

DISNEY WISH
is a Reality

Porthole Cruise

10.2022

Divinely Delicious
The Biscuit Queen's cuisine

Ghosts of the Coast
Savannah's phantom fun

Old Florida
A revealing road trip

and Travel

A person wearing a wide-brimmed hat is lying on their back on a white mesh hammock. The hammock is suspended over clear, turquoise water. The person's legs are raised and bent at the knees. The background shows a vast expanse of water under a blue sky with some clouds. The scene is framed by the dark, vertical fronds of palm trees hanging down from the top of the frame.

ISLAND GREEN

THE MALDIVES' sensational and sustainable eco-resorts



Spooky Savannah

In this genteel Southern city, scary hauntings are serious business.

by Richard Varr

SHORE LEAVE



ANNA AND WALLY

“When a young couple came and stayed, Anna was maybe jealous of their love and hovered over the girl crying,” he continues. “The girl woke up and felt a drop of water on her face — the ghost crying with tears falling between her fingertips.” And after staying a night in what Godley calls the inn’s “famously haunted” room 204, you may leave with your very own spiritual awakening. “They’ll tell us stories like they feel a presence in the room tugging at their bed sheets and tickling their feet.”

Across from Savannah’s leafy Chippewa Square, where Tom Hanks’ character Forrest Gump sat at his bus stop and contemplated life through a box of chocolates, staff at the 1896 Foley House Inn will tell you about their own resident ghost who they named Wally, a disembodied boarder who disappeared mysteriously one night. They say his stories may stem from a body found behind a wall during a 1987 renovation.

I magine waking up startled in the darkness to a crying ghost, her tears dribbling on your face.

“She haunts the upstairs waiting for her lover to return,” says Patrick Godley, owner of Savannah’s historic 17Hundred90 Inn & Restaurant. He’s spinning out a lament for Anna, believed to be the ghost of an indentured servant from the early 1800s. Jilted by a sailor who left her behind, the distraught woman jumped to her death from a top-floor window.

"I did see a figure standing there, a see-through black silhouette, an older gentleman about 6-foot-3," admits Hayden Burgin, an inn staff member. He says stories also include hearing dulled piano music played over and over again, kitchen doors swinging open with no one there, and repeated tugging on a housekeeper's shirt in the same room.

CITY OF SPECTERS

Tales of an otherworldly presence are typical in this colonial city founded in 1733, and it seems everyone here has a ghost story or two, from scratching on bedposts, jewelry rearranged, and jingling keys, to pale faces eerily staring out of windows. In

2003, the American Institute of Paranormal Psychology named Savannah the country's most haunted city, likely a result of Revolutionary and Civil War casualties, yellow fever epidemics, and Native American and enslaved African burial grounds packed underneath Savannah's Historic District and beyond. "Pretty much every step you take here, there's a chance you're on a different body," quips Burgin.



Such purported hauntings have supercharged Savannah's booming ghost-tour industry with, according to 6th Sense World Historic Ghost & Cemetery Tours, more than 100 competing companies offering evening trolley and walking tours. Guides lead their groups past historic hotels, old homes and through some of the city's 22 shaded squares as fading twilight and dim lamplight begin to cast dulled shadows on low-hanging Spanish moss.

Stops may include one of the city's most popular restaurants, the 1789 Olde Pink House, where reservations can be hard to snag for Southern fare like blue crab beignets and fried green tomatoes. That's where security cameras captured shadowy movements clearly depicted on a video posted to YouTube. Stories of ghost sightings and unexplained loud noises, running faucets, and flickering lights abound in the Marshall House Hotel, once converted to a hospital for Union soldiers and twice again for yellow-fever victims. Tour guides repeat the rumors of murder and death at 432 Abercorn Street, what many believe is the city's most haunted house.

A LIVING INDUSTRY

Real or imagined, ghosts are simply good for business, with many establishments touting their own spirits on their websites. "Ghost stories and liberal drinking laws are a good way to reinvest in a tourist economy based on history and architecture," notes tour guide Max Arnenz while leading me through the red-brick Mercer Williams House. Now a museum, the 1860s Italianate-style home was the centerpiece of the New York Times bestseller (and 1997 movie adaptation) *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. The old mansion may have its own ghostly encounters, with reports of staff seeing the apparition of former owner Jim Williams, who shot and killed his male-prostitute lover in the front den.



My own ghostly experience shocked me out of bed in 2007 — not in Savannah but in Charleston, S.C., another of the country's most haunted cities. It was my second night at the historic Mills House Hotel whose famous guests included General Robert E. Lee in 1861. What appeared to be a man dressed in yesteryear garb hovered over my bed. To this day, I'm not sure if I was awake or dreaming, but the strong ghostly presence scared me enough to sleep with the lights on for the following two nights.

Back at the 17Hundred90 Inn & Restaurant, Godley shares another likely haunting. This time, it's the ghost of a young boy named Thaddeus who leaves pennies and dimes around the inn. Godley says he found one while auditing, after stepping away for just a moment. "I went back to the desk and when I picked up the papers, there was a shiny penny on top of the desk." And despite his experiences, he still questions whether ghosts are real. "I don't believe in them, but I'm afraid of them," he admits. ●

