloisters is superb. The courses wander through the tidal wetlands delicately, offering vistas that delight the eyes but challenge

your swing. I tested the patience of our foursome by stopping to watch the planes landing at the airport; they flew low and slow over the fairways. At one

point there was only a narrow country road between my tee box and a Falcon jet screaming down the runway.

Our favorite track was “Seaside” which was by far the most challenging but the most beautiful. The winds were blowing at well over 30 knots when we played, and those gales pushed our golf balls into trouble time and time again, testing the patience of Casey, our long-suffering caddy.

The most “Downton Abbey-esque” feature of the hotel is the library, which is a real library with a curated selection of books you actually will want to read, sorted by topic and surrounded by comfy chairs. A steward will bring you beverages as you ponder history, sports or biographies. I enjoyed the room as I finished Bergreen’s history of Magellan’s voyage around the world, which I highly recommend.

A bit of interesting history lies behind this course. Built on the site of an old plantation, adjacent to the green on the ninth hole there is a small cemetery. Century-old tombstones mark the resting places of the slaves who worked the plantation. This burial ground is still active — there was an internment the week before Christmas — but this is one club with a tightly restricted membership. Only people who are directly descended from the slaves who worked the plantation may be interred on those grounds. I found that irony richly intense. The wealthy slave owners are long-gone and forgotten, but the slaves — who had nothing in life — will enjoy eternity in the shade of the live oaks, feeling the surf-tossed winds stir the long grass around their headstones. *Requiesce in pace*; you deserve it.



All things must come to an end, and a steady diet of \$100 hamburgers will cause even those delights to lose their charm. Eventually it was time to race home, back to reality. Back to the dogs, the gym, the laptop, and the pushy emails from the editor of this newspaper, ever striving to keep his deadlines from disintegrating into shambles. (I love you, Boss! Your emails are inspirational.) The trip home was uneventful, in bright sunshine and gentle winds. But it was a trip of a lifetime, made all the more sweet by aviation.

Why We Fly

Why we fly is an important question, asked of us by others as often as ourselves. Yes, we like to practice our pattern-work. Yes, sometimes it's just a job. Some of us even fly airplanes so small they're not practical for traveling any great distance. All true.

But the fundamental reason most of us fly is to facilitate the ability to go somewhere interesting and visit people we love. It gives our flying purpose and meaning. This purpose alone makes the expenses and the hassles of aviation worthwhile. So here's my New Years wish for you: Keep on flying; find fun places to go, enjoy your friends and enjoy the ride. It will be worth your \$100, guaranteed.

About the Author

Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who has more than 50 aircraft types in his logbook. His pride and joy is a Cessna T210, which has carried him to every corner of the U.S. and Canada for more than twenty years. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

