

Spring Fever

Written by Mark Shaffer
Thursday, 16 April 2009 02:34

The Backyard Tourist (aka **Mark Shaffer**) catches Spring Fever, dons seersucker...

Symptoms

I bought a seersucker jacket this morning. I was washing the six inches of accumulated pollen off the car and the sun was shining, the sky was an impossible shade of azure, the azaleas were in riot, a gentle breeze was blowing, the heady scent of Carolina jasmine wafted – yes, wafted – through the air, and the next thing I know I’m buying a seersucker jacket. Seersucker. No offense to anyone reading this and thusly attired, but I’ve never really considered myself a seersucker kind of guy. This is the fabric of Hollywood’s prototypical (and stereotypical) Southern “gentleman” that I despise so much – the uniform for Tennessee Williams’ booze-soaked scoundrels and John Grisham’s outgunned idealistic lawyers – and worse, it’s what Matlock wore. Sorry, Andy.

But then again there is something undeniably authentic about a seersucker suit in the South. It is the fabric of my childhood memory, of sticky summer Sundays fanning the heat about in the late Neolithic Period prior to central air conditioning, when it seemed like half the congregation were all in light blue striped suits, slightly rumpled in the humidity. Growing up there was always a such a suit hanging in my closet purchased in a local downtown department store from people whose last name hung above the door and who took pride in clothing a community – all sadly extinct, now.

This last decade I’ve had little use for seersucker suits, having lived in places like Las Vegas where it certainly fits the climate but not the fashion vernacular – whatever that may be in a town where you can blow five grand on Armani in a casino lobby surrounded by a sea of cargo shorts and Hawaiian shirts. And in Seattle it is illegal to wear suits of any kind unless you are a) in the banking business, and b) in the banking business and from out of town with a valid ID and “suit pass,” or c) Bill Gates. It is a little known fact that Seattle enforces a casual municipal dress code. CEO’s conduct board meetings in vintage Led Zeppelin and Grateful Dead t-shirts. Anything other than various shades of black and grey are frowned upon until the sun finally comes out for a few frenetic weeks in July. This ushers in the brief-but-much-anticipated vintage bowling shirt season. After all, why spend all that money on tattoos if no one’s able to appreciate them?

While living in Seattle I went to work in a jacket and tie precisely once. I was pulled aside and told that the jacket was making everybody feel “uptight” and the tie was just plain “restrictive” and sent the wrong message. Hell, I was fine with that. I had no problem going to work in whatever I wanted to wear. I pretty much do that here and now, but why the sudden, whimsical seersucker imperative?

But of course! It was a sign – a sign that I was back in a place where this garment was not only practical but appropriate, appreciated (even necessary), and that – once again – I was experiencing the onset of my old seasonal nemesis, that most diabolical of afflictions, Spring Fever.

Feed the Fever

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Of course, it is well known that one feeds a fever and starves a cold. It would be unwise to attempt to starve Spring Fever. The likely result would be a backlash of catastrophic proportions. Even the most conservative of individuals who attempt to “sweat it out” often awake from a coma-like state days, months – even years later to disastrous results. One fellow (an accountant down on business from Ohio I’ll call “Dave”) discovered He’d traded in his Lexus for a beat up old VW camper, driven to the Keys and attempted to live out the lyrics to Jimmy Buffett’s “Nautical Wheelers” while amassing a huge bar tab at Sloppy Joe’s with his new best friend, a similarly afflicted Manhattan day trader who had adopted the name “Skeeter.” Like the common cold, a cure for SF continues to elude modern science, much like a logical explanation for the continued popularity of American Idol, the “comedies” of Judd Apatow and Bill O’Reilly’s delusional insistence that he is indeed a journalist. But once again, I digress...

It is a little known fact that Spring Fever (SF, hereafter) is much like malaria in that once it has been contracted, the bug remains in your system forever, squatting like a drunken toad in the back of your psyche, waiting. Waiting for the right balance of climate and environment to leap squirming into your brain and whisper, “Hey pal, forget that deadline, it’ll wait. Look out the window at all that sunshine. What you really want – what you need most in life right now – is a margarita, an icy, salty margarita on a deck in the sun. Oh yeah.” Of course, resistance is futile – even dangerous – since one of the key symptoms is environmental stupefaction, a phenomenon whereby afflicted individuals become so overwhelmed by the sudden, intense burst of light, color and sensation as to be stupefied by it. The result is not unlike your average zombie movie. In the ambulatory stage the afflicted stumble aimlessly about, mouth agape, squinting into the sun, muttering in strange indecipherable non-sequiters. The post-ambulatory stage usually finds them seated listlessly at outdoor bars and cafés, or prone on a beach (should one be handy).

During a long ago Spring Break on the Grand Strand I came down with a case of SF so intense that it lasted two years. Seriously. I still get the occasional call from the Mayo Clinic.

Living with your SF

The key to surviving Spring Fever is quite simply to embrace it. The hard truth is that until the average sufferer meets the challenge head on, they’re basically good for nothing. Perhaps one day employers, teachers, parents and spouses will come to realize that by dealing with our Spring Fever we are not wasting time or money, shirking duty or responsibility – no, far from it, indeed. We are protecting them. By removing ourselves at the first telltale signs (inability to concentrate, inexplicable need to play Margaritaville over and over, sudden urge for a new pair of flip-flops) we are removing them from the risk of exposure and a possible lifetime of dropping everything at the hint of a perfect day to simply stop and smell the flowers. Where would the world be if everyone did that?

That being said, those of us with severe cases of Spring Fever can cope and manage to be productive citizens at the same time, particularly in this time of economic uncertainty. What we spend during these “bouts” might appear to be cavalier and self indulgent to the uninformed. In fact, Spring Fever can provide a primary jumpstart – a peripheral stimulus package, if you will – for the local economy. Here’s how you can put your SF to work and feel good about it.

Get out!

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There's an old saying, "never ask a local for directions." While I remain dubious on the wisdom of this statement, I will go out on a limb and claim that most locals in tourist destinations tend to take their surroundings for-granted. Although even the most jaded of us would be hard put to ignore a sunset smeared like a child's finger painting over the marsh, or the magnificent oaks along Beaufort's Bay Street festooned in grey tapestries of Spanish moss. Whether you were born and raised in the Lowcountry or just came for a week on the beach or the golf course, this time of year it's a wonder anything gets done – anything constructive, that is. Think about it. On crystalline spring days filled with balmy breezes scented with sea salt, pluff mud and the promise of something better to do than whatever it is you're already doing, it's a freakin' wonder we ever accomplish anything at all. At least those of us with "the fever," that is. The rest of you go about your day blissfully ignorant of the constant siren song in the air, immune to the sultry enticements rustling about in the trees, whispering "come out, come out and play." I mean take a look at that shot of the rocking chair. This is the view from the porch here at The Lowcountry. See what I have to deal with? On days like this when the Fever's running high and the irony of writing a piece on it is practically too much to bear, there's just no choice but to get out of the office.

A brief disclaimer:

Because the acute onset of Spring Fever is nearly always associated with the imbibing of spirits in an open setting, we have elected to address this in a special category. Please consult the accompanying Life Behind Bars column for recommendations on Spring Fever beverage decisions. We now resume The Backyard Tourist...

Of course, this feature goes under the heading of The Backyard Tourist, so when it comes to getting out of the office and procrastinate – uh, researching a piece, I usually don't have far to go. In this case, I'm literally stepping into The Lowcountry's backyard (for the most part): Historic Beaufort.

Spring Fever's all about sensory overload and a great way to make the most of this in a place with half a millennium of history behind it is to plunge right in. You can do this in any number of ways and most of them begin at the Downtown Marina, the logical place to find information in a seafaring town. This is Historic Tour Central. All you have to do is decide whether to walk, ride or float. There are no bad choices. I recommend them all.

By water

Board Captain Dick's Prince of Tides (843.524.4422) for a relaxing narrated voyage up the Beaufort River to get an entirely different perspective on the city, past and present. The views from the water afford a chance to see things you can't really get more than a glimpse of by land (if you get glimpse at all). Tidalholm is one. If Edgar Fripp's rambling 1856 riverfront estate looks familiar that's because the home is a local celebrity among its neighbors on The Point, having starred in both The Great Santini and The Big Chill. But the real stars of any river tour are the bottlenose dolphin that hunt the tidal waters and often venture right up to the boat for a better look at who's looking at them.

The expenditure of energy can be tricky with Spring Fever, but if you're up to burning a few calories a kayak tour is a sublime experience on a perfect day. Kim and David at Beaufort Kayak Tours (843.525.0810/www.beaufortkayaktours.com) offer a full slate of floats to suit just

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about any interest and group and the best part is that no previous experience is necessary. They also do tours of Hunting Island State Park, cruising the marsh, lagoon and shoreline of the park's pristine maritime forest.

Hoof it

Another perfect way to spend a flawless hour or two in the Historic District is also an integral part of that history, the horse-drawn carriage. In downtown Beaufort the carriage tours originate at the west end of the marina over by the thing near the... oh, never mind. Just look for the great big horses. The drivers are friendly and have all the information you need, or – as expected – get schedules and tickets at the marina store. Drift back in time to the clomp, clomp, clomp of authentic (albeit more leisurely) horsepower as you glide through the dappled shade of live oaks and Spanish moss among the specters of the nation's formative struggles.

Okay, really hoof it

My own variety of Spring Fever usually means I have to “walk it out” or “sit it out.” Since we'll cover the latter approach separately, a walk seems like a fine idea. Self-guided maps are available all over town and easy to follow. For those more interested in something like a leisurely photo safari, I'd recommend going it alone. You can set your own pace and take your time setting up shots. Than again, a guided walking tour is a great way to burn off some of that slack-jawed awe that often accompanies a case of SF.

Both Jon Sharpe's eponymous Walking History Tour (843.575.5775/ www.jonswalkinghistory.com) and Evelene at the

The Spirit of Old Beaufort (843.525.0459/ www.thespiritofoldbeaufort.com

) offer unique and dramatic on-foot experiences you won't forget even in the midst of an SF-induced stupor. Evelene conducts her Spirit of Old Beaufort walks just as the name implies, in period costume and in character. Jon Sharpe, a former L.A. actor/director, had the dramatic good sense to shipwreck near Beaufort some years ago and in turn find the drama in our local history.

Finally, the obvious

In this part of the world there really is only one sure-fire way to quell the lazy flames of Spring Fever: a day at the beach. Even though recent storms and damaging tides have slashed away at a merciless pace, Hunting Island State Park (www.huntingisland.com) still boasts one of the best beaches on the east coast. The park also features thousands of acres of pristine maritime forest with wildlife galore, plenty of hiking and biking trails as well as a fishing pier, boat launch, campground and the only lighthouse in the state open to the public. Just one question remains, what are you waiting for? Just one suggestion, with entrance fees at \$4 a head for adults, the \$50 annual pass is highly recommended and is good for everybody in vehicles seating up to 15 passengers. That's a deal, particularly if your Spring Fever – like mine – tends to last year 'round.

Tell us about your Spring Fever experiences. Email Mark Shaffer at backyardtourist@gmail.com