

Amelia Island Plantation was one of the first conservation-minded resorts. The payoff is a lovely beachfront, protected from the overdevelopment that plagues many major tourist destinations.



ROAD TRIP  SOUTH

# Golden Isles

Driving down Georgia's romantic coast eases my homesickness for New Orleans.

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS



As a native of New Orleans, I have always been curious about Savannah, a romantic, historic city often compared to my hometown. In the wake of Katrina's destruction, this seems like a good year to bypass the Gulf and check out the coast of my adopted state. So I grab a friend and head off for some much-needed R&R. >> The drive from Atlanta fails to deliver much more than a seemingly endless view of Georgia's piney woods, making the exit off Interstate 16 a welcome sight. Driving into town, we admire the gracious antebellum mansions, pristine city squares and massive Spanish moss-laden trees that supply most of this quaint hamlet's endearing charm, but clearly there's also a burgeoning movement to give the city a more contemporary vibe. >> Savannah is moving into the 21st century. The flashiest indication of this is the brand-new **Mansion on Forsyth Park**, a 126-room hotel built onto an 18,000-square-foot Victorian-Romanesque mansion. We pull up to the vibrant orange-brick structure and hand the







Range Rover over to the valet. Inside, the lobby epitomizes Savannah's marriage between old and new with its white onyx reception desk, Versace furniture, 200-year-old pink Verona columns, hardwood walnut floors and massive \$40,000 antique Austrian-crystal chandelier. The opulent, art-filled space is like a breathtaking mix of the funky W Hotel and the historic Georgian Terrace Hotel.

After gazing at our room's fabulous Italian marble bathroom, we decide to get a taste of Savannah nightlife on **River Street**. We could walk—it's only a few blocks—but it's more fun to take a pedi-



Twenty-one of the original 24 squares planned by Savannah's founder, General Oglethorpe, still exist. For energy to explore the lovely town, shown on these two pages, grab a cone at Leopold's.

cab. Our "driver," between spouting history and factoids, takes our picture and recommends a favorite seafood spot.

We are pleased with his suggestion, the **Chart House**. Although it's a chain, the sprawling, three-story restaurant is located in a historic riverfront building, and the dimly lit, log-cabin ambience provides a cozy nest for feasting on succulent, jumbo lump crab cakes. Afterward, we browse the cobblestone streets long enough to work up an appetite for a waffle cone at **Leopold's**, a 1950s-style ice cream parlor owned by Stratton Leopold, a *real* Hollywood film director who splits his time between L.A. and his native Savannah. Strolling over to the **Trustees Theater**, we're just in time for the indie film festival sponsored by the Savannah College of Art & Design.

The next morning we enjoy brunch at the popular **Soho South Cafe**, then peruse the cute shops along Bull Street—wrapping up our visit with the **Freedom Trail Black History Tour**, a two-hour interactive journey (led by an eccentric history buff wearing a mud-cloth hat) that includes stops at the Civil Rights Museum, a slave burial ground and the city's first African Methodist church.



THE TWO-HOUR DRIVE TO **Amelia Island** is considerably more scenic than our previous route. With Alicia Keys' *Unplugged* blaring, we roll past glistening marshlands, the town of Brunswick and historic roadside landmarks. We can't resist stopping for fresh green peanuts and "sweet oranges" at a homespun roadside market selling everything from vine-ripened tomatoes to live blue crabs.

**Amelia Island Plantation**, a 1,350-acre resort just over the Florida border that is a pioneer in eco-friendly development, overlooks the blue ocean to the east and the lush green marshland and Intracoastal Waterway to the west. What our generic hotel room lacks is more than made up for by the balcony view of the beach. Bicycles and motorized golf carts are available for rent, but we decide to explore the property via "Segway Safari," wheeling our way, via bike trails, past fancy houses and through ravishing marsh landscape.

A quick change of clothes later, we're

off to **Fernandina Beach**, a historic Victorian seaport, for dinner. Music emanates from night spots in the entertainment district, which is packed with shops and restaurants, but we conclude that the **1878 Tavern & Grille** is the perfect retreat for a quiet dinner as tranquil and relaxing as the sound of the crashing waves that eventually lull us to sleep that night.

A TRIP TO THE GEORGIA coast simply must include a visit to at least one of the 14 barrier islands that make up the Golden Isles.

**Sapelo Island** is accessible only by a once-daily ferry trip—our first tip-off that the tour would be memorable. Missing our turn twice on the one-lane highway, we make it to the dock with barely five minutes to spare, then relax onboard as the wind blows through our hair and the sun glistens off the water like De Beers diamonds.

The state Department of Natural Resources offers half-day tours, but we pre-arranged a personal tour with a native who goes only by "Jerome." He loads us into his battered four-wheel-drive vehicle, an absolute necessity for navigating this wilderness, and drives us by sights such as Hog Hammock, a historic Gullah settlement; Reynolds Man-



The swanky new Mansion on Forsyth Park, above, incorporates a Victorian mansion and elegant new guest suites.

sion, former home of the tobacco giant; the Sapelo Lighthouse and the University of Georgia Marine Institute; but those landmarks are secondary to the rare spectacle of completely undisturbed nature. As Sapelo matriarch Cornelia Bailey famously said, "When you come to Sapelo, you see birds and bees, flowers and trees. . . and that's the way God intended it to be!"

For more information see page 120.



## Perfect Pampering



No trip to the **Mansion on Forsyth Park** would be complete without two key indulgences: the hotel's signature butler service and a visit to the Poseidon Spa. For about \$50 extra per night, a butler will do everything from unpack your suitcases to draw an evening bath for you. And if that isn't enough to make you feel like royalty, try the Poseidon's in-room deep-tissue massage for the ultimate indulgence.





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[gullahcuisine.com](http://gullahcuisine.com)

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843-884-7677

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**STAY**

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100 Colleton Ave.  
877-648-2200

[thewillcox.com/home.htm](http://thewillcox.com/home.htm)

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**Charleston**

**Wentworth Mansion**

149 Wentworth St.  
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[wentworthmansion.com](http://wentworthmansion.com)

Awarded AAA Five Diamond designation for the third year in a row.

**DON'T MISS**

**Madison**

**Georgia Potters: Then & Now**

Apr. 25-July 5

Madison-Morgan Cultural Center  
[madisonga.org](http://madisonga.org)

**Madison Fest/Bluegrass Festival**

Apr. 28-30

West Jefferson Street in downtown Madison  
[madisonga.org/calendar.htm](http://madisonga.org/calendar.htm)

**Aiken**

**The Aiken Horse Show**

Apr. 1-3

Hitchcock Woods  
[aikenhorseshow.com](http://aikenhorseshow.com)

**Charleston**

**Annual Festival of Houses & Gardens**

Through Apr. 15

[historiccharleston.org](http://historiccharleston.org)

**Cooper River Bridge Run**

Apr. 1

[bridgerun.com](http://bridgerun.com)

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**[ SOUTH ]**

**EAT**

**Savannah**

**Chart House**



202 West Bay St.

912-234-6686

chart-house.com

**Soho South Cafe**

12 West Liberty St.

912-233-1633

sohosouthcafe.com

**Lady & Sons**

102 West Congress St.

912-233-2600

ladyandsons.com

An always-packed Southern eatery owned by Food Network personality Paula Deen and her sons.

**The Olde Pink House**

23 Abercorn St.

912-232-4286

Enjoy pan-seared crab cakes at this converted historic mansion with *pink* walls.

**Gryphon Tea Room**

337 Bull St.

912-525-5880

This popular romantic eatery, which serves Savannah's signature crabcakes, is for those who are serious about their tea.

**Amelia Island/Fernandina Beach**

**1878 Tavern & Grille**

12 North Second St.

904-261-8103

This cozy fine-dining canteen serves up a diverse mix of steaks, seafood, chicken and chops.

**The Verandah**

6800 First Coast Highway

**Amelia Island Plantation**

888-261-6161

aipfc.com

This bustling family-style restaurant is nestled among twisted live oak trees.

**STAY**

**Savannah**

**Mansion on Forsyth Park**

700 Drayton St.

888-711-5114

mansiononforythpark.com

**Amelia Island**

**Amelia Island Plantation**

6800 First Coast Highway

888-261-6161

aipfl.com

**Sapelo Island**

**Reynolds Mansion** (large groups only)

912-485-2299

gastateparks.org/info/sapelo

**DON'T MISS**

**Savannah**

**Ghost Talk Ghost Walk Tours**

Abercorn Street at East Congress Street

912-233-3896

savannahgeorgia.com/ghosttalk

**Savannah Pedicab**

912-232-7900

whiterod.com/pages/contact/spedicab.html

**Freedom Trail Black History Tour**

(Departs from Savannah's Visitors Center)

301 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

912-398-2785

**Trustees Theater**

216 East Broughton St.

912-525-5050

trusteestheater.com

Art Moderne theater hosts SCAD events.

**Amelia Island**

**Segway Safari Tours**

Amelia Island Plantation

904-277-5120

**Sapelo Island**

**Spirit of Sapelo Wagon & Bus Tour**

Sapelo Island

912-485-2170

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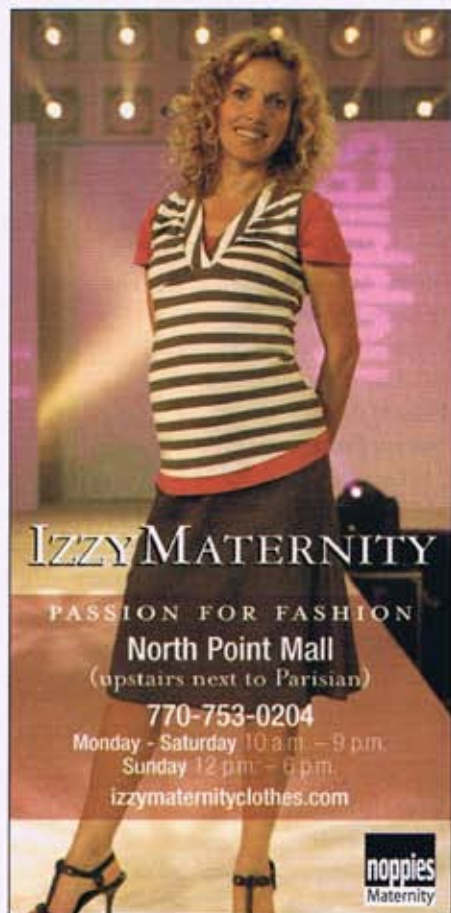
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## In Style

From **boutiques** to **bikini waxes**, you can trust **Atlanta Magazine** for the city's most **authoritative fashion coverage**.



( ATLANTA'S AUTHORITY SINCE 1961 )

## JEANNE BRASELTON

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 115

sex, philosophy and all aspects of creative anxiety. They crammed every inch of space with photos, artwork (one of Al's bluestocking foremothers had studied in Paris), kitschy bric-a-brac, canyons of books—and enough pill bottles to have stocked Graceland.

"They had as many of those little orange bottles as they did books," says George de Man, a Rome writer.

During her manic periods, Jeanne shopped compulsively. So the house did not present the sort of minimalist, beige-dominated aesthetic associated with *Architectural Digest*; it was Southern tacky and genteel run gloriously amok, like an all-consuming hybrid of kudzu and wisteria.

"Jeanne would go on eBay and spend a fortune on crap," de Man says. "Weird ashtrays, funny gewgaws, some rare antique book somebody had recommended. It was madness! But it was a generous madness. I still have the LBJ campaign button she gave me."

And there were the pets.

"Jeanne was always picking up strays," Hershey says. "I guess you could count Al among those. But we'd be talking, and I'd hear this thundering stampede sound off in the distance, and then all of a sudden there would be this herd of dogs in the room. They would briefly acknowledge our presence and then pass on through. And the place was crawling with cats too."

Friends rolled their eyes at the Braseltons' free-range kennel.

"I think, in his later years, Al had concluded that his 'animal spirit' was canine," de Man says. "Whenever an ambulance would pass by, it would irritate the dogs' ears, and they would howl for as long as the siren lasted. Al always, always howled right along with them, right up until they finished. Every single time. A loud, full-throated howl."

The Braseltons' flair for irreverent whimsy could be seen in their customized Christmas cards, one of which showcased Al decked out as the pope and Jeanne dressed as a nun—dirty dancing.

"Al had a beatnik's love for spontaneity and surprise," de Man says. "He

always said a good poem is like a good joke: It catches you by surprise. He was tired of liberal clichés, so he liked to be the devil's advocate around left-leaning people, talking blarney about the triumph of big business and the importance of 'nut-cutting.'"

After Al's death, Jeanne was invited to read from *A False Sense of Well Being* to the Inquiry Club, the intellectual wing of the Piedmont Driving Club. Before closing, she told the august gathering, "I believe my husband would have wanted you all to hear this," and then read Al's poem titled "I Have Fired My Seed," a randy celebration of fornication with melons and other unconventional partners, employing the F-word. It took the stunned crowd several minutes to commence its timorous, confused applause.

WHEN I FIRST MET THE BRASELTONS, I WAS supposed to grab a brief lunch with Jeanne in Rome and then return to my office. She was wearing a brooch that looked like a tiny typewriter. Her first words to me, cascading forth in her husky smoker's voice, were: "You'll have to excuse me, honey. I had a migraine, and I'm buzzing on OxyContin and 12 other medications and trying out this new antidepressant because I'm bipolar, you know? AL, COME AND MEET OUR NEW FRIEND!"

Her husband entered the room magisterially, gave me a gimlet-eyed once-over and barked, out of the blue, "Aha! A true country girl—I'll bet you're even more depraved than you look and that you wear frayed, cut-off denim short-shorts like Daisy Mae. Wear 'em next time you visit! You will come back, I assume?"

"That's just Al being Al," Jeanne continued, by way of explanation. "I'm having these weird hot flashes on top of everything else, because of the hysterectomy, and running behind on everything. Look at this—have you read Brad Watson's latest book? We love it! Take this with you and tell me what you think. Want something to drink, honey?"

Enchanted, I stayed with them until 1 a.m. The conversation, about some bizarre, unprintable subject, was still raging when I staggered out the door.

"Who could ever keep up with them?" asks Susan Harvey, an artist and charter