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American Way

MAY 2020

SHE'S
THE BOSS

*Fishing
with Mom
can be
hazardous
to your ego*

Key West

*An insiders'
guide to the
Conch Republic*

Local Kate
Kowalski
relaxes in
historic
Old Town

VINTAGE
VISION

*The
'70s road
trip that
changed
photography*





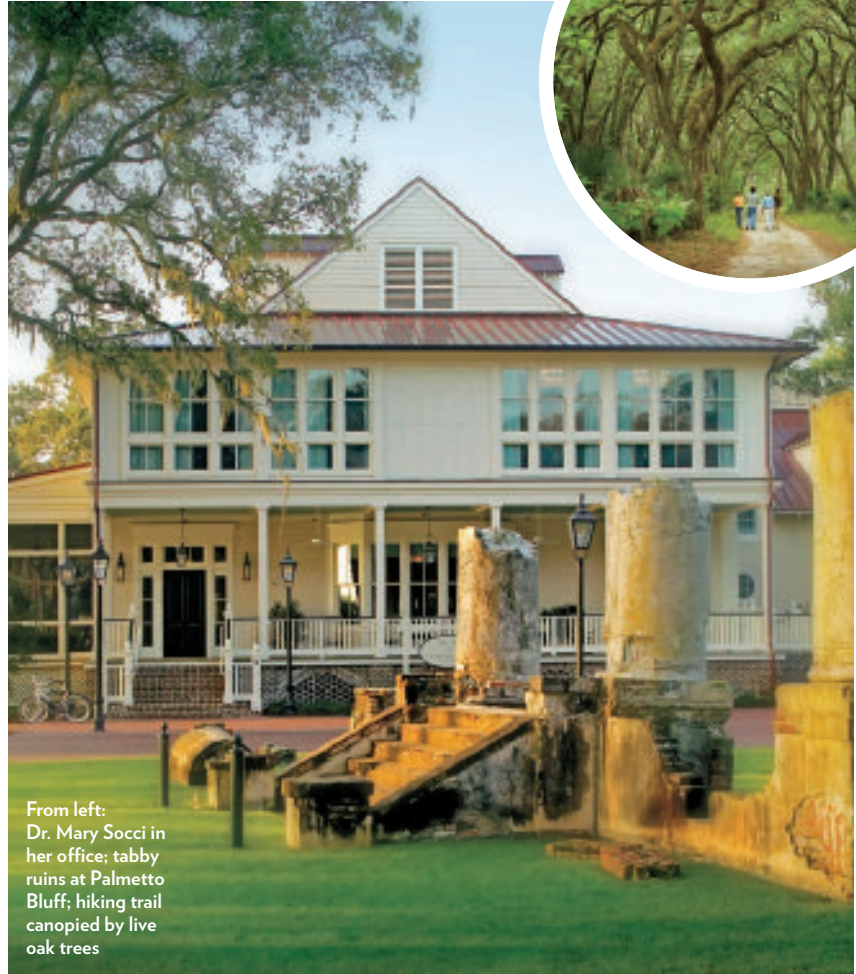
Dig This

A luxury resort and residential development in South Carolina's Lowcountry has a full-time archaeologist who cares for 12,000 years of human history
 By Alexandra Marvar

OVERLOOKING THE MARSHES ON South Carolina's May River, Dr. Mary Socci sits at a vast wooden table in her office in the Palmetto Bluff community, sorting through hundreds of shards of pottery in meticulously labeled Ziploc bags. Along the walls are stacks of file boxes containing Paleo-Indian tools dating to 10,000 B.C.E., fossilized mastodon and megalodon teeth, and colonial-era glass bottles.

The gated 20,000-acre property just inland from Hilton Head Island boasts a five-star Montage resort, a residential community, restaurants, boutiques and boat landings. It also has a lot of stories to tell. That's where Dr. Socci, the property's staff archaeologist, comes in.

In 2003, new owners formed the Palmetto Bluff Conservancy to continue the property's legacy of cultural and environmental stewardship. In 2004, Dr. Socci came aboard, overseeing the archaeological survey required by federal and state regulations, and determining the sites that might hold local history. Palmetto Bluff is



From left: Dr. Mary Socci in her office; tabby ruins at Palmetto Bluff; hiking trail canopied by live oak trees



rich with clues to lives of the past: Prehistoric Native Americans resided here; Revolutionary War soldiers fought here; former enslaved people returned here after the Civil War to buy property where they'd been held; and one family's Gilded Age mansion is now charred ruins.

Dr. Socci worked with planners to ensure the resort's development wouldn't erase history.

Not all of Dr. Socci's work fits inside her office. On a lawn ringed with live oaks, once grand columns filled with tabby—a concrete of ash and oyster shells—lie where they toppled after a fire in 1926. Nearby, a Revolutionary War-era cemetery hides behind a

gate under a stand of palm trees. Dr. Socci worked with planners to preserve these sites, ensuring the resort's development would not erase history.

On any given day, the Bluff's archaeologist might be combing through centuries-old wills, deeds and correspondence looking for clues to the past, or analyzing and reporting on what her team has found. Dr. Socci offers a peek at the centuries of life that preceded the Bluff through walking tours, lectures and exhibits, providing a unique amenity to resort guests and residents.

"The developer really felt that there would be added value in having someone to share this history," she says. "I was skeptical at first, because I'd never heard of anyone doing that. But I really think that's true. It's exciting to see how interested people are in what came before."

COURTESY OF PALMETTO BLUFF (3)