coast to coast
a good sam company

COAST MAGAZINE
FALL 2022

TUCSON DELIGHTS

Savannah:
Shaded Squares and Southern Charm by Day, Spooky Ghost Stories by Night

America's Finest Fall Festivals

FALL DESTINATIONS

Rifle River Resort
Sterling, Michigan

Harmony Lakeside RV Park and Deluxe Cabins
Silver Creek, Washington

Pride RV Resort and Family Campground
Waynesville, North Carolina

SAVANNAH:
SHADED SQUARES AND SOUTHERN CHARM BY DAY, SPOOKY GHOST STORIES BY NIGHT

SAVANNAH: Shaded Squares and Southern Charm by Day, Spooky Ghost Stories by Night

Story and Photos by Richard Varr

The shadows of tree limbs snake along the grounds of Chippewa Square as the sun filters through the thick Spanish moss. I'm walking within one of Savannah's most popular city squares where I can't help but notice the imposing bronze statue of sword-wielding Gen. James Oglethorpe, the Englishman who founded the city and, in fact, Georgia. However, I'm more interested in finding the bus stop bench where Forrest Gump contemplated life through a box of chocolates.

It doesn't take long to realize that the Tom Hanks character's bench is not here. The bench was just a prop used during the filming of the American classic of the same name. A quick look in my Savannah guidebook reveals the scene was shot somewhere on the square's northern edge—vague, but I get the idea. Nonetheless, strolling through Chippewa Square is a great introduction to one of the South's most charming and historic cities, also noted for its blockbuster movie heritage and seemingly unending ghostly hauntings.

Chippewa Square with Gen. James Oglethorpe statue

Jones Street is one of the most scenic neighborhoods in Savannah

Savannah City Market teems with activity

"It's interesting to note that Savannah was the first planned city in America, laid out in a grid but also around these squares that were working squares," explains former city tour guide Harriet Meyerhoff. The linear grid pattern of squares surrounded by stately homes and inns—many cornered by landmark columned churches with towering steeples—came about from Gen. Oglethorpe's initial city design. In 1733, he claimed the area along the Savannah River as the first city of the 13th colony for England's King George.

Oglethorpe's plan created four initial squares with surrounding blocks which expanded to 24 by 1851, 22 of which—now mostly luscious with greenery—remain today. They make Savannah a uniquely walkable city with another square just a few minutes jaunt from the last, and many with park benches and shade for a rest or a cooling break from summer heat. Many pay tribute to momentous historical events, war heroes, and key figures taking part in the city's founding and culture.

I see a passerby, for example, posing with a statue of Savannah favorite son and songwriter Johnny Mercer in bustling Ellis Square, just opposite the pedestrian street along the City Market. In nearby Johnson Square, a 50-foot marble monument marks the grave of Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene, a friend of Gen. George Washington and commander of the Southern colonies' Revolutionary War forces. And just two blocks south in Wright Square, a granite boulder from Georgia's Stone Mountain marks the grave and honors friendly Yamacraw Indian chief Tomochichi who welcomed Oglethorpe and his settlers to their new riverside colony.

My next stop is Reynolds Square, named after Georgia's first Royal Governor, with a center statue of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism who came to Savannah in 1736. On one corner sits the 1771 Habersham House, a Georgian mansion that's now one of the city's most popular restaurants. It soon became known as the "Olde Pink House" when the colors from the façade's native brick leaked

through the plastered walls. Today, diners often find themselves on waiting lists for Southern specialties including shrimp and grits, fried green tomatoes, and cornbread fried oysters.

Once a bustling shipping port, Savannah's riverside today has been transformed into a pedestrian walkway, just steps from River Street's restored warehouses now filled with ice cream and popcorn eateries, trinket shops, and restaurants. Named after a former city mayor, Rousakis Plaza is where visitors and locals catch a free ferry ride along the river or book a dinner cruise with Savannah Riverboat Cruises' 1,000-passenger white and red-trimmed *Georgia Queen*, a traditional-styled, multi-decked paddlewheel riverboat.

More of the city's waterfront history comes alive on a grassy stretch of the riverbank, where the action-like figurine of the Waving Girl statue is based on an actual person. As the story goes, Florence Martus waved at ships approaching and exiting the port, flailing a handkerchief by day and a lantern at night. It's said she never missed a ship from 1887 to 1931.

A short walk south along the eastern edges of the central district, the Pirates' House Restaurant occupies buildings dating back to 1753 and 1734, the latter the oldest still-standing structure in Georgia. The original blue shutters and doors were thought to keep away ghosts. It's where pirates ducked through dank tunnels below the tavern leading to the waterfront, to whisk away drunken patrons who soon found themselves as unwilling crewmembers out at sea. The book *Treasure Island* mentions the Pirate's House and is said to have inspired author Robert Louis Stevenson to write it after visiting.

Turn any corner and you might recognize some of Savannah's squares, churches, and homes as settings in great American movie classics. In addition to the *Forrest Gump* scenes shot here, the 1860's Italianate-style Mercer Williams House with its burnt red façade and surrounding gate is the centerpiece of both the *New York Times* best-seller and subsequent 1997 movie entitled *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Now a museum, it was once the home of antiques dealer and historic preservationist Jim Williams. My tour of the home includes the front den where, in real life, Williams shot his male prostitute lover. Claiming self defense, he was finally acquitted after four trials. The lavishly decorated home includes some of Williams' actual antiques and fine arts collections including an 18th-century Gilbert Stuart portrait.
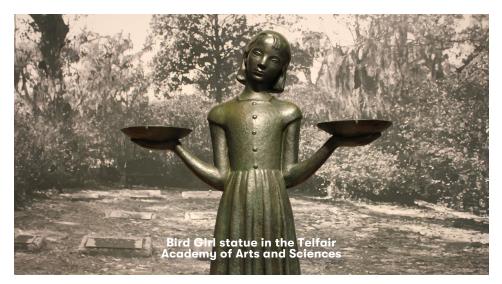
Featured on the book cover and at the beginning of the movie is the Bird Girl, a bronze sculpture of a young woman holding two bowls with arms

The Georgia Queen, a multi-decked paddlewheel riverboat, is beautiful at night

Pirates' House Restaurant is one of the busiest in the city

The Italianate-style Mercer Williams House

Waving Girl statue at night

Bird Girl statue in the Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences

Juliette Gordon Lowe statue at her birthplace, the Wayne-Gordon House

extended to her sides. Originally photographed within the 160-acre municipal Bonaventure Cemetery, the 1936 statue now resides in the Telfair Academy, the South's oldest public art museum with a wide collection within its elegant marble rooms. The sculpture was relocated from the cemetery to protect it from vandalism when the book became extremely popular. A shooting location for the movie, the Bonaventure is where, as part of the story line, the voodoo priestess Minerva performed rituals to justify Williams' self-defense claim for his pending trials.

The Mercer Williams House was also in the 1989 film *Glory*, used to portray the Boston home of Union Col. Robert Shaw played by Matthew Broderick. Other *Glory* shooting locations included the grounds of the Georgia State Railroad Museum, and River Street with its 18th- and 19th-century architecture highlighting many of the warehouse-like buildings.

A replica of the prop bench used in *Forrest Gump* sits within the Savannah History Museum, in what was once the expansive historic Central of Georgia Railway Train Shed. With artifacts, uniforms and an actual locomotive, this museum details Savannah's most dramatic eras including its pivotal roles in the American Revolution, Civil War (when Gen. Sherman spared the city and offered it to President Lincoln as a "Christmas gift"), and the Industrial Revolution. The museum also highlights the founding of the Girl Scouts by Savannah resident Juliette Gordon Lowe.

Several homes have ties to Lowe's life in Savannah. She was born in the 1823 Federal-style Wayne-Gordon House, also known as the Juliette Gordon Low birthplace, now a museum highlighting her life and career. Inside, original and period furnishings decorate seven rooms. The 1849 Andrew Low house belonged to Juliette's father-in-law, and eventually her husband. She lived here when founding the Girl Scouts. The adjacent carriage house became the Girl Scouts First Headquarters and today is a museum.

Homes with noted Civil War history include the 1841 Greek Revival Old Sorrel Weed House where patrons entertained Gen. Robert E. Lee, and also across the street flanking Madison Square, the 1853 Green-Meldrim House in Gothic Revival architecture, used by Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman after sparing Savannah as a Christmas gift to President Lincoln. The 1819 Owens-Thomas House with its restored slave quarters is a museum offering a deeper look into pre-Civil War Savannah.

When the homes, museums and shops close for the day, one of the city's booming industries comes to life with nightly walking and motorized ghost tours. Savannah was named the most haunted city in America by the Institute of Paranormal Psychology in 2003, most likely due to its turbulent history and sudden death from wars and Yellow Fever epidemics, as well as from Indian burial grounds underneath its compact colonial and 19th-century cityscape.

In fact, in what many say is the country's most haunted city, it seems everyone has a ghost story or two—children's sallow faces peering out of windows, the constant clanking of keys unlocking doors and the drone of low-volume piano playing, to name just a few.

At the 17Hundred90 Inn and Restaurant, for example, staff tell me about a ghost who was an indentured servant at the inn when it was a boarding house. She fell in love with a sailor and they planned to run away together. He instead left without her and the distraught young woman committed suicide. Her ghost now tugs guests' bed sheets. And at the Foley House Inn, a B&B facing Chippewa Square, staff report kitchen doors swinging open and closed with no one walking through them, and that a chef there would see a silhouette of a man from the 1800s.

Costumed guides lead nightly ghost tours along quiet and dark neighborhood streets, stopping in front of homes with tales of those who were murdered and died there, and their restless spirits left behind.

"We have the highest rates of reported poltergeist activities in the nation," explains the costumed tour guide with 6th Sense World® Historic Ghost & Cemetery Tours who calls himself "The Spirit Formally Known as Prince." "That means we get the most phone calls for unusual physical activities in the house, for example, furniture moving by itself, things flying through the air, things like that."

Savannah's summer getaway is just a half-hour drive toward the coast. With the feel of a friendly beach community, Tybee Island has three stretches of ocean beaches offering water sports including swimming, kayaking, parasailing and stand-up paddle boarding. Many visitors book dolphin boat tours that usually encounter tame groups of jumping and playful marine life. Others, meanwhile, take on the challenge of climbing the 178 steps up the restored 1730's Tybee Island Light Station and Museum with its dramatic views of the coastal so-called Lowcountry.

Along the South Channel waterway near Tybee Island sits Fort Pulaski National Monument, named after Polish Revolutionary War hero Casimir Pulaski. Pockmarked brick walls surrounded by a moat remain after improved Union rifled cannons bombarded and pierced the fort, forcing the Confederate stronghold to surrender in 1862. Farther north up the Atlantic coastline and just beyond the South Carolina border is Hilton Head Island, one of the nation's foremost beach communities known for its resorts and more than two dozen golf courses.

It's another hour or more drive north to Charleston, so very similar to Savannah with its colonial and Civil War history, antebellum homes, and Southern ambiance. Church spires and multi-tiered steeples tower over the low-rise skyline along streets with swaying palms and mighty live oaks draped in Spanish moss. So-called Rainbow Row is where the most photographed, picture-postcard string of pastel-colored homes sit side by side. It's where Confederate gunners pummeled Fort Sumter with the opening salvos that started the Civil War. And yes, it's also purportedly one of the nation's most haunted cities.

Before leaving Savannah, I walk through shaded squares and quiet neighborhoods one last time. "A lot of the old families that date back to the Colonial period are still here," I recall tour guide Meyerhoff telling me. "There's a blend of different architectural styles, and it's all at eye level and not high towers and buildings. There's a uniqueness and charm."

For more information:
www.VisitSavannah.com

Colonial Park Cemetery, the site of many ghost tours