

The Savannah Experience

If you have time to visit only one city in the Southeast, make it Savannah. It's that special.

The movie *Forrest Gump* may have put the city squarely on the tourist map, but nothing changed the face of Savannah more than the 1994 publication of John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. The impact has been unprecedented, bringing in millions in revenue as thousands flock to see the sights from the bestseller and the 1997 movie directed by Clint Eastwood. In fact, Savannah tourism has nearly doubled since publication of what's known locally as The Book. Even after all this time, some locals still earn their living off The Book's fallout, hawking postcards, walking tours, T-shirts, and in some cases their own careers, as in the case of the Lady Chablis, the drag queen in The Book who played herself in the film.

"What's special about Savannah?" we asked an old-timer. "Why, here we even have water fountains for dogs," he said.

The free spirit, the passion, and even the decadence of Savannah resemble those of Key West or New Orleans rather than the Bible Belt down-home "Red State" interior of Georgia. In that sense, it's as different from the rest of the state as New York City is from upstate New York.

Savannah—pronounce it with a drawl—conjures up all the clichéd images of the Deep South: live oaks dripping with Spanish moss, stately antebellum mansions, mint juleps sipped on the veranda, magnolia trees, peaceful marshes, horse-drawn carriages, ships sailing up the river (though no longer laden with cotton), and even General Sherman, no one's favorite military hero here.

Today, the economy and much of the city's day-to-day life still revolve around port activity. For the visitor, however, the big draw is Old Savannah, a beautifully restored and maintained historic area. For this we can thank seven Savannah women who, after watching mansion after mansion demolished in the name of progress, managed in 1954 to raise funds to buy the dilapidated Isaiah Davenport

House—hours before it was slated for demolition. The women banded together as the Historic Savannah Foundation, and then went to work buying up architecturally valuable buildings and reselling them to private owners who promised to restore them. As a result, more than 800 of Old Savannah's 1,100 historic buildings have been restored and painted in their original colors—pinks and reds and blues and greens. This “living museum” is now the largest urban National Historic Landmark District in the country—some 2½ square miles, including 21 1-acre squares that survive from Gen. James Oglethorpe's dream of a gracious city.

1 Frommer's Favorite Savannah Experiences

- **Experiencing a 19th-Century Ambience** Like Charleston, Savannah is one of the top two cities in the South where you can experience what elegant life was like in the 19th century by checking into a B&B in a restored historic building. If you're a man sitting in one of these Victorian parlors, surrounded by wall paintings of bygone belles, you'll feel a little bit like Rhett Butler come to call on Scarlett. Typical of these is the Eliza Thompson House, built around 1847 in Savannah's antebellum heyday.
- **Wandering the Isle of Hope** Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto came here 4 centuries ago looking for gold. The island later became a place of refuge for Royalists escaping the guillotine of the French Revolution. Today, the Isle of Hope, 10 miles south of Savannah, is an evocative and nostalgic reminder of Savannah's yesteryears. You can go for a stroll in a setting of oaks lining the bluff, plenty of Spanish moss, and Georgia pine, dogwood, magnolia, azalea, and ferns. See chapter 11.
- **Having a Picnic Among Plantation Ruins** There is no more evocative site in the Savannah area for a picnic than Wormsloe State Historic Site at 7601 Skidaway Rd., 10 miles southeast of town. A picnic here can be combined with an exploration of the Isle of Hope. Now ruins, these grounds were once part of a 900-acre estate that belonged to Noble Jones, an 18th-century Colonial who came to Savannah with James Oglethorpe in 1733. Nature trails are cut through the property, and there are picnic tables. The property is reached along a beautiful oak-lined drive that makes you think you're on the road to Tara. See chapter 11.

Impressions

Savannah is America's Mona Lisa. Gaze your fill, look all you will. (For once it's quite polite to stare.) You may never fathom the secret of her smile, but like those who love and live with her, you will know the endless rich rewards of trying.

—Writer Anita Raskin

- **Pursuing Grits, Game & Gumbo** In the state of Georgia, only the much larger city of Atlanta equals Savannah in the number of fine restaurants. Since the mid-18th century, Savannah and the Low Country have been known for their abundance and variety of food, and lavish eating and drinking have long been loyal customs. The surrounding area was (and is) rich in game and fish, including marsh hen, quail, crab, and even deer. To these hunters' trophies were added the bounty of local gardens, including old favorites—collard greens, beets, turnips, peas, okra, and corn on the cob. The corn was ground into grits as well, and the okra was used to thicken gumbos, for which every Savannahian seems to have a favorite recipe.
- **Finding Your Own *Forrest Gump* Bench** Arm yourself with a box of chocolates and set out to find your own historic Savannah square like Tom Hanks did in the film *Forrest Gump*, where he began to spin out his adventures. Find the square of your choice, perhaps Chippewa Square (where Forrest actually sat), sit down, enjoy those chocolates, and watch the world go by. Savannah revolves around its historic squares, and it's said that if you sit on a bench long enough, everybody in Savannah will eventually pass by.
- **Enjoying a Martini in Bonaventure Cemetery** In *The Book*, Mary Harty invited John Berendt, the author of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, for martinis in this moss-draped cemetery. It has since become a tradition to partake of this quaint custom. On the former grounds of an oak-shaded plantation, you can enjoy your libation in the midst of the long departed. Of course, the proper way to drink a martini, as in *The Book*, is in a silver goblet. Your seat? None other than the bench-gravestone of poet Conrad Aiken. See chapter 7.
- **Taking a Pub Crawl Along the Riverfront** Savannah has the best, friendliest, and most atmospheric pubs in Georgia,

none more alluring than those along its historic waterfront. On St. Patrick's Day, people drive down from South Carolina or up from Florida to go pubbing. But on any night you can stroll along the cobblestones searching for your favorite hang-out. Often you get staged entertainment. If not, count on the locals to supply amusement. It's all in good fun, people having a hot time in an atmospheric setting of old warehouses—one of the South's best recycling programs. See chapter 10.

- **Hitting the *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* Trail**

It was *The Book*, by John Berendt, that put Savannah on the tourist charts, and it's fun to see the actual places where the adventures in *The Book* unfolded. You can explore such sites as the Mercer House, where the shooting of the blond hustler, Danny Hansford, took place, or Bonaventure Cemetery, where Berendt sipped martinis in silver goblets with Miss Harty. In the evening, head for Club One (see below), a popular nightspot that sometimes features the entertainments of the Lady Chablis, one of Berendt's main characters. See chapters 7 and 10.

- **Spending a Day at the Beach on Tybee Island**

East of the city, Tybee Island is a place to have fun. Sun worshipers, joggers, surf-casters, kite-flyers, swimmers, and mere sightseers come to these golden sands to escape the oppressive heat of a Savannah summer. Join the pelicans, gulls, and shorebirds in the dunes for beach dynamics. You'll be following in the footsteps of Blackbeard, who often took refuge here. It is believed that many of the pirate's treasures are still buried at Tybee. To cap off a perfect day, head for Fort Screven, a Civil War fort. Then climb to the top of the lighthouse for a panoramic view of coastal Georgia. See chapter 11.

- **Camping It Up at Club One**

From Clint Eastwood to Demi Moore, from Meg Ryan to Bruce Willis, every visiting movie star or celebrity heads to this rollicking joint. 'Tis true that some Savannahians refer to it as a gay club, and there are those who would never darken its door. But the club attracts a wide spectrum of humanity because it's known for having the best entertainment in Savannah. Sometimes even the fabled Lady Chablis, empress of Savannah, appears here. This drag queen gained prominence in John Berendt's book, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, and played herself in the film (Diana Ross wanted to). The dancing here is the hottest in Savannah. See chapter 10.

2 Best Hotel Bets

- **Best Boutique Hotel** Built in 1888, **The Mansion on Forsyth Park** (☎ 888/711-5114 or 912/238-5158), is the most spectacular in Savannah. This hotel has both luxury and taste and is also the site of one of Savannah's leading restaurants. See p. 40.
- **Best River Street Rejuvenation** The cotton warehouses along the Savannah River have been turned into hotels, shops, and restaurants, none restored better than the **River Street Inn** (☎ 800/253-4229 or 912/234-6400; www.riverstreetinn.com). A flourishing storage warehouse for cotton until the boll weevil came, it dates from 1817, when it was constructed of ballast stones brought over from England. Today, it is the epitome of comfort and charm with memorable views of the Savannah River. See p. 43.
- **Best B&B in the Historic District** Savannah's classic inn of charm and grace, **Ballastone Inn** (☎ 800/822-4553 or 912/236-1484; www.ballastone.com), an 1838 building, has been given the glamour treatment. You're housed in a 19th-century-style interior, but with far greater comforts than the antebellum wealthy of Savannah used to experience. Polished hardwoods, elaborate draperies, and well-polished antiques set the stage for a grand B&B experience. See p. 44.
- **Best Deals on Suites** The aptly named **Clubhouse Inn & Suites** (☎ 800/258-2466 or 912/352-2828; www.clubhouseinn.com) offers roomy and attractively furnished suites that begin at \$89, each ideal for a family. With its upgraded decor and furnishings, you get first-class comfort. Many of the suites open onto private balconies. Rates include a generous buffet breakfast. See p. 54.
- **Best Rescue of a Decaying Building** Dating from 1873, the **Hamilton-Turner Inn** (☎ 888/448-8849 or 912/233-1833; www.hamilton-turnerinn.com) has been restored after falling into decay. Today, the four-story French Empire house is one of the most upscale B&Bs in Savannah. The building earned notoriety in John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, but those high-rolling party days are over. It's now a serene oasis. See p. 44.
- **Best & Most Opulent B&B** Built in 1892, the **Kehoe House** (☎ 912/232-1020; www.kehoehouse.com) is no longer a funeral parlor but an inn of such grace that it ranks

among the finest in Georgia. Its fabrics, furniture, and comfort make it an adult retreat of flawless taste. Tom Hanks stayed here during the filming of *Forrest Gump*. See p. 45.

- **Best for Grand Hotel Style Living** Built in 1890 as the city's grandest hotel, today's **Hilton Savannah DeSoto** (☎ 800/426-8483 or 912/232-9000; www.desotohilton.com) is a monument to the grand life. Completely renovated, it is once again an address of lavish comfort with a certain charm, especially for such a commercial hotel. The public rooms, such as the 18th-century drawing room, reflect a Colonial theme. See p. 48.
- **Best Moderately Priced Hotel** The most appealing of the city's middle-bracket but large-scale hotels, the **Hampton Inn Historic District** (☎ 800/426-7866 or 912/721-1600; www.hampton-inn.com) opened in 1997, rising seven redbrick stories. Although modern, it pays homage to Savannah's past, including a big-windowed lobby designed to evoke an 18th-century city salon. See p. 50.
- **Best Value** Adjacent to Chatham Square, **Bed & Breakfast Inn** (☎ 888/238-0518 or 912/238-0518; www.savannahbnb.com) lies in one of the oldest and most historic parts of Savannah. Its guest rooms are exceedingly comfortable and some of the most affordable for those wishing to stay in the historic core. Furnishings are a combination of antiques and tasteful reproductions. See p. 52.

3 Best Restaurant Bets

- **Best Restaurant** In the Victorian District, **Elizabeth on 37th** (☎ 912/236-5547), with its modern Southern cuisine, is not only the most glamorous and upscale restaurant in Savannah, but it also serves the most refined cuisine. In a palatial neoclassical villa from the turn of the 20th century, you can carve some indelible culinary memories here, the menu reinforced by an impressive wine list. See p. 71.
- **Best Southern Cuisine** **The Lady & Sons** (☎ 912/233-2600) is the domain of Paula Deen, who, along with her sons and \$200, launched this temple of gastronomy. She's Savannah's most well-known cookbook writer, sharing the secrets of her kitchen. We always drop in for her chicken potpie topped with puff pastry. It doesn't get much better than this. See p. 59.

- **Best International Cuisine** In the Mansion on Forsyth Park, **700 Drayton** (☎ 912/238-5158) is one of the culinary showcases of Savannah. Enticing every visiting celebrity to Savannah, it dazzles with a seductive, market-fresh cuisine. See p. 62.
- **Best Low Country Cuisine** Stylish and casual, **Sapphire Grill** (☎ 912/443-9962) is an upscale bistro. The “coastal cuisine” of Christopher Nason wins raves among food critics. It’s based on seafood harvested from nearby waters. Wait until you sample the James Island littleneck clams tossed in foie gras butter. The able service and impressive wine list contribute to the allure. See p. 61.
- **Best for Seafood** Many restaurants in Savannah serve good seafood, or else they’re soon out of business. But **The Olde Pink House Restaurant** (☎ 912/232-4286) seems to put more flavor into its offerings than its competitors do. You don’t get just fried fish here, but the likes of black grouper stuffed with blue crab and drenched in a Vidalia onion sauce, or a crispy scored flounder with a tangy apricot sauce. That the setting is both elegant and romantic makes the Pink House even more appealing. See p. 62.
- **Best for Prime Rib** Chain restaurants rarely make Frommer’s “best of” lists. There is one exception in Savannah: the **Chart House** (☎ 912/234-6686). Beef-eaters are in heaven here. The prime rib is slow-roasted and served au jus, and the specially supplied beef is corn fed, aged, and hand-cut. The chefs prepare a mean lobster as well. See p. 56.
- **Best Cajun/Creole Cuisine** Overlooking the Savannah River, **Huey’s** (☎ 912/234-7385) has a kitchen that would hold its own in New Orleans. If you like all those good things like jambalaya, andouille sausage, crayfish étouffée, and oyster po’boys, welcome home. Even homesick Louisiana visitors show up here “for a feasting.” See p. 58.
- **Best for Barbecue** The good people of Savannah don’t survive on oyster po’boys or catfish suppers all week. At least once a week they like barbecue. For that tasty treat, many of them show up at **Wall’s** (☎ 912/232-9754). This is an affordable, casual, family-style restaurant, where the barbecue is something to write home about. The sauce and the slow cooking are part of the secret—that and the hickory wood used. Of course, no Southern chef reveals all his secrets for barbecue! See p. 69.

- **Best for Breakfast** Everybody, or so it seems, shows up at **Clary's Café** (☎ 912/233-0402). A Savannah tradition since 1903, the cafe today has an aura of the 1950s. You expect James Dean to show up on a motorcycle wearing blue jeans and a leather jacket. The cafe was featured in the film *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Among the dozens of breakfast offerings, we go for the chef's special: Hoppel Poppel (scrambled eggs with chunks of kosher salami, potatoes, onions, and green peppers). See p. 67.
- **Best Down-Home Favorite** For "belly-busting food," **Mrs. Wilkes' Dining Room** (☎ 912/232-5997) is a Savannah tradition. Visitors and locals have been standing in line here since the 1940s for real down-home Southern fare. Mrs. Wilkes' time-tested recipes get a workout every day, feeding generations of the local citizenry on barbecued chicken, red rice and sausage, corn on the cob, squash and yams, and any dish with okra. And what would a meal be without Mrs. Wilkes' corn bread and collards? See p. 68.
- **Best Fusion Cuisine** The most eclectic bistro in town, **Bistro Savannah** (☎ 912/233-6266) serves a mixture of Southern and Fusion cuisine, inspired by a culinary geography that ranges from the bayou country of Louisiana to Thailand. Not only do they make the best seafood bouillabaisse in town, they serve such temptations as crisp pecan chicken with a blackberry bourbon sauce. See p. 58.