



All in the Family

By Lauren & Jason Frye Photography by Jack Upton

Meet the Sweeneys, a modern family who has made an old-fashioned tradition of bringing together three generations each summer at Captain Charlie's Station on Bald Head Island.



"This is my favorite place on the island," Joe says... what the Sweeneys refer to as "Captain Charlie's compound."

When Joe Sweeney laughs, his eyes are as clear and blue as the summer sky. His contagious laugh comes easily as he sits with wife Linda in the cozy kitchen of one of three historic cottages at Captain Charlie's Station—after all, he's two weeks into his Bald Head Island vacation, and it shows.

"This is my favorite place on the island," Joe says, making a sweeping gesture with his hand to indicate the historic houses, gentle dunes and unfettered views of South Beach that make up what the Sweeneys refer to as "Captain Charlie's compound."

His affection for Captain Charlie's is evident in how homey he's made it in just two weeks. Beach cruisers and boogie boards lean against the house; bright towels drape over the porch rail drying in the sun; a kite, tied to the back of his chair overlooking the water, has been flying, maybe, forever.

On the counter, an old walkie-talkie set crackles to life. "Mom? You there?" The voice of 17-year-old daughter Maggie comes through buoyant, joyful, over the static. "We'll be back up from the beach in a few minutes. We're hungry," Maggie says. The walkie-talkies are perfectly at home here, slightly outmoded but effective, a nod to simpler times.

"We've been coming to the island for years," Joe and Linda confide, their story sailing smoothly from one to the other in the relaxed kitchen air. The table, scattered with books and board games, tells the story of a family savoring their precious leisure time together.

"The first time we came, Jack [their 10-year-old son] was in a crib," says Linda. "Our kids have pretty much grown up here." The two look happy, exchanging smiles as they navigate through their Bald Head Island memories. Linda pauses now, crinkling her brow. "No, wait," she says, turning to Joe. "The first time we came it was just the two of us, on a Valentine's Day package. We stayed at Ibis Roost. We fell in love with the island."

No doubt the February wind was cooler then, the sky closer to steel blue than summer's Persian blue, and the Sweeneys' home in Lancaster, Penn., couldn't have been farther away. The couple toured the island, took advantage of the amenities, and even befriended an Island Agency sales executive. Upon returning from their relaxing



Above: Joe Sweeney kicks back and takes in the grand ocean view from the porch of Captain Charlie's Station Cottage III.

Opposite: With the water just steps from the house, Jack (10) and Joseph (16) spend the afternoon catching some waves on South Beach.



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long-weekend getaway, Joe and Linda decided they needed to bring the whole family back.

“We’d had it with the hassle of other vacation spots,” says Linda. “We needed a break, something truly low-key that would allow us to really relax.” The following year they brought daughter Maggie and sons Jack and Joseph, and a tradition was born.

The Sweeneys’ yearly trip to Bald Head Island has since evolved, becoming part vacation and part family reunion, although their definition of family goes beyond the kids, in-laws and siblings that usually define the term. The Sweeneys include family friends from around the country, their kids’ friends from school, and the other regular Bald Head Island vacationers they’ve come to know. Throughout the years they’ve rented all the cottages at Captain Charlie’s Station in various combinations to accommodate their guests.

“This year, Linda and the older kids had to stay behind for a bit, so I spent the first two weeks here with Jack and his friend Paul, two 10-year-olds,” Joe says with a playful grin that draws his own inner 10-year-old to the surface for just a second. The guys spent their time biking, kayaking and playing in the surf until dark.

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Linda’s mother, Peg, and Joe’s mother, Barbara, cherish their summer trips to Bald Head Island, where they get a chance to slow down and reconnect with family.



"We get good, quality visiting time when we're here," says Linda. "At home, we're always on the go. Here, the quality of our time together is different. We really get to spend time talking and listening to one another without the regular distractions."

Their first night on the island, they noticed a crowd of people gathered near the end of the path to the beach. "There was a whole nest of turtles hatching," says Joe. They spent the following four nights chatting with the other folks who had come to watch, and keeping an eye on the turtles.

"After we finished watching the turtles, all the kids drifted away to play flashlight-tag on the beach until their parents called them in," says Joe with a smile that belies his own love of frolicking on the beach.

Linda chimes in, "That's one of the things we love about the island—the kids can *go be kids* and we don't have to worry."

This year, the Sweeney reunion is a multi-generational affair. Joe's mother Barbara and Linda's mother Peg are both in tow, as is Joe's sister Ann. "We get good, quality visiting time when we're here,"

says Linda. "At home, we're always on the go. Here, the quality of our time together is different. We really get to spend time talking and listening to one another without the regular distractions."

As if to prove this point, Maggie, 17, Joseph, 16, and Jack return from the beach, wrapped in beach towels and smelling faintly of sea water. Both grandmothers take turns asking the kids about their day, and Peg gets up to help Jack make lunch.

"I feel like everyday life is too programmed," says Barbara, scooting over to make room for Maggie at the table. "Here, time is gone. I lose track of the hour and the day, and it doesn't matter."

Joe seconds that emotion. "It's different here," he says. "You slow down and see everything through the 'island prism.'"

For Joe, everything looks better through that prism. He describes a rainstorm that blew through a few days earlier, the way

Opposite: A Carolina-blue sky sets the perfect backdrop as three generations of Sweeneys share stories and laughs over a delectable picnic lunch.

Right: Captain Charlie's Station makes an ideal family reunion location, allowing everyone a little quiet time between social gatherings.





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Whether collaborating on a sand castle or combing the beach for treasures, the Sweeney boys appreciate the time spent together on the island.

the drops of rain clung to the sea oats, the blue and green of it all as it passed. “I grabbed my camera, but I wasn’t fast enough. The moment was gone.”

Fortunately, the Sweeneys have had many moments that haven’t passed quite as quickly. “We have a picture of the kids standing on the porch, the ocean at their backs,” Joe says.

Linda smiles, touching her husband’s arm. “We call it the Ralph Lauren picture,” she laughs. “The kids look so summery and happy, and that photo really captures the island experience for me. I keep it on my bureau.”

Joe confides that he has a copy on his desk at work. “Sometimes my assistant catches me looking at it on a particularly long day, and she says, ‘You need to get to Bald Head Island!’”

Last summer, the Sweeney reunion included the usual cast of family and friends. “It was the last vacation we were able to take with my stepfather before we lost him in April,” says Linda, looking quietly at her hands. “When I look back at the photos from last summer, I realize what a special time it was, and I’m grateful we were able to have him be part of this.”

Peg smiles at her daughter, touching her arm. “Linda and Joe are very generous people,” she says. “They give us the trip to the island for Christmas every year. It means so much to share this part of summer with my family.” Barbara agrees.

“We’re coming back next month,” she smiles.

Jack has finished making lunch and is concocting a pitcher of pink lemonade. He pours the mix into the pitcher, eyes it, then pours more.

“Aren’t you going to measure that?” asks Grandma Peg. Jack turns, flashing a grin not unlike his father’s.

“Measure, schmeasure,” Jack says. “It’s summer.” ☺

Lauren and Jason Frye met while attending the Masters of Fine Arts program in Creative Writing at UNC Wilmington and have been working collaboratively ever since. Jason, a poet and screenwriter, prefers capturing sensory images and succinct details while Lauren, a nonfiction writer, prefers to piece together the larger elements of story. They live in Wilmington, N.C., with their cat, Ernie.

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