



BAGPIPES AT SUNDOWN

THE DISTINCTIVE SOUND OF BAGPIPES MARKS THE END OF THE DAY ON SEA ISLAND'S PLANTATION COURSE.

BY JOE RADA

a lone figure stands silhouetted against the setting sun and fading sky. He paces slowly along the fairway of the 10th hole at Sea Island's Plantation Course, striking an unforgettable image. The wailing melodies and enchanting tones he skillfully squeezes from a set of bagpipes make the scene all the more memorable.

As surely as sunset, every day a bagpiper clad in the unmistakable garb and regalia

of a Scottish Highlander strolls amid green grass and breeze-blown trees on the grounds outside The Lodge at Sea Island. Golf originated in Scotland, a place also known for bagpipers, forever intertwining the two and forming a traditional connection long held in high esteem at Sea Island.

The golfers finishing their rounds take notice. Guests settle into Adirondack chairs on the lawn to listen and watch before heading to dinner at The Lodge's restaurants.

AMAZING GRACE

The hum of the bagpipes has been uniquely tied to feelings of comfort and nostalgia for people in the United States, despite the instrument's Scottish heritage. The Marsh brothers—Geoff, Robert and Tom—along with family friend, Ron Wells, shared a special moment of remembrance at The Lodge one fall evening while listening to the bagpiper's song.

The brothers' 80-year-old father, Bob, had been in hospice in their home state of Kentucky for some time when the group found themselves at The Lodge at Sea Island, taking in views of the Plantation Course. Geoff had won the Sea Island Fairways Foursome Sweepstakes, sponsored by Sea Island and the "Fairways of Life" radio program. He received a call from his sister at 6 p.m., who said the hospice had notified her that their father's time was short and she was on her way to his bedside. "As I walked back to my seat ... the song then being played was 'Amazing Grace,'" Geoff wrote in a letter to Matt Adams, host of "Fairways of Life." "I relayed my phone message to my brothers, and we all acknowledged the circumstance of the hymn to the occasion." The brothers ordered a round of their father's favorite drink, gin and orange juice, and toasted to his life and memory.

They soon learned that their father had passed at the approximate time they heard "Amazing Grace." "We took this as a sign our father was with us and wanted to share in the atmosphere," Geoff wrote. "He was not a golfer, but would have been pleased that his sons were able to be gathered together in such a setting when he crossed over."

Children inevitably ask parents, and even the piper himself when he wanders close, about his intriguing instrument and the reason he's wearing a skirt.

First, he tells them, it isn't a skirt. It's a kilt made of pleated tartan-patterned cloth, which Scottish men have worn proudly for centuries. Then he describes his instrument's odd and ancient arrangement of bellows and pipes, explains how each part works, and demonstrates by playing even more tunes.

Some songs are haunting; others are playful. Some are by request; others are drawn from his personal repertoire. Each is played emphatically and at full volume, as is the bagpiper way.

Soon the sky is fully dark. The piper drifts off, disappearing from sight. He leaves the lilting sounds of Scotland floating in the evening air and marks a perfect ending to another day at Sea Island.

The Pipers

Having a lone bagpiper serenade the sunset has been a Sea Island tradition carried on by a succession of pipers. Three musicians currently take turns so that, barring extreme weather, every sundown is covered.

Michael Evers, a member of the local bluegrass band Marshgrass, plays the bagpipes at sunset a little more than half of the time. Patrick Walsh, an attorney and retired instructor at the nearby Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, covers most of the other half. Danny Shepard,

an instructor at the same training center, rounds out the calendar by taking on the few days the other two aren't available.

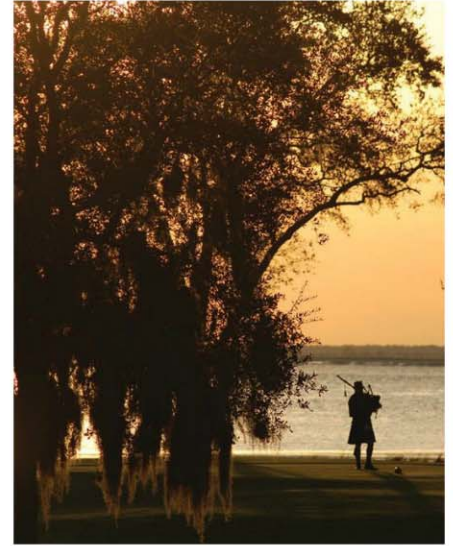
The time they play changes with the seasons, typically from half an hour before sunset until half an hour after. That can mean ending after 8 p.m. in the summer and starting as early as 5 p.m. in the winter.

What tunes they play depends on the piper, but all three of them know "Amazing Grace," "Scotland the Brave" and a few other well-recognized bagpipes standards.

"I play those practically every night I'm out here," Evers explains. "When appropriate, I'll cover some non-standard songs, Christmas carols during the holiday season and 'Happy Birthday' when people request it. Sometimes I'll include a couple of tunes that are unusual for bagpipes—the theme music from 'Star Wars,' maybe, or 'Strangers in the Night'—to see if anyone notices. I've also written several bagpipe tunes myself, and I add them to the mix."

Bagpipes have a very limited range, so not every tune can be accommodated. "I play a set of Great Highland pipes that has just a nine-note scale, so even some common requests like 'Danny Boy' have to be reworked to be playable and still recognizable," Evers says.

Although fascinated with bagpipes since childhood, Evers only taught himself to play five years ago when he learned that a previous Sea Island piper was moving away, creating an opening. "I had three months to learn how to play the pipes, so I began a



crash course," he says. "Now I'm in my fifth year as a Sea Island bagpipes player."

Crowd Pleasers

Reactions to the sunset bagpipers are overwhelmingly positive.

"People are very complimentary," Evers says. "They're fascinated by the instrument and its origins and how everything works."

Some show up nightly to listen. "Countless people have told me that hearing the bagpipes makes their stay at Sea Island magical," Evers says. "One woman who visits annually told me that hearing the bagpipes is the highlight of her whole year. I find that very gratifying. A gentleman from Atlanta comes here every Thanksgiving and takes dozens of photos while I play because he's a huge fan of the pipes. He even asked me to play bagpipes at his wedding, which I was happy to do."

What's it like to be a part of such a cherished Sea Island tradition? "From what people tell me, it's clear that our music helps make the guests' time at Sea Island more memorable," says Evers, who adds that as a professional entertainer, he enjoys performing more than anything.

Aside from occasionally having to perform in rain or cold, the musicians have little to complain about.

"We have a great office to work from, so to speak," Evers says, gesturing broadly to his remarkable surroundings. "A daily sunset view over St. Simons Sound and an appreciative audience at The Lodge—that combination never gets old." ○