

Final Four Weekend In Atlanta

Sarah Gleim, *Contributor*

So the Final Four is finally set—Louisville will play Wichita State and Michigan will take on Syracuse for the chance to vie for the championship on Monday, April 8 in Atlanta. And this weekend is the fourth time Atlanta has hosted the NCAA Final Four, and more than 100,000 basketball fans are expected to converge on the city to watch the men’s NCAA Division I champion crowned. But there’s way more going on in the ATL during Final Four weekend than just basketball. Our Startle.com editors scouted out the scene and pulled together an itinerary packed full of concerts, parties, fan fests and, of course, where to watch the best in college hoops, even if you don’t have a ticket to the big games.

While you’re in Atlanta, check out these hot spots that serve up some of the South’s best fried chicken.



Final Four, photo courtesy NCAA

What to Know

The 2013 Final Four weekend in Atlanta runs April 5-8, and will be the fourth time the Southern city hosts the NCAA men’s basketball tournament. This year marks the 75th anniversary of March Madness, and the weekend is expected to be one of the largest in history. Tickets for Saturday’s Final Four games and Monday’s Championship game (all played at the Georgia Dome) are still available from ticket brokers, but be prepared to dish out some cold hard cash if you want decent seats—we found just a few lower level tickets selling for close to \$600 each.

But if you don't have tickets, you can still catch plenty of basketball action because Atlanta is also hosting the Division II and III basketball championships. It's the first time in tournament history that a city is hosting all three championships on the same weekend, and the best part is tickets are free for the April 7 Division II and III games at Philips Arena. If your heart is set on catching the Division I teams on the court and you don't have tickets, head out to Final Four Friday at the Georgia Dome. Admission is free and you can watch the top-tier teams practice before the big games; each team gets one hour of court time from noon to 4 p.m., and after practice wraps up, you can cheer on the Reese's College All-Stars (tipoff is at 5:07 p.m., sharp).



Bracket Town, photo courtesy NCAA

Where to Party

Diehard hoops fans should definitely hit up Bracket Town at the Georgia World Congress Center. The four-day fan fest is open to the public and includes more than 300,000 square feet of family-friendly activities. Here you can meet legendary coaches and former college stars at autograph sessions, kids can participate in daily youth clinics and play other sports such as lacrosse and hockey. There's also the "Battle of the Bands" contest with bands and cheerleaders from the participating NCAA teams, and a Powerade 3v3 basketball tournament that's open to fans of all abilities and ages. *April 5-8; Georgia World Congress Center; \$10 for adults, \$6 for children.*

Even if you're not a fan of basketball, you can still get into the spirit at the three-day Big Dance Concert Series at Centennial Olympic Park. The concerts are all free and the weekend lineup is stellar—Zac Brown Band and My Morning Jacket headline the AT&T Block Party on Friday; MUSE, Flo Rida and Ludacris are just a few of the big acts playing at the Coca-Cola Zero Countdown party Saturday; and Sunday's Capital One JamFest includes performances by Dave Matthews Band, Sting and Grace Potter & the Nocturnals. *April 5-7; Centennial Olympic Park; free.*



The Living Room at W Atlanta – Midtown, photo courtesy the Gerber Group

If you need a place to watch the semi-final games on Saturday, head to the Final Four party at W Atlanta – Midtown. The Living Room Bar & Patio will be showing the game on multiple flat-screen TVs, and will feature special game day cocktails and food menus. Once the game ends, you can keep your party going upstairs at Whiskey Park's after party. Top DJs will be spinning and there could be a few surprise basketball guests, as well. *April 6; 12 p.m.-3 a.m.; W Atlanta – Midtown; \$20.*

Several of Atlanta's best watering holes also are having big viewing bashes. The Family Dog in the Morningside neighborhood will show both of Saturday's Final Four games and Monday's championship on its 122-inch HD projection screen, as well as four 55-inch HDTVs. The bar will also focus on serving craft beers from the regions of the Final Four teams. Diesel Filling Station in Virginia Highland will give fans the opportunity to actually test their b-ball skills in a head-to-head shootout competition. The 16 finalists will be chosen by raffle (you get a ticket every time you order a Budweiser or Bud Light) on April 6.



BLT Steak, photo courtesy BLT Steak

Where to Eat

Hold onto your Final Four ticket stubs and head to BLT Steak Atlanta and you'll save 10 percent off food purchases and 20 percent off your bar tab. The menu here includes some of the city's best steaks, a raw bar and creative cocktails—we love the ATL Diablo, a mix of Herradura Silver Tequila, crème de cassis, fresh lime juice and ginger beer.

The Ritz-Carlton, Atlanta is featuring a special game-day menu at its lobby bar, Lumen. The menu features dishes that reflect the best ingredients of the South, plus craft beers from Georgia's own Sweetwater and Terrapin breweries. Four Seasons Hotel Atlanta's Forbes Travel Guide Four-Star Park 75 is also offering a \$6 "slam dunk" special of crab hushpuppies with Old Bay remoulade all weekend.

If you're ready to take part in your own weekend competition, RA Sushi Bar Restaurant in Midtown is holding its Sushi Showdown eating contest in honor of the Final Four. The face-off is open to anyone and organized like a bracket; in each round, participants will compete to eat the most Tootsy Maki rolls in three minutes. The top three competitors from each heat advance to the Championship Sushi Showdown, where they'll have to eat as many Tootsy Makis as possible in five minutes. The grand prize eater will win 12 \$50 RA Sushi gift certificates. *April 7; 3-6 p.m.; RA Sushi Bar Restaurant.*



The St. Regis Atlanta, photo courtesy Starwood Hotels and Resorts

Where to Stay

The Forbes Travel Guide Four-Star St. Regis Atlanta is in the prestigious Buckhead neighborhood and just a quick drive from downtown and all the games. The traditional, Southern hotel is offering special packages during the Final Four weekend, including room rates starting at \$699 per night. After the games, you can unwind with a martini at the

popular St. Regis Bar or with a glass of cab at The Wine Room, which offers nearly 60 vinos by the glass.

If your goal is to stay in the heart of the tournament action, book a room at Forbes Travel Guide Recommended Twelve Centennial Park. It's located a short walk from the Big Dance Concerts in Centennial Park, and a quick drive to the Georgia Dome, Georgia World Congress Center and Philips Arena. Stay a minimum of three nights during Final Four weekend and you'll be entered to win a return trip to Atlanta, which includes two nights in a one-bedroom suite, gourmet welcome basket, complimentary valet parking and up to four tickets to the Georgia Aquarium, World of Coca-Cola, the High Museum of Art, CNN Tours, an Atlanta Braves game, the Atlanta Botanical Garden or Zoo Atlanta.



Mandarin Oriental, Atlanta, photo courtesy Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group

Forbes Travel Guide Four-StarMandarin Oriental, Atlanta also is located in Buckhead and is offering two specials geared toward tournament goers—the Bed and Breakfast package or Suite Temptations, which includes credits you can use on a treatment at the contemporary Spa at Mandarin Oriental, Atlanta. You can melt your tension away après-game with an 80-minute “Peaches and Cream Journey” or aroma stone body massage.

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