

Up Da Creek

Canoe on down and climb on up for a night in the wilds, spent tree-house style along the banks of the Edisto River.

By Melissa Bigner • Photographs by J. Savage Gibson



Rollin' on a River: Author Melissa Bigner paddles down the Edisto (the world's longest free-flowing blackwater river).

If you've ever pictured yourself living it up à la Swiss Family Robinson, perched in the treetops, head north on Highway 61 'til you hit Canadys, about an hour out of the city. There, on a stretch of the ever-winding Edisto River, Scott Kennedy has built the ultimate quick getaway for outdoor aficionados—a pair of tree houses set on the edge of his 150-acre refuge. Flanked by vast spreads of hunting property on either side, the camouflaged cabins are tucked into a wild woodland, hidden year-round by cypress, holly,

and a host of evergreens.

Because Scott outfits his charges in canoes and puts them in about five hours upriver; because only a few, quiet hints of humanity can be witnessed while paddling downriver; and because the accommodations are reached by paddling up to a set of stairs, the whole experience has an otherworldly remoteness that charms

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to the core. And, like most well-spent outdoor adventures, it yields that disproportionate rest ratio: Even one short overnight can leave you feeling as if you've been gone for a long weekend.

That's exactly what I was craving—the chance to wear myself out in the fresh air, spend some time where my cell phone wouldn't work, and play

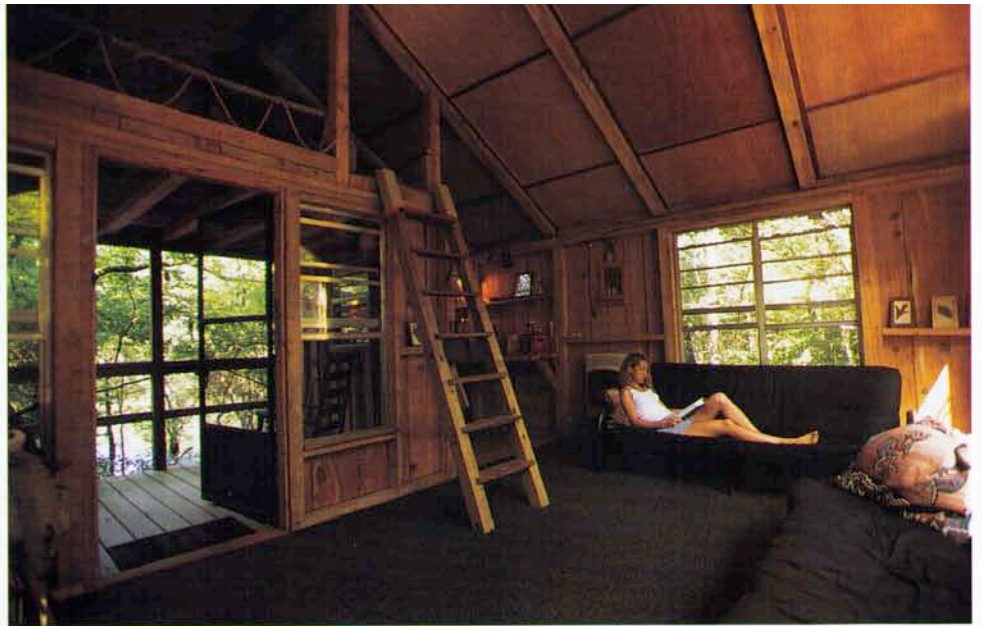


Bird's-Eye Hideaway:

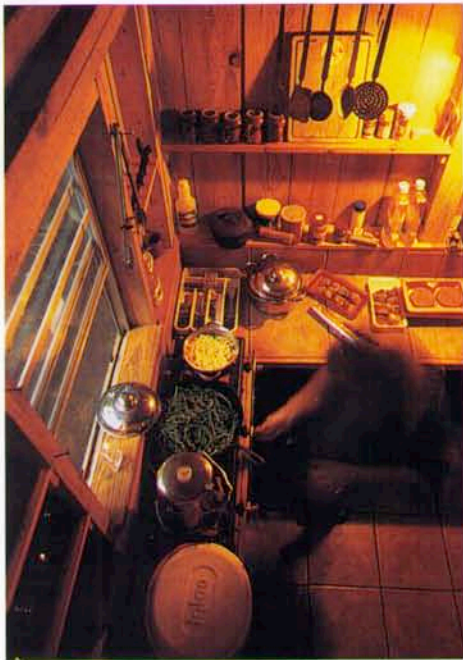
Nestled among the branches of evergreens, the tree houses offer privacy, shade, and an enviable view.

like a 12-year-old. Having just met a stack of deadlines, the timing was perfect—there's nothing like a little methodical paddling to force a wind-down and bring on a recharge. Along for the trip was a longtime pal—Beaufort photographer Josh Gibson—who, courtesy of 10 years of us working together, made for the perfect partner-in-crime.

Thanks to a summer of monsoons, the Edisto was swollen and bloated. Her waters overshadowed the natural shoreline and masked the sandy spits that typically make for good rest stops. With no true breaks, we cruised down on water that was nine feet high at points, almost double the norm, and twice as fast, too, at four miles an hour. Josh guided us through a maze of felled trees, sag-



Room to Spare: *The larger tree house sleeps up to eight easily, six comfortably.*



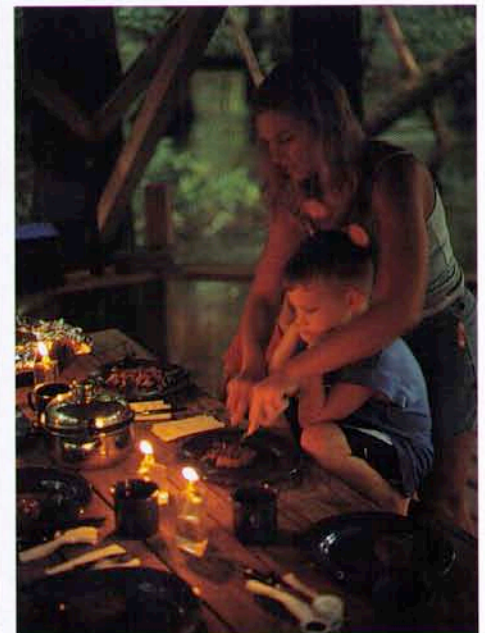
ging under their own bulk in the soggy ground and collapsing into watery graves like weary giants.

The effect was bizarre. As the current pulled and tugged, submerged branches bounced and bobbed everywhere. Little corner-of-your-eye movements had me feeling as though we were surrounded, and each limb seemed to have its own personality. One danced, its leaves shimmying like tassels on a dress; another, this one claw-like in shape, beckoned—whether as a wave or a warning, I'm still not sure. Every

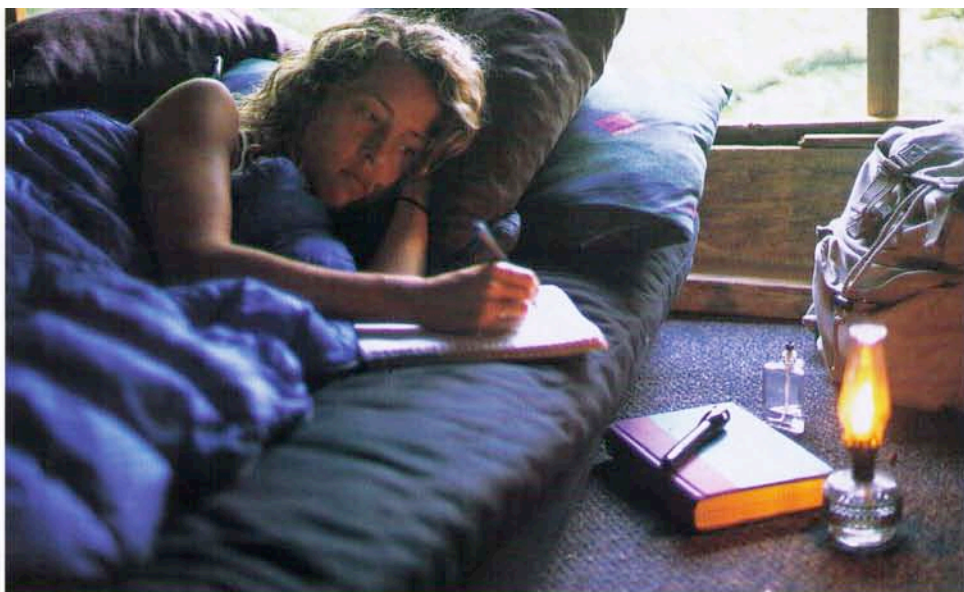
"When I first started building them," Scott had told us, "a hunter motored over and said, 'That's some stand you got there!'"

now and again, we caught a trace of wildlife. But because terra firma was shadowed and out of sight (a by-product of the overflowing waters), we spotted only a turtle or two, one gator, and no snakes. Instead, we heard them as they splashed into seclusion.

By the time we eased up to our accommodations, just past a pole-mounted neon-painted paddle and a can't-miss-it sign reading "Up Da Creek," both of us were pretty darn whooped in that deliciously good way you get from O.D.ing on the outdoors.



Gas grills and cookstoves translate to cookouts, here with CHO co-owner Scott Kennedy and his daughter-in-law and grandsons.



No Electricity? No Problem: Journals, books, and board games rule this roost.

round of Scrabble, one that allowed for slang, proper names, and foreign words. In the tradition of slumber parties past, we crashed for the night and filled the silence by offering up riddles to each other in the dark. (For the record, he hammered me at every turn.) At who-knows-what o'clock, Josh was snoring triumphantly, and I broke out *Harry Potter* to read by Mag-Lite.

That night, the rushing water had a narcoleptic effect, and I woke only once, mostly because of the dazzling full moon. Thankfully, come morning, I had snoozed well past my usual up-with-the-birds hour. Snuggling down into the covers, I saw something slip out of sight by my head. I lifted the pillow and a gorgeous, slick skink peered back at

me. Black with cobalt-blue markings, he spent the night all toasty warm as my clandestine bedmate. Normally, I would've screeched; but there and then it didn't seem to matter. He slithered under another pillow, and I hunkered down and dozed off again.

After breakfast we packed up and headed downriver. We had another four hours or so to go, Scott had told us, before we'd see his house-slash-outpost just past some power lines and just before a small bridge. "Pull on in there; I'm not sure if I'll be around or not," he had said. That was his style throughout the trip: Sign the release, here are a few tips, and off you go. With me being a moderate paddler and Josh being a pro, Scott made for the perfect chaperone—present but unac-



counted for. We always had an out, too, as we knew there was a road an eighth of a mile behind the cabins, one that could take us out of any trouble we may have found.

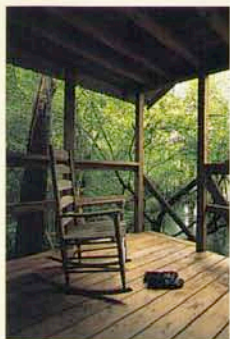
As we fell back into an automatic paddle mode, I started thinking about the best tree house I had built as a kid. Inspired by a Messy Marvin commercial, I erected a little platform in our backyard trees, a lopsided architectural feat fashioned more of nails than wood. To complete the look, I painted the trunks white with red stripes and tagged the area with "Red Devils' Den" and "Keep Out"



Get off the main stream and you're amid cypress, live oaks, and more.

signs. Back then, deep in a Neverland mentality, I considered growing up a curse. But homeward bound on the Edisto, the adage about men and boys and the size of their toys came to mind. I thought about Scott and how generously he shared his tree houses, and that growing up might not be so bad after all.

MELISSA BIGNER racked up adventures aplenty this summer while researching *Secret Charleston*, a guide book due out next April.



Climb On Up

Scott Kennedy and co-owner Anne Gould run Carolina Heritage Outfitters and offer an array of canoe trips, but the overnight tree house expeditions are the crown jewel. (See the website below for runners-up if the tree dens are booked). Of the two houses, one sleeps two to four people and the other sleeps five to eight. Each cabin has gas grills and stovetops for cooking, but no running water or restrooms. Rates are \$90 per person and include canoes and canoe outfitting and a sausage, egg, bagel, and fruit breakfast. Novices get a short lesson in how to make it downriver, while upper-level types are sent downriver with not much more than a proper shove-off. (The adventure is not for those who need hand-holding,

as Scott's more about full immersion.) If however, you do require special assistance, talk to him about your needs, as they are flexible outfitters.

We visited during the hottest day in the summer, yet the bugs weren't bad and the shade and running water broke the heat. Still, bring plenty of bug spray, sunscreen, and drinks to be safe, no matter the time of year. Spring break tends to be the most booked, and July and August are typically the slowest months, while fall and winter are prime time again (thanks to the woodstove heaters). For more information, call (843) 563-5051 or visit www.canoesc.com.