Look inside the bags of most people getting off the ferry at Bald Head Island and you’ll find heaps of sunscreen, several pairs of flip-flops, a selection of swimsuits, and a small library of beach reading. A cross-section of Tom Carr’s duffel, though, is more likely to reveal sweaters, socks, gloves and jeans. “I even bring long johns,” says the CFO of VibrAlign in Richmond, Va. “And it can sometimes get nippy in the golf cart so when we go to dinner we take a blanket.” That’s because Tom and his wife Becky, controller of the same company, usually eschew the heat and busyness of summer, preferring their Hammocks home in the winter. “We most look forward to winter,” explains Tom. “I love to walk the beach when it’s cold, then go back to a roaring fire. My wife bakes cookies and brownies … all the things I love that she doesn’t have time for at home.”

There aren’t many months in the year that get cold enough for long johns on this semitropical island where even December is often warm and sunny. The Carrs like February best, though they also come in spring and fall. “We like to close out the old year and then get on the ferry to Bald Head Island and leave it all behind. When we get to the dock and get ready to get on the ferry, it’s like the world is behind us. Once we are on the ferry, the real world is over.”

A Winter Refuge
Winter is a peaceful time on the island. Many northern birds—as well as people—enjoy a respite from the freezing temperatures of northern climates by spending the winter at Bald Head Island. “We see a lot of Gannets flying by during the winter,” offers Maureen Dewire, Environmental Education Coordinator at the Bald Head Island Conservancy. “They are a pelagic sea bird that only comes on land to nest. But they fly right past here.” Winter is also the best time to spot dolphin pods frolicking near shore since they seem to prefer the deeper water during the warmer months. And, because of fewer human hands carrying them off, winter is also a terrific time for shell collecting.
WINTER IS THE BEST TIME TO SPOT DOLPHIN PODS FROLICKING NEAR SHORE AND A TERRIFIC TIME FOR SHELL COLLECTING.

The Carrs have been making their quiet winter trek to the island for 11 years, long enough that buying a place to call their own became a persistent temptation. “We frequently talked about buying a house here,” explains Tom. “But with our work schedules, we could never quite justify it.” The justification they were looking for came suddenly while they were vacationing in the fall six years ago. During one of his walks, Tom found himself wandering around one of The Hammocks homes as it was being built. Intrigued by the smaller financial commitment of owning a portion of a home and impressed by the home’s design, he called for a tour. The very next day, the Carrs signed papers on a lovely two-bedroom home with a view of both ocean and golf course.

Now for four weeks of every year—one week in each season—they can return to their own home away from home. “We love it,” says Tom, of the arrangement. “If we didn’t own this place, we would never get here as often.” Furthermore, they no longer spend time selecting a rental home. They return each time to their own nice things, a place to call home, and a sense of belonging that comes with knowing their neighbors and being members of several island clubs.

If the Carrs long to venture farther than the five-hour drive from home, it’s simple to swap a Hammocks week for a week in any of 2,000 high-end resorts around the world through an exchange program with Interval International. “I would never trade my Hammocks weeks, though,” says Tom. “No other vacation accommodations would be as nice as my place at The Hammocks.” While not all Hammocks owners are quite so willing to always refuse a villa in Italy, a 13th century Abbey in Ireland, or even a deluxe Disney resort in exchange for a week on Bald Head Island, there is no doubt that The Hammocks are mighty nice accommodations.

Each home is custom-built in an airy cottage style with hardwood floors, abundant windows, comfortable floor plans, and spectacular views of the golf course, forest or ocean. To better capture those sunsets over the Atlantic, many of the homes—including the Carrs’—are built with a reverse plan that features the kitchen and living areas upstairs and bedrooms downstairs. Built by BHI Construction Company, the same island professionals who built the new Shoals Club as well as Keeper’s Landing, the homes are more than just pretty—they are built to thrive in the special climate of the island—whatever the season.

“In all things, we build to a higher standard than the building code requires,” explains Eric Coffey, Director of Construction for BHI Construction. “These homes are built with windows and doors that have a pressure rating that exceeds what’s required.” In the winter, the Carrs enjoy their gas fireplace—a standard feature in every Hammocks home. But in the heat of summer, air conditioning is the imperative. An AC unit that is too feeble cannot refresh a vacationer as he returns from his nature walk, but one that is too beefy quickly chills the house to Arctic levels and then shuts off before removing the humidity from the air, leaving the occupant
feeling cold and clammy. This detail—and many others—are an obsession with BHI Construction. “We have gone above and beyond to accurately size the air conditioning at The Hammocks to ensure that it is perfectly efficient,” explains Eric.

**Refreshed by Spring**

“I like spring on Bald Head Island,” says Thom Bird, Executive Producer at FOX News who, with his wife Nancy Gilburt, bought a Hammocks home just two years ago. “We were there for Easter this year and we thoroughly enjoyed it. I like to golf and in spring you can golf all day; it’s not too hot. But the ocean is still warm enough to put your feet in.” Ocean temperatures start to climb toward the 70s in April and don’t drop much below that until October or November, so enjoying a dip is possible in all but the coldest winter months. And with air temperatures typically in the 70s or 80s in spring with relatively low humidity, it is a great time of year for biking, in-line skating on the island’s smooth pavement, or hiking the many nature trails.

And of course April heralds the blooming of many of the island’s flowers. The dogwood trees begin their startling explosion of color in the spring; the scent of Carolina jasmine begins to fill the air; the extravagant coral honeysuckle and the hummingbirds and butterflies it attracts are in attendance; and the native Carolina Cherry begins to display its plumage.

May marks the beginning of the female loggerhead sea turtle's
arrival ashore on Bald Head Island where she comes to lay her eggs. “It is amazing to see the female’s nesting ritual,” says Maureen. “She hauls her 300-pound body out of the water, looking for the perfect spot of dry sand. When she’s happy with the place she’s selected, she digs with her back flippers until she can no longer reach the sand—at about 18 inches deep—then she goes into a trance and drops her eggs into the hole. The whole process can take from one to three hours.” The Bald Head Island Conservancy hosts turtle walks to help visitors get a glimpse of this ritual without disturbing the turtles. Everyone is very careful around these splendid animals since getting too close to them while they’re choosing their nests can cause them to flee back to the ocean.

Thom and Nancy travel with three children, ages five, 10 and 12, when they come to the island so they appreciate the three pools and many kids’ activities that are available to them through the three club memberships that come with Hammocks ownership: the Shoals Club, the Bald Head Island Club and the on-site Hammocks Club. “The initiation dues and fees that most homeowners pay for the Bald Head Island Club and the Shoals Club are included with Hammocks ownership,” explains Hart Rist, sales manager for The Hammocks. The Hammocks Club is complete with a workout room, sauna, outdoor hot tub, heated pool, billiards room, library and computer with DSL Internet service.

But for many, like Thom, one of spring’s main attractions is the golf course at the Bald Head Island Club. Not only has the course won accolades for both its difficulty for experts and playability for novices, it is also a stunning part of the beauty of the island and a habitat for much of the wildlife that makes the island a home throughout the year. One popular golf course inhabitant is the fresh water American alligator, which calls the wet regions of the course home all year long, but is most visible when the weather is warm. Hammocks owners enjoy easy proximity to the golf course—just a
short cart ride—so catching a glimpse of this ancient creature as it suns itself on the surface of the water is easy to do.

Sun, Sand and Surf

"Still," continues Thom, "all the seasons are great. We try to use all four of our weeks. In the summer, the Shoals Club is a great place to hang out ... with the pool right at the beach." The Shoals Club makes a day at the beach effortless. Simply pick up a beach chair and a towel as you check in through the club and settle in the sand. No need to eat sandy sandwiches and sun-baked sodas. Simply walk back to the pool and order a frozen drink and hot sandwich from the poolside restaurant or enjoy a gourmet meal in the upper deck restaurant. "Dinner is very good there," says Thom. "They have an excellent chef and the menu is very nice."

Summer is the most popular season on the island—with good reason. With 14 miles of pristine beach, it is the perfect summer playground for Homo sapiens. But the island is also an important summer recreation spot for birds. "Painted Buntings are here in the summer," explains Maureen. "That is a most beautiful bird and Bald Head Island has the most nesting pairs in the state. Their numbers are declining in all locations, so we are very proud of this." This small, brightly colored bird is easy to spot here in the summer since it comes willingly to feeders. "And there are 11- to 15,000 pairs of nesting White Ibises on nearby Battery Island in spring and summer," points out Maureen. "That is 90 percent of the state's population and 10 percent of the North American population."

This is the time of year when Hammocks owners get the most use out of their screened porches, that efficient air conditioning, and their choice of multiple pools. It is also the time of year when it is hardest to find rental accommodations elsewhere on the island, so having a guaranteed week in the summer at your own home—with your own summer gear already stashed in the garage—is an unparalleled convenience.

The Best of Fall

But Ed Natt, an attorney in Roanoke, Va., and his wife Claire prefer Bald Head Island when the summer has waned. "I like the fall on the island," he explains. "The days are warm and the nights are cool, just perfect." The Natts have been coming to Bald Head Island for 15 years but never intended to buy a home since they already own a vacation home in Florida. "It was funny how it happened," Ed recalls. "We got one of the Island Passport Packages two years ago—though we didn't think we were serious about buying." That's a promotional weekend visit offered by Bald Head Island Limited Real Estate Sales. "When we got there though," continues Ed, "we realized it was exactly what we were looking for. It gives us a week in each season, and that forces me to take a vacation." The Natts frequently travel there with their two sons, ages 25 and 19, who've been going to Bald Head Island since they were small.

Like many Hammocks owners, Ed likes it that his place is easy and familiar. "They do a nice job maintaining all the facilities—the clubs as well as the home—and it's just nice to know that when you get there, the unit will be great, pretty much everything you need will be in the kitchen, the furnishings will be comfortable, and the amenities will include everything."

The comfort of The Hammocks is no accident. "We were going for a vintage cottage feeling," explains Kerry Allabastro of Dianne Davant Interiors, ASID, interior designer for all The Hammocks homes. Each Hammocks home has its own color scheme, furniture style and accessories. Though she designed each unit individually, they share common themes. "We used lots of beadboard in all of them. That lends itself to a beach feeling," says Kerry. "And we chose a lot of Ron Fisher furniture, a custom company that allows us to pick fabrics, colors, and distressed and crackled finishes. But the thing that drove most of our choices was comfort."

A new phase of The Hammocks is in the early construction stage and Allabastro is starting to work on designs for those, too. She intends to continue the vintage cottage feel done in bold colors—with a few changes. The current units boast bright reds, yellows and apple greens. The next phase will feature cooler blues and greens. The new units—like the existing ones—will seek a timeless design but will also have the benefit of years of feedback from previous Hammocks owners. An element that has been popular with almost everyone who stays at The Hammocks is the art on the walls, much of which features North Carolina artists. There will be more of that in the newer units.

"Another one of our favorites is the kitchen," says Ed of his Hammocks residence. That's one reason his family likes to come when the evenings are cooler. The Hammocks homes are a quick golf-cart ride to the Maritime Market where the Natts are able to find fine meats, fish, wine, and everything else they need to prepare gourmet meals in their own kitchen. The Hammocks
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THE BOYS GO SWIMMING IN THE OCEAN AND THEY LIKE TO PLAY GOLF AND TENNIS. BUT MOSTLY WE JUST HANG AROUND AND ENJOY OUR HOUSE.

kitchens lack nothing but fresh ingredients; everything from the paring knife to the full-size quality coffee maker is already there. “And if something I want isn’t there,” says Ed, “we just buy it at the market and then it’s there the next time we come.”

That’s true of many things in the homes, from books and magazines to shells, photos and bric-a-brac. The homes are completely—and tastefully—decorated to every essential detail. “But we try to leave enough room—esthetically—for owners to add their own touch if they want to,” says Kerry. “Whether that is to simply add books or videos to the library or to add their own photos to the console table.”

Fall is also a nice time for reading, swimming, biking, shell collecting and golfing on Bald Head Island. “I play golf,” says Ed, “and my wife reads a lot.” The house is a very pleasant place to admire the view with a good book in hand. “We also go to the Shoals Club—I love the vista from the porch there. My son spent hours sitting in the shade there, just reading. The boys go swimming in the ocean and they like to play golf and tennis. But mostly we just hang around and enjoy our house. It’s nice not to have to do anything.”

“It’s a very laid-back place,” explains Ed. Unlike the fast pace of Myrtle Beach or Orlando, Bald Head Island inspires the opposite frame of mind. Rather than driving in hot traffic from one frenetic vacation activity to the next, a Bald Head Island vacation starts with leaving the car behind. After the 20-minute ferry ride, it is time to really slow down: The golf carts are permitted a maximum speed of 18 miles per hour. A walking pace begins to feel fast enough. “Not doing anything” becomes an art.

Seize the Season

No matter which season is your favorite, each requires some skill in the art of enjoyment. It requires an uncluttered mind to enjoy a brisk December wind as it stirs up whitecaps. The eye that notices the dolphins as they caper in the waves in January must first take time to gaze idly over the water. Before you can inhale the scent of delicate flowers bursting to life in April, you have to take the time to wander idly among them. Even giving your whole attention to deciding between another frozen drink or a dip in the pool in July requires that you start by sitting poolside long enough to feel that this may be one of the most important decisions you have to make—at least until tee time.

Christina Wood is a freelance writer based in Wilmington, N.C. She has written for Family Circle, USA Weekend, This Old House and many other national publications.