

Atlanta: Sophisticated and Surprising

August 21, 2013

By Jim Ferri

Like others carry bills in their wallets, I carry around in my head a list of places I want to visit one day. Atlanta was on that list for quite some time, until about a month ago when I decided to make a two-day visit.

Two things surprised me about the city. The first was just how sophisticated the city was and how many interesting things there were to do in a fairly small area. In fact, the city has such a profusion of interesting places to see I could have easily stayed a few more days. The second was how relatively traffic-free the city was, making it very easy to drive around.



CNN Studio Tour

The first day after my arrival I decided to visit the main downtown sights around Centennial Olympic Park – CNN, The World of Coca Cola and the Georgia Aquarium. I was staying at the downtown Marriott Marquis, which turned out to be a stroke of luck since it was relatively close to all three places.

Reasoning that the CNN Studio Tour would likely get crowded later in the day, I headed first for the CNN Center, arriving early for the first tour at 9:00am (adults \$15, senior \$14). I joined a small group of about 20 and set off for a 55-minute tour about the large complex.

But I found the tour quite disappointing since it didn't live up to all the hype on its website. We didn't get to see any shows being produced and, to make things worse, our guide had the charisma of a telephone pole. Although it could have been much better, I still suggest taking it. You can also pay \$49 for the Morning Express with Robin Meade Tour, although CNN disclaimer is that news personalities may not be in-studio on the day of your visit.



Centennial Park, downtown Atlanta

Following CNN I only had to take a 10-minute walk to reach The World of Coca Cola and the Georgia Aquarium, neighbors at the other end of pretty Centennial Olympic Park. While walking through the park I saw that many others on the CNN tour were headed for Coke and the aquarium also.

The World of Coca Cola was the antitheses of the CNN tour, with all of the staff smiling, friendly and helpful. When our effervescent guide asked where everyone called home, I was surprised to hear that in addition to being from a dozen or so U.S. states, many had also traveled here from Denmark, Argentina, Hong Kong, India, Germany and several other countries.

The tour began with an excellent, high-quality animated movie, after which we were led out into a small atrium, where you could have your photo taken with the Coca-Cola polar bear or one of the characters from the cartoon. From that point on the tour was self-guided so you can take your time, and I moved on to "The Vault," which included an exhibition on

Coke "Myths and Legends," a section on Coke history and other things, and then the actual vault in which we were assured the secret recipe is kept.



The World of Coca-Cola

The two most popular areas came at the end of the tour: a sampling area containing Coke products from all over the world and the Coca-Cola store filled with just about everything that could have the Coca-Cola name emblazoned on it. It was quite crowded and business was brisk, especially with the foreign tourists.

An hour or so later I was next door at the Georgia Aquarium, the world's largest, walking through a glass hallway in the Ocean Voyager exhibit. It was an incredible experience, almost like being in a theater with a presentation going on all around you. The only difference was that in this presentation the actors were sharks, whales and countless other types of fish. I've been to other aquariums with large tanks where you can look underwater through a window in the side, but I've never experienced anything like this, in which you're right in the middle of the action.



A Whale Shark at the Georgia Aquarium

There are a number of different exhibits in the aquarium and in addition to the walk-through Ocean Voyager, I was entranced by Coldwater Quest that highlights Beluga whales. It incorporates a floor-to-ceiling glass wall in front of which people sit seemingly forever. You soon understand why, as you also become mesmerized by the stunningly beautiful and relaxing sight of being so close to these giants of the deep, and the impact of it all is incredibly calming. One discovers many things as you travel, and that day I learned how to sex a Beluga.

I had an unexpectedly good lunch in the cafeteria, before setting off for the Margaret Mitchell House, home of the author of *Gone With the Wind*, which turned out actually not to be her house, since she only rented one of the 10 apartments there. I'm not a *Gone With the Wind* fanatic like my wife (who, unfortunately, wasn't with me) but I did find the short tour interesting, learning that Mitchel did nothing to enhance the family name, instead being considered risqué and wild for her time.



Exhibit at the Margaret Mitchell House

About 7:30 the next morning at I set out for the Martin Luther King National Historic Site. Although I didn't expect to find it open at that hour, I was still nonetheless surprised to find no one else in the little park.

It was a very quiet and dignified place, built as part of the neighborhood and not looking as monumental as I expected. The tomb of King and his wife is set in a simple pool next to the old Ebenezer Baptist Church with a modern new church across the street.

In addition to the MLK Park, I had four other things on my plate for the day: The Jimmy Carter Center; Oakland Cemetery (where Mitchell is buried); the High Museum, the city's heralded art museum; and the Atlanta History Museum.



Ebenezer Baptist Church at MLK National Historic Site

I dropped by Oakland first, which turned out to be one of the most scenic cemeteries I've ever seen. If it weren't for the tombstones you would think you were in some beautiful city park. It took me a while, and several requests to people I passed along the way, before I found Mitchell's grave.

The cemetery is on the National Register of Historic Places and when I passed the caretaker's cottage I was surprised to learn that private events – including dinners, birthdays, weddings and family reunions – are held in the cemetery as well as a number of special events including, among others, "Tunes from the Tombs: A Festival of Music and Spirits," the "Run Like Hell 5K" and, of course, "Capturing the Spirit of Oakland" Halloween tours.



The Jimmy Carter Center

Later I found the Jimmy Carter Center, like most presidential museums and libraries, interesting not only for its historic value but also for making me remember how much actually happened in history during that time in my life. If you've never seen the Nobel Peace Prize, here's your chance.

I had a bit of trouble finding the High Museum of Art, touted as being the leading art museum in the Southeastern U.S. My visit to the High, although rushed, was interesting, especially the special exhibit of Vermeer's beautiful "Girl with a Pearl Earring" (at the High through September 29) considered by many to be the "Dutch Mona Lisa."



The High Museum of Art

But the place that really mesmerized me was the Atlanta History Center. I had half-expected a somewhat boring museum reciting the history of the city but instead found a wonderful, multifaceted museum complex. Its exhibits included a Folklife Gallery showing how folk arts shaped traditions in the changing South; an presentation on Indians in Georgia; an exhibition on golf legend Bobby Jones Jr. and the evolution of the Masters Tournament; the charming and fascinating Smith Family Farm from the 1860s; and the 1928 Swan Mansion back through the woods behind the museum.

Most riveting, however, was the Center's exhibition "Turning Point, the American Civil War," which in a personal way explained the impact the Civil War had on people's lives both in the North and the South. It was not pro-South, nor pro-North, but pro-education.



Smith Family Farm at the Atlanta History Center

At the end of the exhibit a sign on the wall asks the question "*really, just what did it get for all of us?*" The answer, attributed to Southern writer Robert Penn Warren in 1961, is "*the Civil War is, for the American imagination, the great single event of our history...we became a nation only with the Civil War.*"

I walked through it and found myself thinking, "this is the type of exhibition every high-school student in America should see." And for that matter, most adults, as well.

If you go to Atlanta, don't miss it.