

A Yankee's Guide to Savannah

By Aaron Leventhal

I was first drawn to Savannah by John Berendt's best-selling novel, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. In this Deep South cultural oasis I discovered a historic city, founded in 1737, filled with architectural gems, world-class attractions, lowcountry cuisine and gracious Southern hospitality. Its reputation as a world-class tourism destination was underscored in July when Savannah was named among the "World's Best Cities in the U.S. and Canada" by Travel+Leisure magazine.

I have returned often, most recently with my wife Beth as the guests of Joe Marinelli, Beth's former colleague at Experience Columbus and president of Visit Savannah for the past eight years.



Harbor view from River Street Inn

When Joe and I talked, he confessed it took him some time to accept that he would always be perceived by the locals as a Yankee, no matter how long he lived and worked in Savannah. Even so, he has grown to love the city.

I asked Joe to compare Savannah to Charleston, his popular neighbor to the north. "I like to say Charleston

is the debutante daughter -- sophisticated and highbrow -- and we're the quirky cousin -- laid back, edgy, real. We're the authentic Southern city, where everything is built to human scale. We take pride in being America's first planned city, with the largest historic district in the nation, covering 2 1/2 square miles.

"We are a tourist magnet, attracting 13 million visitors last year, but we are so much more. Our commercial port is one of the busiest along the Atlantic seaboard. My impression is that people here are happier, more relaxed, less stressed, and usually in a good mood. I think it's the sunshine," he said.

Listed below are the highlights of Joe Marinelli's Savannah we experienced during our weeklong stay.

Attractions

You don't need a car here. The Historic District is where everything happens, and free streetcar service is available.

Begin your visit with the informative and entertaining **Savannah Dan Walking Tour**. Dan expertly guides folks on a 90-minute stroll through the historic district and magnificent public squares. An impressive collection of stately mansions, art galleries and cafes

surround the square. **Old Savannah Tours** brings the historic city to life with costumed re-enactors aboard decorative trolleys.

Savannah Riverboat Cruises offers relaxed, narrated harbor tours along the Savannah River. Specialty cruises include dinner, moonlight, gospel, mystery and Civil War offerings.



City Market, in the heart of Savannah's Historic District

City Market dates back to the 1870s and is now filled with dozens of art galleries, studios, boutiques, open-air cafes and live music venues. **Belford's** is an excellent place to dine here. It offers sandwiches, seafood and steaks.

Historic cemeteries are popular landmarks, where Savannah's unique history, scenic beauty and legendary residents are laid to rest. Guided tours are available at Bonaventure, Colonial and Laurel Grove cemeteries.

Museums are everywhere. Of note are the **Telfair Museum of Art**, with an impressive collection of American and European masterpieces; **Owens-Thomas House and Museum**, in a renowned 1816 English Regency Mansion with slave quarters and period furnishings; and the **Ships of the Sea Museum**, containing model ships, maritime exhibits, gardens and a nature trail. All museums have an admission fee.

Dining

Savannah is known for its lowcountry cuisine. Specialties include Southern fried chicken, barbecue, local fish and seafood, fried green tomatoes, collard greens, corn bread and banana pudding. There are dozens of outstanding restaurants, most with Low Country dishes on the menu, in the Historic District.



Savannah and Tybee Island Trip

Organized and led by travel writer Aaron Leventhal

Thursday, March 26-Wednesday, April 2, 2015
During the 26th annual
Savannah Music Festival

Four days in Savannah; three in Tybee Island
Includes lodging at River Street Inn in Savannah and Admiral's View on Tybee Island, meals, sightseeing and festival tickets

For more information, visit www.leventhaltravel.com
or call Aaron at 614-506-9666

and Tybee Island

Some of Joe's personal favorites include:

B. Matthews Eatery, open for breakfast, lunch and dinner; **The Lady & Sons**, Paula Deen's famous two-story restaurant with classic Southern cooking; **45 Bistro**, fine dining in an original 1852 renovated building; and **Olde Pink House**, in an historic 1771 Georgian mansion, serving classic Southern dishes ranging from chicken pot pie and blackened grouper to sweet potato biscuits. Its intimate downstairs Planter's Tavern is a locals' hangout.

Beth and I also enjoyed **Mrs. Wilke's Dining Room** for family style Southern cooking, a Savannah icon; **Olympia Café** for Greek specialties along River Street, and **Leopold's Ice Cream**, since 1919, voted "best ice cream" by National Geographic readers.

Where to Stay

Our choice is **River Street Inn** (800-253-4229; riverstreetinn.com), a cozy, 86 room inn in an original 1817 cotton warehouse overlooking the busy harbor and Savannah River. It houses **Huey's New Orleans Café** and serves complimentary afternoon wine and hors d'oeuvres.

2015 Savannah Festivals

Savannah Music Festival, March 19 – April 4
Savannah VOICE Festival, August
Savannah Film Festival, October/November
Savannah Food and Wine Festival, November

For more information:
877-SAVANNAH or
visitsavannah.com

Columbus-based travel writer and small group tour director Aaron Leventhal has arranged a weeklong trip to Savannah for the Savannah Music Festival and Tybee Island March 26–April 2, 2015. If interested, log on to leventhaltravel.com and contact him at 614-506-9666 or leventhal43206@gmail.com.

Tybee Island

Any visit to Savannah should include a few days of relaxation on tranquil Tybee Island, 18 miles to the east. The retro, historic resort stretches three miles along the Atlantic Ocean. Magically, it has been spared big time development and has retained a 1950s ambience that we found refreshing. We spent lazy days reading, soaking up sunshine, shopping in funky old sea shacks and strolling on the three sandy public beaches.

Rent a bike at **Jason's Flat Tire Bikes** and you can get any place on the island in less than 30 minutes.

We also explored the seashore and its inhabitants with marine biologist, **Dr. Joe Richardson** (912-596-5362), and viewed dozens of spirited dolphins on **Captain Mike's Dolphin Tours** (912-786-5848).

We also took a fascinating four-hour kayak tour (932-695-2305) through the subtropical marshes.



Marine biologist Dr. Joe Richardson shares the rich diversity of coastal habitat on his Tybee Beach Ecology Trip.



Dolphin sightings guaranteed on Captain Mike's Dolphin Tours
Photos by Beth Ervin Leventhal.

An advertisement for Captain Mike's Dolphin Tours. It features a yellow boat named 'DOLPHIN III' in the foreground and a white lighthouse in the background. The text includes 'Captain MIKE'S DOLPHIN TOURS EST. 1992 TYBEE ISLAND, GA' and lists services: NARRATED DOLPHIN SIGHTSEEING ADVENTURES, DEEP SEA FISHING, and SUNSET CRUISES.

An advertisement for the DeSoto Beach Hotel. It shows a collage of images including a main building, terraces, bungalows, and an admiral's view. Text includes 'DESOTO BEACH HOTEL OCEANFRONT', 'DESOTO BEACH TERRACES', 'DESOTO BEACH BUNGALOWS', 'ADMIRAL'S VIEW at Captain's Rest', and 'The DESOTO BEACH Bed & Breakfast'.

An advertisement for DeSoto Beach Properties. It features a large swimming pool, palm trees, and a beach scene. Text includes 'Tybee Island, Georgia Savannah's Beach!', 'Now Featuring 6 Unique Island Properties', '15% Off', 'Promo code: HSN Valid Sun-Thurs Expires 4/30/15', 'CALL FOR DETAILS 877.786.4542', and website addresses 'www.DeSotoBeachHotel.com' and 'www.DeSotoBeachProperties.com'.



Travel writer Aaron Leventhal and Joe Marinelli, president, Visit Savannah

We dined on outdoor decks and patios overlooking the ocean, never tiring of freshly caught fish, clams and crab at **Coco's Sunset Grill**, **A-J's Dockside** and **Marlin Monroe's Surfside Grill**.

Where to Stay

The historic **DeSoto Beach Hotel** (877-786-4542) with its sandy oceanfront beach and swimming pool is tops. It also has five other properties to choose from. Another choice is to rent a furnished home through **Mermaid Cottages** (912-786-5918). Its owner, Diane Kaufman, is a former Columbian.

For more information: visittybee.com