

48 Hours in Atlanta

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Friends share a toast at Empire State South restaurant. Photograph by Rich Addicks

Atlanta thrives on paradox. An ever expanding vista of skyscrapers peeks above the canopy of trees that line its streets. The city strives to be a cutthroat business leader and is home to 15 Fortune 500 companies, but a spirit of southern hospitality still prevails (though these days you may as quickly be offered a Coke as a glass of sweet tea). "People tend to forget that Atlanta is young compared to other American cities," says author and illustrator Tray Butler, a Georgia native. "New York was founded 200 years earlier. Even Sunbelt superstars like Charlotte or Houston are technically our older siblings. What we have is a youthful exuberance, a kind of rebellious spirit, and yes, some growing pains. Atlanta is like a teenager: It can't stop changing." Conventioneers who visit only downtown (which empties of locals at night) miss the charm and diversity of the city's many singular neighborhoods.

DAY ONE

MORNING A Sense of History

The Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site spreads across 42 acres of downtown's Sweet Auburn district, long a hub of African-American businesses. At the King Center (where the civil rights leader and his wife, Coretta Scott King, are enshrined), procure tickets for daily tours of MLK's birth home. Details glimpsed in the two-story Victorian house wonderfully humanize the icon: It turns out he was a shrewd player of Monopoly, for example. Nearby Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King was co-pastor with his father, reopened in 2011 after four years and \$8 million to restore the Gothic Revival building exactly as it was in the 1960s, including walls painted a warm peach and the original pulpit microphones that broadcast King's sermons.

Take a taxi about one mile south on Boulevard, the area's main thoroughfare, to the gently hilly Oakland Cemetery, established in 1850. Stroll under magnolias and oaks among monuments, obelisks, and mausoleums of some of the city's early wealthy families, as well as more than 3,900 graves marked "CSA," for Confederate States Army. Purchase the \$4 map from the gift shop to find the humble headstone for *Gone With the Wind* author Margaret Mitchell. Refuel across the street, sipping on the city's most deftly made espresso at Octane Coffee. It shares space with Little Tart Bakery, a neighborhood favorite for quiche and pastries made using local, seasonal fruit.

AFTERNOON Hot Shops

Once a badland of abandoned stockyards and mills, the city's Westside neighborhood recently transformed into a wonderland of refurbished warehouses full of bespoke shops. Urbane Billy Reid, where staffers will likely offer you a bourbon, in the Westside Provisions District complex and preppy Sid Mashburn in Westside Urban Market next door (a walking bridge joins the two redbrick complexes) offer different takes on dressing the southern gentleman in style. Mashburn's wife also runs a store, Ann Mashburn, featuring her in-house designs including shirtdresses and pencil and wrap skirts. Across the parking lot, design guru Jonathan Adler mixes whimsy with function in his eclectic shop, featuring items such as voluptuous glass lamps, pillows with psychedelic prints, and vases imprinted with a single, puckered mouth.

EVENING Dixie Dining

"Southern food is in vogue across the country, and in Atlanta, where we might have scoffed at our regional cooking in the past, we've embraced it as well," says Steven Satterfield, a Georgia native who is chef and co-owner of farmhouse-chic Miller Union in the Westside. Satterfield honors his roots without resorting to southern-fried clichés: Start with small plates meant for sharing, like the local farm egg baked in celery cream and served with wedges of grilled bread, and move on to duck confit nestled against cider-braised cabbage and whiskeyed apples.

Eating regionally means embracing the seasons, and no local chef highlights the region's larder better than Billy Allin, chef/owner of cozy Cakes & Ale in Decatur, the progressive town that is to Atlanta what Berkeley is to San Francisco. Allin weaves Italian and Mediterranean recipes among southern flavors on his changing menu. Look for dishes like pillowy gnocchi with lamb ragù and green tomatoes along with North Carolina trout roasted in the wood-burning oven and served with a tangy bacon and green onion mayonnaise sauce.

DAY TWO

MORNING Water World

Georgia Aquarium, across the street from downtown's 21-acre Centennial Olympic Park, measures more than 600,000 square feet and holds 10 million gallons of fresh and salt water, making it one of the world's largest aquatic zoos. Its many spectacles are worth the

plunge, but start early to beat the crowds: Order tickets online to avoid lines and secure seats for *Dolphin Tales*, a show filled with special effects that manage not to detract from the leaping headliners. The whole visit takes at least three hours. Be sure to check out the rare, wide-mouthed whale sharks and the white, cuddly-looking beluga whales.

AFTERNOON Midtown Museums

In Midtown, the city's cultural hub, stop for a lunchtime oyster po'boy or a fried chicken salad at Empire State South, the restaurant owned by Top Chef judge Hugh Acheson.

The white, curving, unapologetically modernist building of the High Museum of Art, by Pritzker Prize-winning architects Richard Meier and Renzo Piano, stands out majestically along a verdant stretch of busy Peachtree Street. A touring exhibition showcasing the works of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo and her husband, Diego Rivera, is a current draw (on display through May 12). Be sure, though, to spend time with the permanent southern folk art exhibit on the top floor, full of quirky, poignant caricatures with names like "Take My Yoke Upon You and Learn of Me Saith Jesus." Museum of Design Atlanta, with its modern concrete-and-glass veneer, opened across from the High in early 2011. It has no permanent collection, so shows are in a constant, fascinating flux: Past exhibits included skateboard art, Italian motorcycles, and portions of the AIDS Memorial Quilt.

EVENING Laugh Out Loud

At the edge of Inman Park, a great walking neighborhood and Atlanta's first residential "suburb," planned in the 1800s, chef Robert Phalen uses imagination at his restaurant One Eared Stag. Adventurous carnivores will sigh over beef belly with pickled eggplant and roasted bone marrow with onion marmalade; tamer palates will love the chicken schnitzel and, for dessert, chocolate pot de crème. A few blocks away, Dad's Garage, home to the city's premier improv troupe, inspires belly laughs with outrageous, unscripted performers acting along loose themes like the Civil War or a genre of music (rock, hip-hop) chosen by the audience.