

# GTMA 2020 Travel Writer Award

## Entry #020

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### Article 1

#### On and under the water in Japan's Kerama Islands

Zamami Island has one stoplight, and every time I walk past it, I catch it red.

That's okay, because you can't be in a rush here. Anyway, this stoplight is more aspirational than essential; during my week on the island, I can count the number of cars on my fingers and toes.

One of the 36 islands in the Kerama Islands archipelago, Zamami has an area of about six square miles and a year-round population of approximately 600 people. (Together, the four inhabited Keramas are home to roughly 1,500.)

The only way on or off the island about 20 miles southwest of Okinawa Island in southern Japan is by boat and, on good days, there are only three public ferries a day. On bad days when swells in the East China Sea are more than 10 feet, as on the day I was supposed to arrive, there are none.

I disembark the Queen Zamami at 10 a.m. one Thursday in early February with my inflatable SUP (Stand Up Paddle) in tow and reservations for three days of diving with the only English-speaking dive shop that responded to my email query. Winter is the offseason in the Keramas. The weather isn't that wintry, though – these islands

are at about the same latitude as Hollywood, Fla., and the average February water and air temperatures are both about 75 degrees.

Almost immediately, I regret traveling with a SUP. In addition to an 11-foot-long board, my SUP bag also holds a life jacket, collapsible paddle, pump and a large selection of snacks in foil bags that are as colorful as they are indecipherable. I snack up in Okinawa because there are no grocery stores in the Keramas. Together, all of this weighs at least 50 pounds. And the room I've booked at a minshuku (a traditional family-owned bed-and-breakfast with tatami mats and futons instead of Western-style beds) is in Ama, the smallest of Zamami's three communities and about one mile from Zamami Port.

I wander the entirety of the port in search of a taxi. This takes less than three minutes and is not fruitful. In a combined souvenir shop and visitors center, a 20-something man with a kind smile apologizes for this. I can't find a taxi because there aren't any. Mr. Kind Smile calls the manager of my minshuku, Naho Tanaka, and she comes and gets me herself.

What Ama lacks in taxi convenience it makes up for with a three-quarter-mile-long (and mostly sand) beach that is a perfect SUP launch spot. Because so much coral is in the waters around these islands, beaches are a mix of sand and pieces of coral eroded into rounded, fingernail-sized shapes.

The Kerama Islands are a hot spot for watching turtles. Three species — green, hawksbill and loggerhead — live in the islands. On Zamami, Ama Beach is turtle ground zero. Naho tells me they sometimes come onto the beach to feed, but walking past a deserted campground and onto the beach, I see no turtles. Neither is there a single other person.

Had I waited until summer to come to the Keramas, I could have enjoyed 95-degree days and swimming in 85-degree water, but I would have had to share the islands with 200,000 other visitors and not just the three that came over on the Queen Zamami with me that morning.

Ama Beach is only 500 feet from the minshuku, and as I'm carrying my board and paddle to it, a sign erected by the Ama Sea Turtle & Local Ocean Protection Association alerts me to what's ahead. REQUESTS FROM THE SEA TURTLE: WHEN

I'M EATING SEA GRASS APPROACH CAREFULLY, PLEASE DON'T FOLLOW ME AROUND, OBSERVE ME FROM A DISTANCE.

It's doubly good that I have Ama Beach to myself because I break the turtle-watching rules almost immediately. Paddling around the shallows in front of the beach, turtles are everywhere, but camouflaged. I do not see them until my SUP – which I eventually figure out probably looks to them like a shark, one of their main predators – approaches. I think the dark shape 10 feet in front of my board is a hump of coral, but then it moves. Even though it swims away faster than I've ever seen a turtle move, it's definitely a turtle. This happens more than 10 times, but less than 20, before I have enough of a sense of balance on the board to confidently head for deeper water; it scares fewer turtles there.

To paddle to an island the size of several football fields laid end-to-end, it takes less than 10 minutes. One end of this islet has a faint trail climbing to a weathered lighthouse. The other end is a peninsula beach. A group of Japanese kayakers eat lunch here. Already used to having beaches to myself, I wave and continue on.

Thirty minutes later, I paddle my board onto a beach twice the size of Ama on an island that seems at least as big as Zamami. There's no one else around. From a dry bag, I pull out my Kindle and a pork cutlet bento box. After eating, I lie down on the coral, which molds to my body better than any memory foam mattress. I mean to read, but instead nap for an hour.

Coral beaches are the best: There's no sand to clear out of every crevice or to infiltrate a camera lens. Because of the latter, I take lots and lots of photos. The water here is itself such an indescribable shade that it has its own name, "Kerama Blue," which is also what the waters in and around these islands are called.

The Kerama Blue, much of which is protected as Kerama Shoto National Park, is not just blue, though, it's also clear. When diving, there is 100 feet of visibility.

Divemaster Seiji Miyazato picks me up at my minshuku at 8:50 my second morning on the island. The dive boat has room for 15 clients, but today it's just me. This is the case for each of my five dives with Seiji.

Some scuba divers keep meticulous notes on the type of fish and sea life they see on every dive – I am not one of them. I know the correct names of maybe a couple

dozen of the fish I've seen during my 15 years of diving. Any fish that was in "Finding Nemo" I know by its name in that movie. (The Keramas have lots of Nemos.)

Diving around Zamami Island, I recognize lionfish, sea horses, sea slugs and starfish, and see dozens of fish for which I don't know the names. Kerama Shoto National Park is home to 248 species of hard coral and even more species of fish.

I watch an octopus change color and see a whitetip shark sleeping. On the seafloor beneath the overhang of a coral reef, the shark totally looks like it is snoring. Also, a shoaling school of thousands of purple queen anthias swim into me, briefly giving me vertigo. Parrotfish nibble at my fingers on several dives.

I am close enough to a sea turtle for a long enough period of time to count the number of wrinkles it has on each eyelid. They're asymmetrical – one lid has seven, the other nine. I watch another turtle tear at a hummock of hard coral like it is cardboard. Yet another just hangs in the water, suspended as gracefully and easily as a ray of refracted light.

Skimming the bottom in a shallow area – none of the dives I did were deeper than 40 feet and many were only 20 feet; this means that much of what you can see diving, you can also see by snorkeling – Seiji finds a bullet casing the length of my finger. He picks it out of the sand and hands it to me. It's brass, but has rusted to a Smurf-y blue. It's heavy, but it floats featherlike when I release it – dancing, dipping and swooping – back to the seafloor. It's probably been in the Kerama Blue since March 26, 1945, when the Battle of Okinawa started here.

The evening after holding the World War II bullet, I go looking for the Tower of Peace, a monument to honor the 300 Zamamians who died in that war. The majority of these – 246 – were suicides, which the Japanese government led the islanders to believe was a better alternative than being captured by the enemy. The monument is set on a steep hillside in a tangle of forest about a 10-minute walk above Zamami Port.

From the monument, I take the long way back to Ama. Because there are so few cars, Zamami's 15 or so miles of pavement feel more like pathways than roads.

Walking them, I see more pedestrians than cars. The road to and along the island's northern shore is twisty and vertiginous and has several fine overlooks. As I walk between overlooks, the two cars that pass me slow down. The driver of each is a weathered fisherman. Neither speaks English, but both use gestures to ask whether I need a ride.

There's no way I can fit into the cramped front seat of the first car, but I accept the second driver's offer. As we drop back into Zamami Port, of course we hit the stoplight when it's red.

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## **Article 2**

My father left Bulgaria when he was 14. Nearly 7 decades later, we visit as a family.

Plovdiv, a city built on six hills rising from the plains between the Balkan and Rhodope mountains, is Bulgaria's first European Capital of Culture, an annual designation given by the European Commission to highlight the diversity of arts and culture. It is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities on the continent.

Walking around it, it's all I can do not to cry in gratitude, wonder and happiness. I am on a family trip that I never expected to happen: my dad, mom, brother and myself visiting the country where my father was born. He lived here until he was 14, when he and several family members fled as the Communist Party grew in influence across the country.

Emotions follow me 125 miles northeast of Plovdiv to Veliko Tarnovo. Here, over Bolyarka beers on a large terrace overlooking the imposing Asenevtsi Monument – four larger-than-life-size mounted horsemen around a 30-foot-tall sword – we agree this city should be Bulgaria's next European Capital of Culture.

Veliko Tarnovo was the country's capital for several hundred years and reigned as one of Europe's centers of arts and culture in the Middle Ages. (It's fine to just call it "Tarnovo," which is what most locals do; veliko, which means "great" in Bulgarian, was only added to the city's name in 1965.) Tarnovo was the first Bulgarian city to be

written about in National Geographic; a story about it ran in the magazine's October 1907 issue. Its history goes back five millennia and its cobblestoned, red-roofed homes and businesses spill down a steep natural amphitheater created by a sharp bend in the Yantra River .

### **Reclaiming a heritage**

Growing up, there wasn't much Bulgarian culture in our suburban house, but there was banitsa, a flaky, cheesy traditional Bulgarian pastry, and nightly Bulgarian lessons for my younger brother and myself from my dad. My mom, a Baltimorean whose sweet tooth crossed cultures, never stopped baking the former, but the latter ended one night in second grade when I told my dad, "This is your language, not mine."

When he lived in Bulgaria, my dad never went to Plovdiv or Veliko Tarnovo. His family lived in Perilovets, a farming village in the country's northwestern corner, near its borders with Romania and present-day Serbia. He did go to Vidin, a port city on the Danube River about 30 miles from his village that, in a cart pulled by oxen Belyo ("white") and Sin ("blue") was an all-night journey from the family farm.

Veliko Tarnovo is almost 200 miles farther from his village than Vidin. Plovdiv is about 50 miles more distant. My dad learned about the long histories of both cities in school, but says the idea of seeing either in person never crossed his mind.

In 2003, when I was in my mid-20s, I spent two weeks in Bulgaria with my dad, but didn't make it much farther from his village than he had as a kid. On that trip, my initial meeting with every second cousin, family friend and former neighbor who hadn't fled the country (and who didn't speak English) started with them excitedly greeting me in Bulgarian. I smiled in what I hoped was an apologetic manner as my dad explained I had no idea what they had just said.

An argument could be made that my father shouldn't have listened to a 7-year-old complaining about language lessons. Still I can imagine "this is your language, not mine" hurting so much that it made sense to wait for me to come back to him when I was interested. Except I never did. By 2003, all I could do was recite the first seven letters of the Cyrillic alphabet.

Every introduction left me feeling I had let my dad down.

That trip ended with me glad to have put faces to names of these distant family members and to have seen where my dad grew up. Since he left, his family's house had been razed and a modest, one-floor, village hall built in its place. The well he fetched water from and a couple of trees he climbed remained. I was in no hurry to return.

It wasn't until after both my dad and I were several years out from brutal-but-successful treatment for cancer (melanoma for him; breast for me) and he was 82 that I decided I wanted to go back. Fifteen years had passed. A more mature traveler and daughter (although still unable to speak Bulgarian), I instigated the trip. My brother Rob and my mom, neither of whom had been to Bulgaria before, quickly announced they were coming too. "We have to make it the ultimate homecoming for dad – to share his birthplace and heritage with his American family, all together," my mom said. "It just has to be all of us!"

I had matching gray, long-sleeve T-shirts made. Screen printed on the back, in a nod to our Bulgarian and Baltimorean roots, is a riff on the Guns N' Roses logo: "Hons n' Roses – The Mishevs do Bulgaria." ("Hons" are a very Baltimore thing; Bulgaria is well known for its rose perfume.)

The "Hons n' Roses" tour includes seeing Plovdiv and Tarnovo before ending with a visit to Perilovets and and the family.

### **Wine, beer and history**

Since it is the Capital of Culture, Plovdiv is our first stop. Our first destination in the city is a gatehouse at the entrance to the city's Old Town. Only local residents, business owners and guests at the several boutique hotels here are allowed to drive this UNESCO World Heritage site's narrow, cobbled streets lined with 19th-century homes built in the top-heavy Bulgarian National Revival style. (At the time, taxes were assessed on a home's footprint, so the ground level was made as small as possible.)

Checking into the Hotel Evmolpia – Evmolpia was this city's name when it was a Thracian settlement in the Late Bronze Age (1200- 500 B.C.) – we're offered local cheese and wine. Archaeological evidence shows grapes have been grown and wine

made in this area for more than 3,000 years. Today, there are about 20 vineyards and wineries within an hour's drive of Plovdiv.

At Hotel Evmolpia, I try a red made from the local grape variety mavrud. It's heavy and I taste cherries and blackberries.

There are also local chardonnays, merlots and cabernet sauvignons available.

Adjacent to the Old Town is the formerly derelict, now trendy, Kapana District, a maze of tight, winding streets. (Kapana means "the trap" in Bulgarian .) We quickly get lost, and that's fine. Around one corner there's the Hipster Hostel and an art gallery selling products made from felt. Around the next corner is a giant spray-painted mural of an alligator with a heart-shaped diamond in its toothy mouth being ridden by a bored-looking man wearing a turtleneck.

It is one of my mom's life quests to try as many beers as possible. So when we turn yet another of Kapana's corners and find Cat & Mouse (Kotka i Mishka in Bulgarian), a bar with more than 100 beers from around the world and three of its own brews, we stop. Tasting each of the latter, you'd never know the bar and brewery was founded to finance a website dedicated to independent journalism, Pod Tepeto ("Under the Hill "), and not only out of a love of beer.

We settle in with our drinks at an outside table from which we can see three different spray-painted murals, two boutiques selling a mix of locally made clothing and home accessories and three or four art galleries/studios. The businesses are on the ground levels of colorful, two-story buildings with pennant flags strung between them. The building next to Cat & Mouse is a cafe named Central Perk, styled to look like the cafe of that name from the TV show "Friends." Latte- and espresso-sipping customers speaking French, German, English and Bulgarian relax here in sofas and armchairs.

Bulgarians have a word for this scene: "aylyak." Aylyak is a word taken from Turkish; in that language it means doing nothing or being idle. In Bulgaria, aylyak is slightly different; here it refers to a lifestyle that cultivates and celebrates an easygoing, unhurried attitude (as in, the opposite of farm life). Within Bulgaria, it is generally held that Plovdivians do aylyak best.



While locals love aylyak, it is also blamed for the delay in the refurbishment of Plovdiv's Central Square, which was not finished in time for the Capital of Culture opening ceremony in January. I think it makes more sense to blame the Romans, Macedonians or Thracians though: It seems you cannot dig a hole in Plovdiv without hitting a ruin from one of these civilizations. Beneath almost the entire one-mile length of the shopping and pedestrian street Knyaz Alexander I in the center of the city is a Roman stadium built at the beginning of the 2nd century when the city was known as Trimontium. Several sections of it have been excavated, including a seating area you can see in the basement of the clothing store H&M and, in the middle of Dzhumaya Square, colonnades and the stadium's northern end. For better or worse, most of Bulgaria's ruins are eminently accessible and here you can sit in the same seats where, 2,000 years ago, 30,000 people gathered to watch chariot races.

Uphill from our hotel is the Ancient Theater of Philippopolis. Built at the end of the 1st century, it was used for performances for several hundred years, abandoned after a fire and forgotten until a landslide in the 1970s revealed a section of it. The Bulgarian Conservation School spent 10 years restoring it and in 1981 it reopened as a performance space that has become renowned for its acoustics. Sadly there are no rock concerts, operas or master Zumba classes being held while we're here.

This fall, restoration work on more than 20,000 square feet of intricate mosaics in the 1,800-year-old Bishop's Basilica should be finished.

My dad is surprised by the vitality of Plovdiv and its people. "It measures up to a modern European city, but still retains its Bulgarian flavor," he says. He recognizes the vestiges of former Communist rule in its big gray multistory apartment buildings, but likes that newly remodeled buildings — and newly excavated ruins — are now the focus.

On our last evening in Plovdiv, my mom, Rob and I walk up to the broad, flat summit of our hill, called Nebet Tepe, to watch the sunset. We also find ruins of dwellings and fortifications that predate the birth of Christ. We're not a selfie family, but standing on the rubble of an ancient wall at the hill's edge, we snap one.

**Tales of palaces — and a cow**

My dad knows more about Veliko Tarnovo's history than Plovdiv's. Most of the latter's ruins were discovered and studied after he fled the country. The former's history is the Bulgarian history he learned in the one-room Perilovets schoolhouse. Tarnovo was the country's capital during the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185-1393) and also at the beginning of the Third Bulgarian Empire in 1878 when Bulgaria won its freedom after almost 500 years of Ottoman rule.

My dad knows the names of some of the 19th-century rebels that Tarnovo's Monument to Hanged Rebels honors for advocating (and fighting for) Bulgarian independence from the Ottoman Empire. The constitution that governed the country when he was born was drafted and signed in the white, cross-shaped building down the street from our hotel. (Today, this building is the Museum of the Bulgarian Revival and Constituent Assembly.) He tells us about Russian Gen. Iosif Gurko, for whom our hotel is named. (Gurko's army liberated Veliko Tarnovo from the Ottoman Empire on July 7, 1877 .) He tells us the four Asenevtsi Monument horsemen liberated Bulgaria from the Byzantine Empire in the 12th century, then ruled it as czars for most of the next century.

Even without my dad's details about the Bulgarian czars who lived in grand palaces on Tsarevets hill, the view of it from the sky walk, a glass-bottomed viewing platform that stretches out between buildings above the Yantra River, are impressive.

Little is left of the palaces but their foundations. A wall built to fortify the hill still stands. Its watchtowers are crenelated and the wall itself is as thick as 12 feet in some places.

Walking down Samovodska Charshiya street, which is home to the studios and galleries of many local artisans, we hear about my dad's favorite cow, Mininkata ("little one"). He says she was famous because she was an award-winning milk producer, and that, because of her, his father, whom my brother and I called "Dedo," went to jail. "The Soviets came for her and Dedo refused to let her go, so they put Dedo in jail and the family had to pay a huge ransom to have him freed," my dad says.

Over our drinks at the Asenevtsi Monument, after we've finished making the case for Tarnovo as Bulgaria's next European Capital of Culture, I thank my dad for sharing his history with us and tell him I'm sorry I was such a punk back in second grade.

Thankfully, when it's time to get another round of drinks, the bartender speaks English.

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### Article 3

Less than a mile from Hilton Head, this S.C. island couldn't be more different

Sallie Ann Robinson is down in St. Petersburg, Fla., doing a presentation at the Tampa Bay Collard Green Festival. So instead of bumping along the sandy roads that cut through Daufuskie Island's dense maritime forest on a history tour with her, I'm bumping along the island's roads with Jenny Hersch. Hersch recently spent three years researching and co-writing a book with Sallie Ann on the history of Daufuskie, a sea island off the southern coast of South Carolina.

Hersch laughs when I ask if she's a guide. "I'm a bass player with an interest in Daufuskie's history," she says, alternating between tales of island life and apologies. The latter are for the drive — patches of deep potholes send her electric golf cart dipping, bucking and bobbling — and for not being Sallie Ann. "She's the real deal. I'm just visiting," Hersch says. "I'm full of fun facts, but she's lived it all."

Sallie Ann is the sixth generation of her family to be born and live on Daufuskie, and, explaining her keynote presentation at the festival, an accomplished chef. On the Travel Channel's "Bizarre Foods" show, she cooked host Andrew Zimmern some barbecued raccoon — after she showed him how to skin and clean it.

Hersch has nothing to apologize for: Her facts go deeper than mere fun, and the wild and woolly drive only adds to Daufuskie's charm and magic.

I've long been in love with the Lowcountry, a wild labyrinth of rivers, islands, maritime forests, wetlands, savannas and marshes that stretch south from Charleston to the Savannah River. The area is home to bald eagles, herons, wood storks, ibises and pelicans. There are orchids, cypresses, sycamores, magnolias and flowering dogwoods. Daufuskie – pronounced dah-FUS-key; the last two syllables rhyme with “husky” – is all this, and then several levels more.

Separated from Hilton Head's southwest tip by less than a mile of water, Daufuskie couldn't be more different from its densely populated neighbor. The only way to get to the island today is the same way Native Americans have since it separated from the South Carolina mainland about 4,500 years ago: by water. There are cars on Daufuskie, but it wasn't until 1995 that they were required to be registered and drivers required to have a license. Because there's no bridge to the island and because the island is only about eight square miles, most people, whether residents or visitors, get around by golf cart or bicycle. There are a couple of stop signs but no police to issue tickets.

Daufuskie has no grocery store or doctor, much less a hospital, but about 400 people live there year-round. About one-quarter of these, including Sallie Ann, are Gullah, or Geechee – African Americans descended from slaves who, even today, maintain a distinct culture and dialect. The latter is a combination of West and Central African languages and English. The Gullah spoken by three people in the small general/souvenir store in Freeport, the island's commercial hub, is, to me, mostly indecipherable but mellifluous.

Other evidence of Daufuskie's charm? Every tree on this island weeps with thick, Albus Dumbledore beards of Spanish moss that are as straggly as they are abundant. Cyclists brake for armadillos crossing the road while tooling around the island. The same woman, Hailey, who welcomes me to the Daufuskie Island Rum Company one day is, the following night, my waitress during dinner at Melrose Beach

Club, where she greets me by name. People ride horses on the beach. Twice as I paddleboard in Calibogue Sound (pronounced kal-uh-BOWG-ee), dolphins swim alongside and pelicans, the tips of their wings no more than a foot off the water, soar past.

At Lucy Bell's Cafe, a lunch spot in a former honky tonk, fresh, local fried oysters and other items are served at wrought-iron tables shaded by a century-old live oak. Down the road is an art gallery whose owner-artist asks patrons to pay by the "honor system" and leave cash or a check in a box on the front porch.

Having read "The Water is Wide," Pat Conroy's 1972 memoir about his year teaching Daufuskie's black students in the two-room Mary Fields School, I arrive on the island expecting it to be idiosyncratic and evocative, and to possess a moody magic. But, as extensive a picture as the book painted of an island set apart from time — Conroy mentioned the island not yet having phone service — it doesn't do the reality of Daufuskie justice.

Of course, as charming as I find Daufuskie today, it wasn't always this way. By the mid-1700s, European diseases and wars wiped out most of the Native American tribes that lived in the Lowcountry for about 9,000 years, including on Daufuskie. The island's Native American name did stick: "Daufuskie" means "sharp feather" in the Muscogee language.

Glass cases inside Strachan Mansion, a gathering spot inside the resort community of Haig Point, display Native American points and arrowheads and pieces of fiber-tempered pottery discovered as the property was being developed. Also inside these cases are Civil War bullets, hand-forged iron chains and glass slave beads.

From the 1770s through 1861, Daufuskie had 10 plantations; at any given time about 200 slaves lived on the island. On my tour with Hersch I learn that it was slaves who

built, in 1805, the island's main north-south road, which is still used today. (This is the island's only paved public road.)

On Daufuskie, I stay at Haig Point's 1873 lighthouse. Haig Point was once a plantation of the same name. Walking up to the lighthouse's back door, I wonder at thick, right-angled oyster shell pathways surrounding the lighthouse. Inside, a section of kitchen floor that is clear plexiglass instead of wood perplexes me. Hersch tells me the "pathways" are all that's left of the Haig Point mansion, its foundation. The plexiglass in the kitchen allows lighthouse guests to see the foundation's depth.

About 200 feet north of the plantation house's foundation are the carefully preserved remains of three former slave dwellings. The slave houses and the mansion are constructed of tabby, a type of concrete made with lime from burned oyster shells mixed with sand, water, ash and crushed oyster shells. The mansion's foundation reveals it was the largest tabby home built on the South Carolina coast. The slave dwellings, which were originally 16 by 24 feet, are among the best-preserved in the area.

Considering the plantation's history, I'm surprised to learn that the ghost rumored to haunt Haig Point's lighthouse is, if not friendly, at least benign. Over my four days in her former home, though, Maggie Comer, the lovesick daughter of the lighthouse's first keeper, is absent.

The most haunting place I find on the island is Melrose, another former plantation turned luxury golf community that is adjacent to Haig Point. Melrose went into bankruptcy in March 2017. Some families still live full-time in homes they own here, but many cottages are abandoned. This winter, a chain-link fence was erected around the waterfront clubhouse and inn to keep vandals away, but all its windows had already been broken. The development's roads and Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course are weedy and blanketed with fallen pine needles.

Driving my golf cart here at night — an independent restaurateur leases one of Melrose's former restaurants; he fixed it up and reopened it as the Melrose Beach Club last October — I wonder how two streetlights still work. Having recently finished reading the dystopian novel "Station Eleven" by Emily St. John Mandel, I imagine Melrose is exactly what the world would look like if a super-flu wiped out 99 percent of the planet's population. Even with this in my head, the quietude of the decaying development is more captivating than creepy.

My first visit to Melrose is on the back of Zeus, a calm and stately white gelding who looks as though he's winking. (He isn't; he has a minor infection in one eye.) Haig Point recently began renting Melrose's stables, and the first 15 minutes of its 90-minute beach ride are through Melrose's post-apocalyptic landscape.

Zeus brings me to the beach shortly after passing a catawampus gazebo with several collapsed pilings. As he self-assuredly walks several feet from waves gently lapping at the shore, my mind turns to a favorite book from my childhood, Walter Farley's "The Black Stallion." I think of Alec Ramsay riding bareback at a full gallop down the deserted beach where they're shipwrecked. But while magic is everywhere on Daufuskie, I'm not so silly to think it has suddenly made me an accomplished enough equestrian to stay in the saddle of a galloping horse.

I'll save my Alec Ramsay fantasy for my return trip. Even then, I'll do it only after paddleboarding with dolphins a few more times. And eating another plate of fried oysters at Lucy Bell's. And, of course, after touring the island with Sallie Ann.