

She Holds the Reins

Second-generation stable master Amy Kutrufis directs Sea Island's new equestrian facility.

Walking on a beach at dawn, as morning people all know, simply requires waking up early and stepping out. Seeing sunrise from a saddle, however, as any horse person can tell you, requires getting up *absurdly* early to make preparations.

That's exactly what Sea Island Stables manager Amy Long Kutrufis, some of her horse-loving staff, and a few lucky Sea Island Resorts guests do. "Beach rides are our most popular activities," Amy says. "I like the morning rides best, because it's such a peaceful time."

Knows What She Wants

Amy has had plenty of time to discover what she likes and doesn't like about an equestrian facility. She's the daughter of longtime stable master Marvin Long, Sr., and his wife, Dot, who met while working at Sea Island Resorts and ran the horse center for five decades. Amy and her brother, Marvin, Jr., literally grew up at the stables on St. Simons Island, not far from the resort that owns the operation.

"I was riding before I could walk," she says. "By the time I turned 14, I taught lessons. Even when I was away at college—studying animal science at Middle Tennessee State University—I came back to the island a lot to see the horses. Being around horses is the only life I know. I live just 5 miles away, and I can be here at all hours of the day and night." ▶

A beach ride, at sunrise or any time of day, ranks high among popular activities for Sea Island guests.



ABOVE: "We have everything we need here," Amy says. "When I drive past the old place now, I wonder how we ever accomplished all that we did there." RIGHT: While Cusa enjoys a snack of hay, Amy talks to Lauren Burns (an attendant who works in the lesson barn) and Michelle McGraw (an attendant in the boarding barn).



Such immersion made Amy the perfect choice as stable master when her parents retired 10 years ago after holding the reins for half a century (they've since passed away). It also gave Amy insights about what to include at Sea Island's much-improved new facility, which opened last year.

"In 50 years at the old place, I learned what works and what doesn't," Amy says. "We met with five designers and three architects, and, along with Sea Island Company chairman and CEO Bill Jones III's vision, we combined all the best ideas and got exactly what we wanted."

Equestrian Paradise

The new operation, surrounded by woods at the edge of a scenic pond about 4 miles from the beach, covers 40 green acres. "It's the size of a 9-hole golf course and just as well groomed," Amy says. The facility differs dramatically from the cramped former stable grounds 2 miles away on a site hemmed-in over time by commercial strips and busy roads.

"A golf course designer planned every slope and tree. You can't even see the road from here. Full-grown live oaks were lifted in and placed just so, as if they'd been here for years. It's really incredible."

Four barns with tin roofs, pine walls, and custom metal hinges and bridle hooks face each other in pairs like mirror images and form a neat courtyard. Shaded breezeways in each, as well as in an adjacent maintenance building, keep horses as well as their handlers cool and comfortable. Two huge riding rings—one multi-purpose and one for jumps—boast cypress rail fences of rough-sawn, hand-sanded lumber.

"We have two tack rooms in each barn, and they're much better equipped and organized," Amy says. "The horses have hot and cold showering areas, and each stall has a fly system built in. The whole place, bathrooms and all, is a lot more like what you might see at The Cloister and The Lodge and other parts of Sea Island Resorts."

"Best of all," she adds, "we can stable 64 horses now instead of 42. We have Thoroughbreds, quarter horses, mustangs, pintos, Arabians, Belgians, and more. Half the stalls are for boarders owned by Sea Island members, and half are for horses we use in lessons and on trail rides."

World of Possibilities

Rides on 6 miles of wooded trails begin right at the stables, a nice change from transporting horses by trailer to remote areas from the traffic-bound former location. Horses are transported to Rainbow Island for beach rides.

"Now we can offer several kinds of rides at once instead of having to alternate them like before," Amy says. "When we're at full occupancy, the staff grows to 24. We all love horses. We all love what we do. It's like a big family."

The bigger barns, a reception building, and the broader grounds open a realm of possibilities such as hosting weddings, cookouts, a Derby Day

party, and other gatherings. "One event had 1,000 people—with food tables, carriage rides, barn tours, and more—and it didn't even feel crowded," Amy says, amazed. "We could never have done that before. When I drive past the old place now, I wonder how we ever accomplished all that we did there."

Back to Basics

Amy, whose husband, Terry, is a charter boat captain and whose son, Jake, 14, works part-time in beach services, revels in all the changes. She sticks to basics, though, concerning riding lessons. "I especially like to teach the little ones," she says. "I want them to experience the same love of horses I've had all my life. If that first lesson goes well, it makes a lasting impression."

JOE RADA

Sea Island Stables are at the north end of St. Simons Island. Visit www.seaisland.com (follow links to "Recreation" and "Equestrian"), or call 1-800-732-4752 (and ask for the stables).

Mixing Old and New

Although she's gladly settled into the new stables, Amy couldn't quite leave behind everything from the former site. "We brought the mounting block for sentimental reasons," she says. "It's just a piece of concrete with three steps, but so many people climbed it to get on their first horse, and now more will. We also brought my dad's tree, an oak that was planted in his honor when he died in 1998. It stands right between the barns now. I think he'd have liked that."



TOP: The new stables mix traditional style and modern amenities, which have Amy (riding Boots) cantering merrily along. ABOVE: Full-grown live oaks were carefully relocated to the new stables' stunningly beautiful 40-acre site.