

The Washington Post

Atlanta, by the guidebook

By Andrea Sachs, May 16, 2013



My visit to Atlanta started on Page 292.

Immediately after landing, I wandered over to Map 14, Grant Park/Summerhill, to experience the “oddest Atlanta tourist attraction.” I had placed my utmost faith in this guidebook, and it honored that trust. At least when it came to Page 292. (Page 321, you are not off the hook. I will deal with you later.)

While travel appsters hover over their gadgets, scrolling and squinting at a tiny screen, I hoisted my low-tech guidebooks all over Atlanta. I ruffled through their pages on sidewalks, in my rental car and even inside a bathroom at a bar, searching for whatever I needed next: food, culture, a cab, coffee, the police. And though the weight of the books crocheted a knot in my back, at least I didn’t walk into a parking meter.

To cover the entire spectrum of Atlanta, I toted around a small library of guidebooks: “Moon Handbooks” (for standards and staples), “Not for Tourists Guide to Atlanta” (as comprehensive as a phone book) and “Wallpaper City Guide” (sybaritic and stylish).

Each book spoke its own patois, yet sometimes they came together in a cohesive voice — a valuable consensus for an indecisive traveler. Case in point: the Georgian Terrace Hotel, the august early 20th-century property that appeared in all three softbacks, including the very discerning “Wallpaper.” Leave the equivocating to Yelpers and Trip Advisors.

And yet sometimes they didn’t endorse equally — a conundrum for a waffling traveler. The Cyclorama, considered the largest oil painting in the world, was too anti-aesthetic for

"Wallpaper," which avoids the campy and the common. "Moon" provided a thorough write-up, but its description lacked flash. "NFT," however, went straight for the superlatives. I go weak for "-ests."

Neither book truly captured the Cyclorama's essence, but maybe they were intentionally holding back to protect the secret sauce. I stumbled into the museum unprepared, except for knowing the phone number, address, Web site, hours and admission fee. To view one of three intact Cycloramas in the country (about 20 worldwide), I had to wait for the next tour. Guests aren't allowed inside the amphitheater unattended; perhaps the temptation to jump into the painted scene and play Civil War soldier is too strong.

To bide my time, I read about the painting's creation in 1886 by German and Polish immigrants in Milwaukee, who illustrated a dramatic day (July 22, 1864) in the Battle of Atlanta. The painting measures 42 feet high and 358 feet in circumference and includes a Natural Museum of History-ish diorama that was added to the foreground in 1936.

The seats in the auditorium turned softly as our group embarked on two rotations of the painting, the chaos and calamity of war streaming across the wall. The guide helped focus our attention by pointing out certain features: the sole woman (a red dot tending to the wounded), the lone black man (a reference to the freeing of slaves) and the comely face of Clark Gable, whose smiling visage graced the fallen body of a soldier. After the tour, a woman with two German guests informed the guide that she has lived in Atlanta since 1981 and had never visited the Cyclorama until now.

Obviously, she needed a guidebook to push her out of the house more often.

I was prepared for the Atlanta heat, which never materialized, but not for the traffic and parking woes, which gripped my car and never let go. "Moon" and "NFT" touched on the vehicular hassles, providing advice on parking lots and public transportation. ("Wallpaper" adherents either employ private drivers, or traffic parts for them.)

"NFT," for example, explained how difficult it is to park at Oakland Cemetery, which was built in 1840, before the invasion of space-guzzling vehicles. Loath to leave the free and spacious lot at Grant Park, home of the Cyclorama and the zoo, I walked the mile to the historic burial ground.

The cemetery is a living history museum of the dead, housing the remains of such famous personalities as "Gone With the Wind" author Margaret Mitchell and Maynard Jackson, the city's first African American mayor. The main objective of my pilgrimage, however, was to pay tribute to Joseph Jacobs, the pharmacist who introduced Coca-Cola to the world in 1887. Before entering the gates, I stopped into Ria's Bluebird for a Diet Coke. I later learned that I should read before I do: According to my guidebooks, Ria's serves smokin' Southern cuisine and is a coveted brunch spot. (Says "Moon": "The wait on weekends can be mind-boggling." No lines, though, for a soda to go.)

On my way to see Jacobs in the Jewish section, I passed the forever slumbering legendary golf player Bobby Jones. A tour guide leading a passel of boys stood on a patch of grass littered with golf balls, a glove and a towel from a Scottish course.

Jacobs's site was devoid of fan souvenirs. Two large urns flanked the simple white marble mausoleum; a locked iron gate protected his remains. I grabbed my bottle of soda, took a swig, then sprinkled the rest around his grave.

May your fridge be stocked with Coke for all eternity.

Maybe I trusted too much. Yet both "Moon" and "Wallpaper" touted the Thursday-night cocktail gatherings at the Museum of Design Atlanta. Free drinks with admission. Talks, too. Maybe I should have called first.

When I showed up, I saw an empty lobby and an employee with a shift-is-almost-over expression on his face. I saw no evidence of drinks or revelry. The front-desk guy told me that the event is held the last Thursday of every month. I was two weeks late or two weeks early, depending on your point of view. But I wasn't going to retreat. I checked my sources and discovered that the High Museum of Art across the street was open till 8 p.m. Drinks, too.

The guidebooks deserted me on a few other occasions as well. Eighty Eight Tofu House, a 24-hour Asian vegetarian restaurant, was out of business, despite its mention on Page 321 of "NFT." And the Red Light Cafe no longer hosts hip-hop shows, contrary to the description in "Moon."

After a bluegrass show at Red Light, I mentioned to owner Ellen Chamberlain that my guidebook (second edition, printed 2012) listed the club as a hip-hop venue. Her expression soured as she explained that she frequently fields calls from people asking about the shows. Since she took over eight months ago, she has excised the musical genre from her lineup, instead focusing on Americana, folk and Southern front porch music, plus Empress tea parties. Message to "Moon": You need to update.

Nonetheless, the tiny stumbles didn't overshadow the guidebooks' great strides of discovery. For example, I owe "NFT" for lighting the way to the art museum at Spelman College, the historically black college for women. The arts center is housed inside the Camille O. Hanks Cosby Academic Center, named after the wife of Bill, and makes the impressive claim of being "the only museum in the country dedicated to visual art made by and about women of the African Diaspora." I happened upon the winning suggestion in the "Colleges & Universities" section, not "Arts & Entertainment."

"Wallpaper" also earned a hearty handshake for leading me to Westside Provisions District, an urbane collection of clothing stores, restaurants and furniture and design shops, including Jonathan Adler and the dapper-and-dashing spousal set of Sid and Ann Mashburn. (Pellegrino and beer served to shoppers — classy.)

I do, however, take all the credit for missing the turn to Westside and ending up at Goat Farm, an artists' colony established in an old wheelmaking factory. I didn't find any four-legged barnyard animals, but I bumped into some chickens and artists loafing around a coffeehouse.

I ordered an iced coffee (price by donation) and pulled up a stool between two artists. The twosome tossed out restaurant suggestions: Busy Bee Cafe for fried chicken, Antico for Neapolitan pizza, Ann's Snack Bar for the ghetto burger, Home Grown for brunch and the guy playing the xylophone. Back in the car, I cross-referenced their recommendations with my guidebooks as an extra layer of protection.

On Friday, I took my guidebooks out for a night on the town with two friends who are longtime Atlanta residents. We began our bar hop at Sister Louisa's Church of the Living Room and Ping Pong Emporium, a new experience for all of us. ("Moon" called it the "best hipster hangout.")

After a few pints of SweetWater, the local brew, and many rotations of a nun doll suspended overhead, we departed for Sound Table. "Wallpaper" informed (or warned?) us that the Old Fourth Ward haunt transforms into a feverish dance party. But the wood-paneled venue was nearly empty when we arrived and left. In the open-air deck out back, Andy told me that Atlantans flock to new places, then grow fickle once the hot spot loses its burn. Page 38 was no longer relevant.

As the trip drew to a close, I gave the guidebooks a break and allowed Andy and Katie to take over from the printed page. They took me to the 57th Fighter Group Restaurant, a World War II-themed eatery at the DeKalb-Peachtree Airport. We emerged from an entryway of sandbags to find rooms plastered with wartime photos and memorabilia. At the booths, diners don headsets and listen to the chatter from the air traffic control tower.

The restaurant, so deliciously odd, didn't appear in any of my guidebooks. Hopefully, it will show up in the 2014 editions.