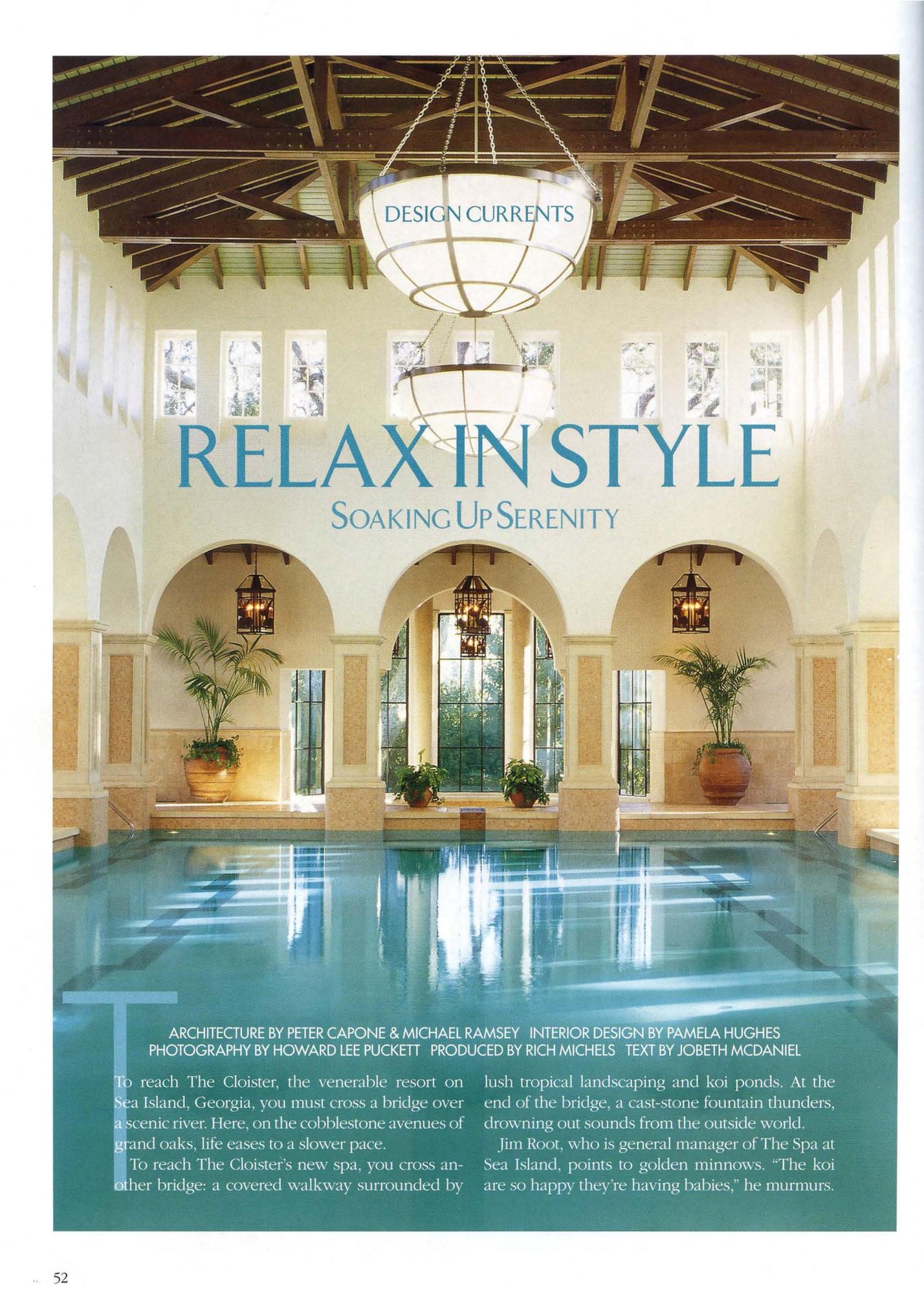


MARCH 2008

VERANDA





DESIGN CURRENTS

RELAX IN STYLE

SOAKING UP SERENITY

ARCHITECTURE BY PETER CAPONE & MICHAEL RAMSEY INTERIOR DESIGN BY PAMELA HUGHES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HOWARD LEE PUCKETT PRODUCED BY RICH MICHELS TEXT BY JOBETH MCDANIEL

To reach The Cloister, the venerable resort on Sea Island, Georgia, you must cross a bridge over a scenic river. Here, on the cobblestone avenues of grand oaks, life eases to a slower pace.

To reach The Cloister's new spa, you cross another bridge: a covered walkway surrounded by

lush tropical landscaping and koi ponds. At the end of the bridge, a cast-stone fountain thunders, drowning out sounds from the outside world.

Jim Root, who is general manager of The Spa at Sea Island, points to golden minnows. "The koi are so happy they're having babies," he murmurs.

People are happy here, too, drifting around the spa in a dreamy daze, their senses soothed by the ever-present sounds of water in motion. Layer by layer, the outside world slips away.

This is how architect Peter Capone envisioned the spa when Cloister owner Bill Jones III, chairman and CEO of the Sea Island Company, first approached him with a master plan for a complete overhaul of the resort. "The architectural style was a given," says Capone. "It had to be complementary to the hotel."

The Cloister, designed in 1928 by the famed Palm Beach-based architect Addison Mizner, blends Mediterranean and Moorish styles. In recent years, Jones replaced the old hotel with an updated, new set of buildings that closely hews to Mizner's original design. Like the hotel, the spa's new space feels and looks as if it had graced this spot for decades.

Water is the spa's main theme and its guiding principle. "Water creates energy, creates sound," says Capone.

It also creates mood. Outdoors, at the entrance, the fountain's crashing torrents are strong and powerful, energizing yet

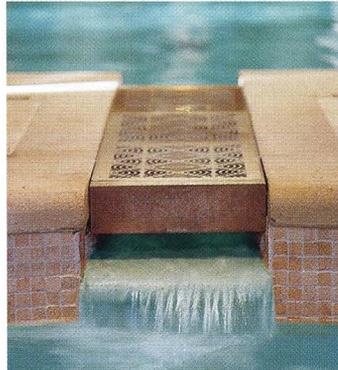
soothing. Inside, and especially in the garden atrium, the water trickles and bubbles. "It's a quiet zone. People go in there and decompress."

The central fountain splashes and spills into runnels coursing in each direction, feeding the spa's four main bodies of water. Toward the front entrance, and due west, a stream trickles over river rocks into the pond of those contented koi.

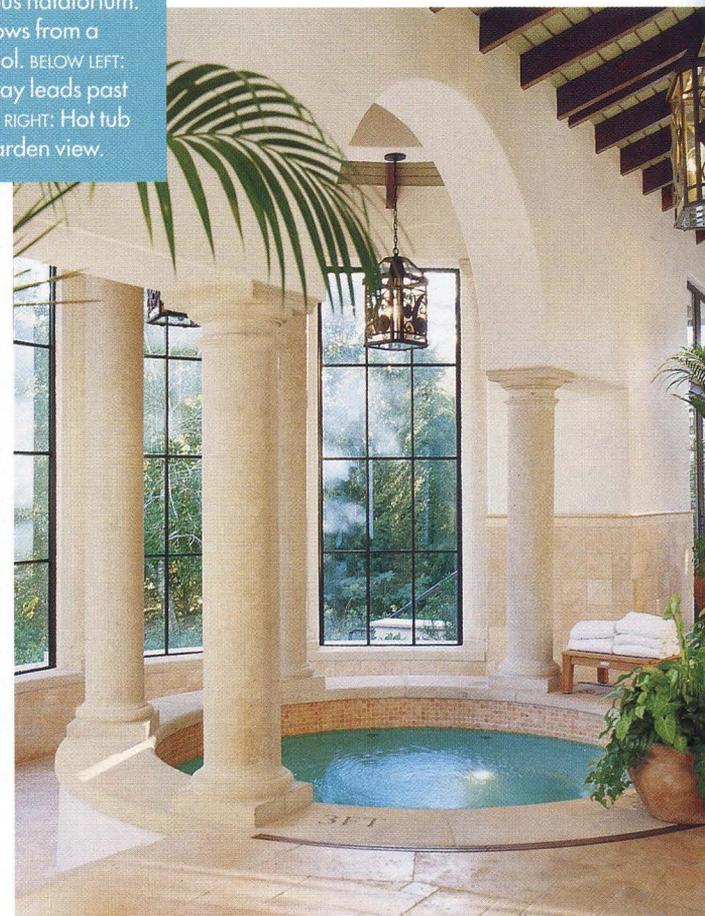
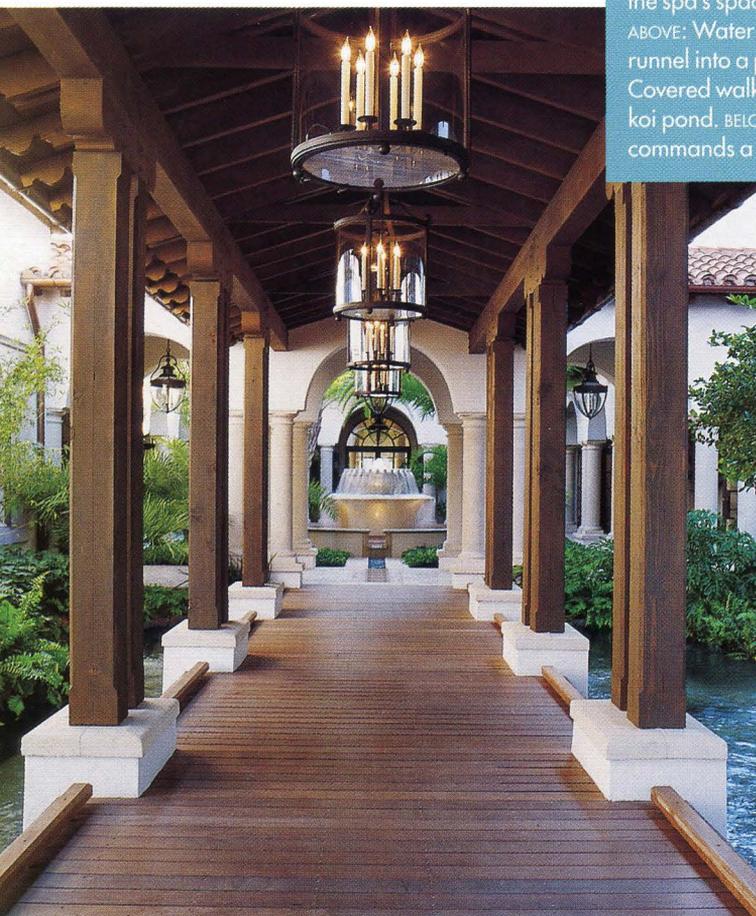
To the south, the runnel flows underfoot through the fitness center reception area to a sunlit natatorium with a Jacuzzi tub and a grand swimming pool. On each side of the room, doors open out to quiet courtyards with trees and flowers.

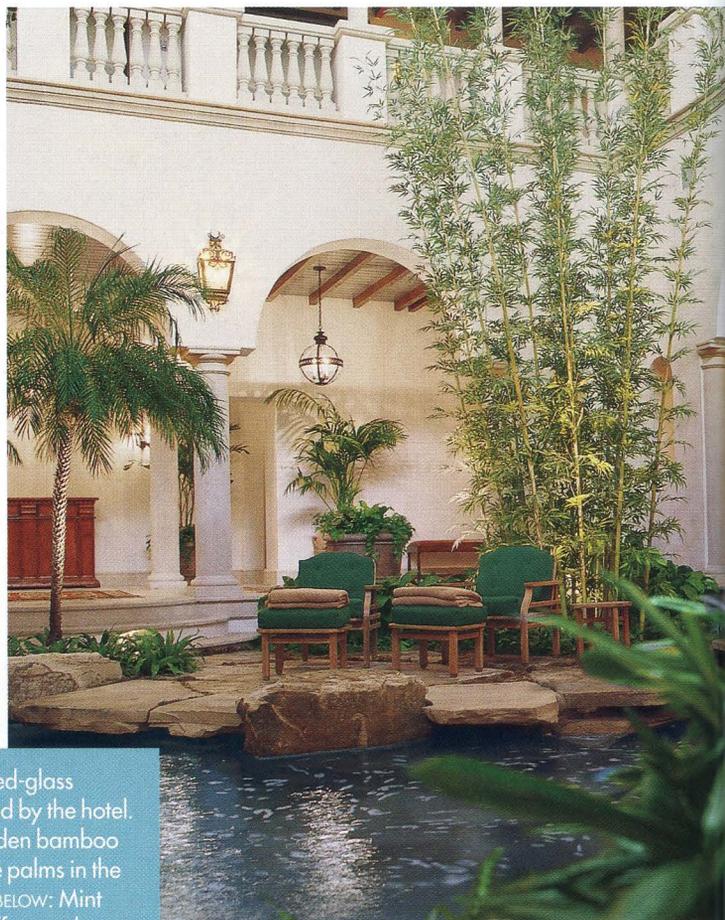
"The pool is indoors, but when the doors are open, it has an outdoor feel," says Capone.

East of the central fountain is the water atrium, the third water feature. The runnel surges into a large indoor heated tub with an outside view, then to a rocky goldfish pond and grassy labyrinth. The pool overflows its edges to create a waterfall. Adventurous guests sit just below the cascade, where the water splashes pleasantly



OPENING PAGE: Open-beam ceilings and archways frame the spa's spacious natatorium. ABOVE: Water flows from a runnel into a pool. BELOW LEFT: Covered walkway leads past koi pond. BELOW RIGHT: Hot tub commands a garden view.





ABOVE LEFT: Stained-glass windows inspired by the hotel. ABOVE RIGHT: Golden bamboo and pygmy date palms in the garden atrium. BELOW: Mint soap, lemon-coffee scrub, rose jasmine polish and Dead Sea salts for various treatments.



against their backs and shoulders.

To the north is the garden atrium, the spa feature most likely to elicit an “aah” from guests. A meditation garden echoes with soft, comforting ripples from a brook and a small waterfall set along varying levels of Tennessee Crab Orchard stone. Clerestory windows forty-five feet above visitors send a gentle light down onto Washingtonia and pygmy date palms, black olive trees and bamboo. Guests pass by on their way to treatments, or they can pause and relax, lounging in chairs in the leafy shade.

Interior designer Pamela Hughes, president of Hughes Design Associates of McLean, Virginia, and Sarasota, Florida, began working on the decor when the spa was still colored renderings by Capone. “Our job was to make the level of finish and luxury consistent with the hotel, to make it a welcoming and hospitable and warm place,” she says.

“You can’t leave this fabulously detailed and elaborate hotel and walk into a plain space. We wanted the spa to be simple, but it still had to be elegant. We used the same luxurious, high-quality materials we used in the hotel, but we toned it down with the design and the colors,” Hughes continues. “That’s how you achieve that same level of

elegance without being formal or fussy.”

Comfort and tranquility dictated every detail of the design. Turkish travertine lines the hallways, a neutral backdrop for the spa’s nearly 200 rugs from Woven Legends in Philadelphia, which also provided 640 rugs for The Cloister. All were woven by hand in small Turkish villages, using natural dyes and materials.

“Rugs in the spa are more primitive, less formal than the hotel, with a looser weave,” says Hughes. “We used brighter, more energetic colors on the fitness side and softer, more soothing colors in the spa treatment areas.”

Furnishings are sparse, allowing rugs and interior landscaping to take center stage. Scattered around the spa are several Tibetan chests two hundred to three hundred years old. Taber & Company of Tucson created the handcarved mesquite cabinets and reception desks.

“Mesquite is a very hard wood,” says Hughes. “We can even use it in wet treatment areas. It’s a rustic, dark and primitive-looking wood, but the carving on the cabinets is so fine that it is very elegant.”

Paul Ferrante Inc. of Los Angeles custom made the Moorish-style sconces and lamps, which harken back to

The Cloister's original 1928 architecture by Mizner. The light is muted, glowing from the ceiling, from sconces and from lamps placed low to bring a more intimate, human scale to the airy, high-ceiling rooms. Artwork is carefully edited, leaving many walls blank.

"We didn't want people to be overstimulated, blown away by too many things to look at," Hughes says.

Hughes found most of the paintings in the rich trove of the Sea Island Company archives. A few were painted by Bill Jones' brother Jim, an artist in New York. Six large murals of the beach and marshes by Norvel Hermanovski once hung in the old resort's club rooms. Now they line the walls of the spa's upper floor.

On the spa side, all is hushed, from the thick carpet in the locker rooms to the overstuffed easy chairs in waiting areas. Inside the treatment rooms, pedestal tubs and heated massage tables sit atop rustic travertine tiles. Stained-glass windows, in a Gothic-influenced style similar to The Cloister's originals, filter the light softly.

Before the spa opened, spa manager Root made a few changes: He removed a few high-tech features, such as tubs with

electronic controls, and added pedestal tubs with traditional faucetry—low tech, easy to use and comfortable.

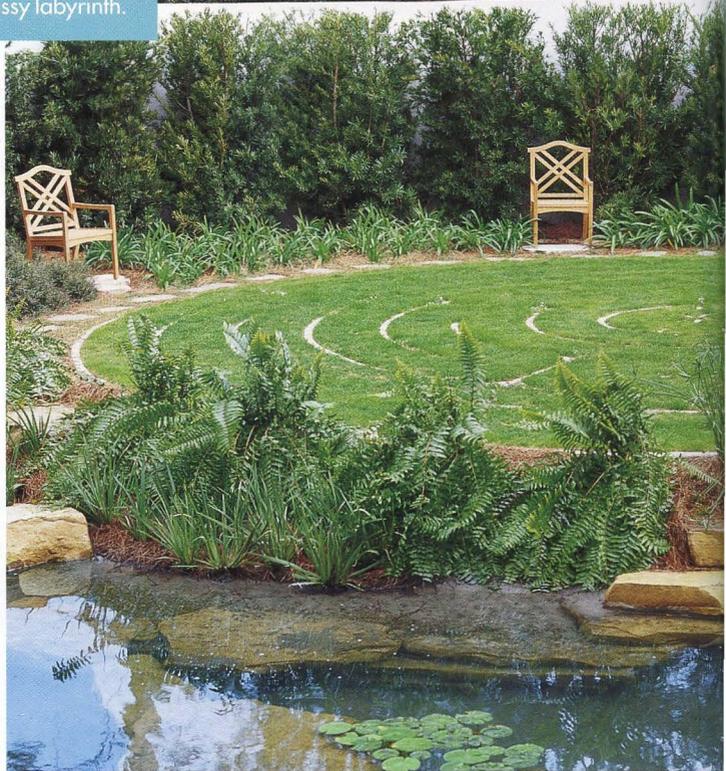
Treatments at the spa include a range of facials, therapeutic baths and body treatments such as hot stone massages for couples or singles. The Turkish Hammam bath lasts two hours and encompasses seven steps: an aromatic Moroccan mint soap cleansing, an olive scrub, a rose and jasmine rhassoul clay body polish, an atlas cedar and neroli citrus soak, an orange quince misting, a cardamom amber oil massage and, for the finish, the application of a tangerine-fig-butter cream. After that experience, the pampered guest often sinks into a thick-cushioned chair on a cozy patio to sip mint tea and listen to birds singing in nearby treetops.

Capone designed the 65,000-square-foot, U-shaped building so the water atrium, with its waterfall pool, would serve as the common area between the fitness facility and the spaces devoted to the spa. "The energy level on the fitness side is very different from the energy level on the spa side," Capone says. "They're two different experiences, not compatible."

Resorts too often treat the fitness side as



ABOVE: A pattern of inlaid stones guides visitors around a labyrinthine path at the spa. BELOW LEFT: In the entry courtyard, a tiered, cast-stone fountain flows into four runnels. BELOW RIGHT: Goldfish pond and ferns line the grassy labyrinth.



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a poor second cousin, he says, confining it to a basement with a few mirrors on the walls. This fitness center is filled with light, decorated as carefully and thoughtfully as the spa and the hotel, with original art, Turkish rugs and separate areas for the use of weights and cardio machines.

"We don't just have rows of treadmills," says Capone. "We give guests a sense of privacy and their own personal space."

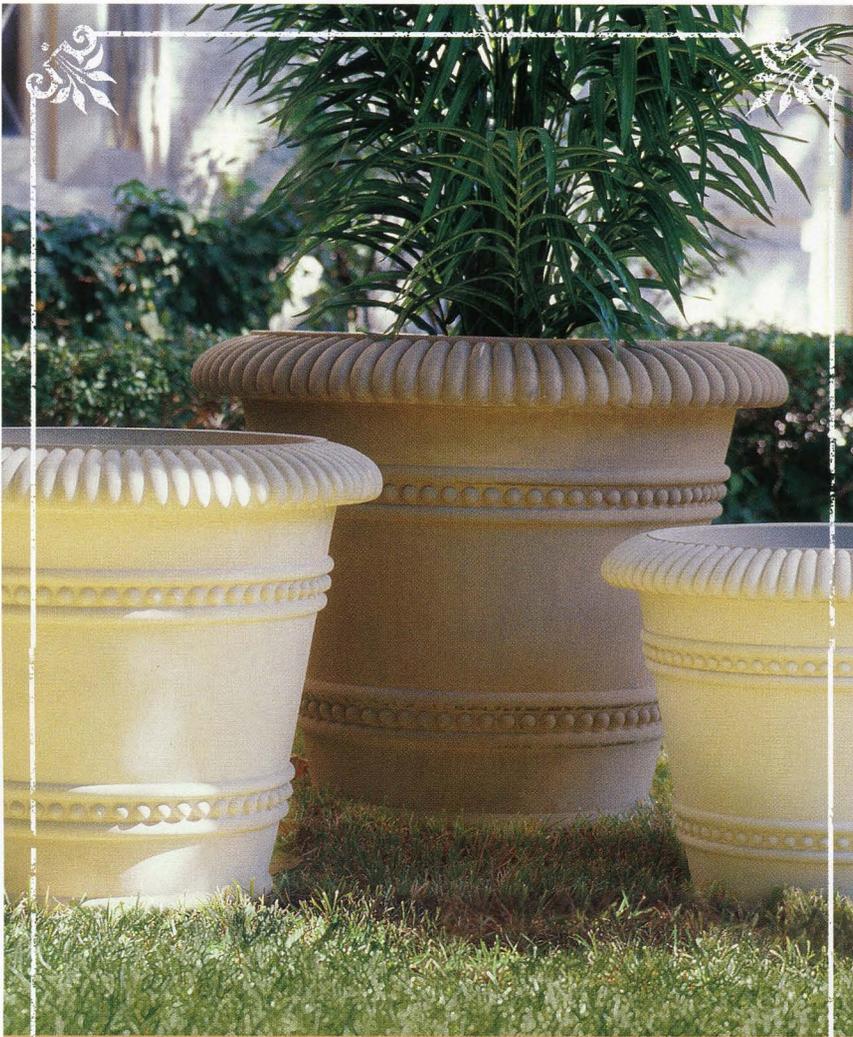
The fitness side stays busy throughout the week with guests from the resort as well as residents of Sea Island and other Georgia coastal locales. Exercise buffs may choose from one hundred hours of studio classes each week, from Pilates to yoga. In addition, a guest may meet individually or in a small group with one of the resort's coaches to refine swimming, jogging or weight-training skills.

Squash players have their pick of an American hardball doubles court or two international singles courts. The courts area is bathed in natural light, decorated with vintage resort photos and original oil paintings. Champion squash player Ben Gould teaches lessons and holds squash workshops.

In the new lifestyle kitchen, Wellness Chef Laurie Erickson, who came to The Cloister from Canyon Ranch in the Berkshires, coaches guests on nutrition in healthful cooking sessions. Erickson already has many success stories with clients who have taken her advice to heart, cutting out refined foods and replacing them with fresh, nutritious ones.

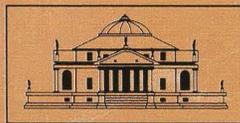
Spa manager Root, who previously worked at top-rated destination spas including Miraval, Rancho La Puerta and Green Valley, says the building offers a wonderful setting but that the real spa experience depends on the building's hundred-plus employees.

"We don't have a new spa," says Root. "We have a new spa building. The spirit in the old spa was so much a part of that Sea Island spirit, which is about people connecting. We tried to enhance that, building on the message that it's all about being of service to others. We have purposely nurtured that spirit."



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Staff members spent months training before the opening. Their warmth and friendliness feel genuine. "We say it's a 'spa of one.' We have 65,000 square feet of space, but it's all about the person standing in front of me right in that moment."

The Cloister is renowned as a resort beloved by generations, a quiet and restful place that helps families and couples reconnect. Root says the spa's motto—"rest, restore and reunite"—alludes to a 1931 letter that was written by Howard Coffin, who founded the Sea Island Company and built the original Cloister. "Coffin said that in hectic times, we have to never lose focus on the ability to relax. If you have the ability to just think or play, time tends to slow down. You don't have the rest of the world competing for your time.

"That letter could have been written last week," continues Root. "In eighty years, nothing has changed, except maybe life has become more compressed. The new currency is time. There are more demands of us. If you can truly step away from that, energetically and physically, it puts you in a better place to manage and deal with your life."

Root says lotions and potions, no matter how wonderful, pale in significance to the full spa experience: camaraderie, exercise, good food and enjoying nature.

"What's important is not the first time you see the building, when you are bowled over with how beautiful it is. What's important is how usable it is. It's how you feel when you are there."

Root says that though the spa is enormous, its spaciousness is tempered by human-scale design. "All spaces in the spa were designed to linger in. It's what makes people return day after day."

So for Root, the greatest compliment a person can give The Spa at Sea Island is one that he hears frequently: "See you tomorrow." □

The Spa at Sea Island and The Cloister are located about halfway between Savannah, Georgia, and Jacksonville, Florida.

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See Sources on page 218.