



BLACKWATER B&B: South Carolina's Edisto River treehouse

OUTPOSTS

BY T. EDWARD NICKENS

Swamp Music

THAT FIRST MORNING, my friend Tim Lassiter and I whiled away the hours with our legs dangling over the gunwales of our canoes, drifting with the Edisto River's current like Huck and Jim. We cruised through oxbows fringed with alligatorweed, and dawdled on sandbars pocked with wild-turkey tracks. Then, after a lunch of crab-cake sandwiches, Tim continued downstream while I paddled into a remote slough to cast flies for whatever might lurk in water as black as Satan's heart. After I landed a few bass, I went on down the slough into a side creek, which eventually spat me back out into the Edisto's main channel. I had no idea whether I was upstream or downstream of Tim, or whether I was five miles or 500 feet from where we had parted. In any event, the sun was starting to set, so I paddled like a galley slave, carving sharp turns around bends in the river. I could feel blisters bubbling on my palms, but there was no way I was going to sleep out on a bed of muck on South Carolina's most pristine — and primeval — waterway.

After digging hard for another hour and a half, I rounded a particularly sharp bend, and there was Tim, sipping a beer, stretched out on a porch 14 feet above the river. Behind him was our lodging, a treehouse cabin that looked like a floating palace in a swamp where cypress knees rose from the swamp floor like four-foot fangs. "You didn't get lost on this little river, did you, Cap'n?" Tim said, grinning from his perch.

Welcome to the ultimate paddlers' perch: the Edisto River treehouse

wind a total of 250 miles through South Carolina's midlands and Low Country before the river's tannin-stained water (think overbrewed Lipton) empties into the Atlantic south of Charleston.

When I arrived at the treehouse on that first afternoon, the barred owls were already hooting, while a Cooper's hawk was slashing at a pair of wood ducks just a few feet from our heads. "Now this," Tim said as he grilled venison tenderloin on the deck, "is the high life." In the morning, I crossed a swinging rope bridge and took a quick hike around the preserve. I hopped from root to root, steadying myself against trees where big fishing spiders had taken the best handholds. I forded stagnant bogs, stepping thigh-deep into goo the color and consistency of molasses. Red trumpetteeper blossoms glimmered like firebursts. I spotted a three-foot-long ribbon snake and tried to grab its tail, but missed.

In that 30-minute pre-breakfast hike, I managed to wrench a knee pulling my foot from the muck, shred my shins on saw-palmetto trunks, and sacrifice maybe a cup of blood to a cloud of hungry mosquitoes. Climbing gingerly back into the treehouse, I felt like a member of some ancient, semi-arboreal tribe who had beaten a retreat up into the trees when the going got tough in the primordial stew below. But civilization wasn't far away; I wandered past the porch rockers and into the kitchen, where Tim was busy frying eggs in sausage drippings.

