

The sweet Southern world of coastal Carolina

Slow and easy does it when taking in Savannah, Charleston and the Golden Isles

By Rebecca Steimle

Sultry Savannah in the summertime drips with heat, history, Spanish moss and southern charm.

Genteel Charleston, its coastal neighbor to the north, fans itself and beckons the would-be visitor.

Come see us, they smile. Relax. Stay a spell.

Together, they elicit an irresistible invitation. These two cities – more like big small towns – are not only stunningly beautiful, they're inviting, walkable, with that slow pace and Southern charm that makes visitors somehow feel they've come home.

Especially to those who've succumbed in the past and can easily bring to mind their old homes and mansions, their luscious gardens, their intoxicating, sensual beauty, these two stunning cities have an irresistible allure.

Pair them with some bucolic sojourns off the Carolina coast – a little oceanside “R and R” – as I'm planning to do, and you've got the perfect trip.

I know it's perfect because I've visited before. Several years ago, on several occasions, we got a house on the ocean, rented by the week, three kids in tow. There was lots of playing in the surf, sandcastles and sunburns.

This time, I'm going back with my grown daughter to do more of what we want to do – more culture, more natural beauty, and more of the absolutely *endless* gardens there that are tucked everywhere you go in these cities.

The Golden Isles: Life on “slow”

On the advice of a friend, we're going to start this trip on the water – specifically, at the “Golden Isles” – then move inland. We want to check out a couple of the Carolina Coast's 13 barrier islands.

I love a beautiful beach – the perfect Zen relaxation experience that insures you forget time and space and wherever it was you came from. When I learn from my coastal Carolina connection Fred Griffith, owner of tour company Coastal Georgia Experience, that we might have his favorite beach all to ourselves — I'm excited for the non-excitement to come.

An eastern Georgia native and 10-year resident of St. Simons Island, Fred says the untouched nature of much of the barrier islands is what he appreciates most about the area.

Most of the islands are reachable only by boat or aircraft – leaving them primarily the jurisdiction of the surrounding sea life and native bird populations.

Three of the islands – Jekyll, Tybee and St. Simons – are connected to the mainland by bridges, so those are the islands people visit.

Tybee, where most beach-seeking tourists go – can see as many as 30,000 people on the beaches in a day. Not for us.

What will be our main destination – St. Simons Island – is roughly the size of Manhattan, but that’s where the similarities end.

Here, nothing can be taller than the lighthouse – four stories, tops. In addition, 40 percent of the island is intentionally undeveloped. Similarly, Jekyll Island, which is owned by the state of Georgia, is a designated wildlife refuge, so development is limited to just 33 percent of the island. Fred tells me the long stretch of beach on the south end of St. Simons is rarely crowded.

“It’s one of those few affordable places on our planet that you can be among native wildlife and away from civilization,” says Fred. “It’s so unoccupied that at times you feel like you’re the only person on earth who knows about it.”

Yet the island visitor in search of a little physical activity can still find kayaking, sailing, biking, horseback riding on the beach, dolphin spotting and turtle watching.

Gullah preserve old ways

Before our last visit some years back, my anthropologist mother told me about the Gullah, descendants of slaves “imported” here from the western coast of Africa hundreds of years ago. They live on the Sea Islands and have retained much of their African culture over centuries.

The Gullah live in small farming and fishing communities. Specifically because of their relative geographical isolation and resulting strong community life, they’ve been able to preserve much of their African culture.

I’ve since read about their musical African dialect, their folk tales, and their African-style handicrafts, including hand-woven sweet grass baskets, used for centuries for both agricultural and household purposes.

To see more of Gullah life today, Fred suggests taking a guided tour with Seretha Tuttle of Gullah n Geechie Mahn Tours.

We’ll follow up our tour with by sampling some Gullah cuisine. Their low-country one-pot dishes, with names like “Hoppin’ John” and “perloo,” feature local ingredients like okra, peanuts, field peas, shrimp, crab, oysters and fish.

Best place to get some good Gullah grub before heading to Savannah, I ask Fred? Well – naturally – where else but a little café called “Gullah Grub” on St. Helena Island.

The grace and ghosts of Savannah

On our last trip to Savannah, aptly nicknamed the “Garden City,” we wrestled with a folding map. (The map won.) This time, we have our choice of apps for use with our iPhones. Online reviews are mixed, so we’re going with tried-and-true Apple.

Even with iPhone in hand, when you’re in the heart of these towns it doesn’t take much to step back in time 150 years or so. Lovingly preserved Georgian and Federalist architecture lets the visitor imagine Savannah’s earliest residents guiding horse-drawn carriages down cobblestone streets, around manicured parks and squares, stopping to step off at one of Savannah’s many ornate antebellum homes.

Per the original design by founder General James Ogelthorpe in 1733, Savannah’s historic district is comprised of a plethora of squares and parks. Today, the centerpiece 30-acre Forsyth Park invites the visitor to enjoy the sheer pleasure of relaxation and watching the world go by.

Take a bench, gaze upon the iconic Forsyth Park Fountain – and take it in. The grandest trees I’ve ever seen fill these parks, as they do much of this region – “southern live oaks” growing as high as 80 feet tall with a 100-foot branch span.

Such a reverie may make you wonder: Why - shouldn’t a visit to a Southern town so steeped in history include a visit to a graveyard or two?

Why, yes, it should. Colonial Park is Savannah’s oldest cemetery, dating back to the early 1800s, and Laurel Grove South Cemetery is the final resting place of many slaves. But Savannah’s most famous burial ground is Bonaventure Cemetery. You remember it from the “Bird Girl” statue on the cover of John Behrendt’s novel *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Though she’s been moved to Savannah’s Telfair Museum, equally lovely are “Gracie” and the “Lawton Grave,” two of the cemetery’s most evocative gravestones.

Those interested in specter-seeking – aka “ghost tours” – will find numerous offerings. More than a dozen outfits offer walking, carriage or trolley ghost tours. The City of Savannah restricts ghost tours from the cemeteries, but that doesn’t keep them from stopping outside their boundaries to tell a tale or two.

There’s the legend of Mary the Wanderer, who, having walked in to the ocean despondent at the loss of her true love – a Union soldier, is said to roam in search of him to this day. Some locals tell of butlers who knock on doors at the Jekyll Club Hotel, presumably with invisible room service.

Eugenia Price, author of numerous historical novels set in the Savannah area, found such spirit tales fascinating and visited the area many times, taking notes on the graveyards and the people buried there.

Fred says visitors wanting to steep themselves in antebellum life before they arrive can read *Savannah* or *Beauty from the Ashes*, two of Price's most evocative novels.

"A lot of her research into the people and the history of the area is what guides here use today to give historical background," Fred Griffith told me. "She even chose a Savannah-area cemetery as her own final resting place."

That's the laid-back lure of Savannah. One visit and you want to stay forever.

Charming Charleston

But we will move on. Because Charleston does beckon.

Indeed, when your ultimate destination has been Named "America's Most Friendly City" by Travel + Leisure as well as Conde Nast Traveler, the "most polite and hospitable city in America" by Southern Living magazine, and "World's Best City" by Travel + Leisure, you know you are indeed being summoned.

In a city known worldwide for its charm, romance, history, elegance and beauty, where does the visitor begin?

The website locountry.com is brimming with helpful information about Charleston's homes, architecture and garden tours: "Homes throughout downtown residential neighborhoods seems to spill over with blooms and petals - on front lawns, in window boxes, behind wrought iron gates, along driveway borders and around courtyards and fountains.

"The price for lingering to enjoy them is no more than a casual stroll."

One might commence one's stroll near Rainbow Row, a series of 13 colorful row houses on East Bay Street. Enjoy its cobblestone streets and very own French quarter made all the more inviting by the tropical gardens that are squeezed into every possible space between the elegant close-built mansions.

Beyond the urban beauty, no visit to the Charleston area would be complete without taking in a plantation or two. We visited Middleton Place last time, which really epitomizes the grace and grandeur of the southern plantation of the 18th and 19th centuries.

This time we'll see Magnolia Gardens, Charleston's most visited plantation, in operation before the Revolutionary War through the time of the Civil War. Billed as America's last large-scale romantic-style garden, it features not the formal, controlled gardens of Middleton Place but instead "a tranquil landscape like Eden where humanity and nature are in harmony."

I'll take Elise back to some other spots we've enjoyed – casual, traditional Hyman's for great seafood, and this time the new Gaulart & Malicet, better known as Fast & French, which is said to transport patrons to a quaint town in Europe for less than \$10 a plate.

There, I imagine, we'll sit and savor and watch the sweet Southern world go by.

And when our trip is itself history, we'll remember this Eden, this "harmony of humanity and nature," most of all.