

March 7, 2004

WHAT'S DOING IN; Savannah

By ANDREW JACOBS

It was in 1946, after decades of decline, that Lady Astor slighted this house-proud city as a "beautiful lady with a dirty face." Since then, Savannah has been in a fevered state of renewal, its residents consumed with resurrecting a glorious past, starting in the 1950's with downtown's mansions and cotton warehouses and more recently with the expanse of fraying Victorians that spread beyond the city's historic heart.

Savannah has fully embraced its role as the guardian of good taste. Even the new convention center, although modest in scale and thoughtful in detail, has been relegated to an island across the Savannah River.

In the coming weeks, as the north braves the last howl of winter, spring will be holding sway over this semitropical city, filling its 21 public squares with blazes of fuchsia, salmon and white azaleas, tulips and Southern exotics like crape myrtle and oleander. With springtime crowds yet to arrive, March is an ideal time to visit, although anyone coming the week of March 15 will have to contend with the throng of St. Patrick's Day celebrators.

Another date to watch is June 8 to 10, when the G-8 summit arrives on nearby Sea Island, filling Savannah with world leaders, an international media corps and those trying to get their attention. Soon thereafter, the Savannah summer will arrive in full force, with most days above 90 degrees, although the ubiquitous veranda ceiling fans, ocean breezes and frequent thunderstorms make July and August quite tolerable.

Events

It's all about the houses in Savannah. The city is rife with remarkably well preserved 18th- and 19th-century Federal, Italianate and Regency-style homes. This will be the 69th year for the Savannah Tour of Homes and Gardens, which runs March 25 to 28, allowing visitors to wander through well-polished homes in the city's four historic districts. In addition to house visits, Historic Savannah Foundation and Episcopal Women of Christ Church have arranged an array of genteel pursuits, including afternoon tea at the First City Club, a seminar on Savannah-style furnishings and lunch at Mrs. Wilkes' Dining Room, where a traditional Southern meal is served in a private home. Tickets for the self-guided walking tours are \$35 (a twilight tour is \$25); special events begin at \$15. Reservations recommended; (912) 234-8054 or www.savannahtourofhomes.org.

The once-sleepy Savannah Music Festival has evolved into a marathon of zydeco, Gershwin, gospel and Southern rock that spills across the city for 15 days. From March 21 to April 4, more than 100 musicians will perform in historic churches, revived

movie palaces and along the old cobblestone waterfront that skirts the Savannah River. This year's acts include the Jewish-Algerian singer Françoise Atlan; Lewis Nash, the jazz drummer from New York; Yungchen Lhamo, a Tibetan singer; and the Austrian-born pianist Anton Kuerti, who will play the final five Beethoven piano sonatas in one sitting. Tickets are \$15 to \$60, with many events free. Information: (800) 868-3378 or www.savannahmusicfestival.org. The Trustees Theater box office is at 216 East Broughton Street; (912) 525-5050.

The city's St. Patrick's Day celebration, one of the country's largest, partly explains why Savannah is known as the Hostess City. Although the parade takes place on Wednesday, March 17, winding around the city's squares, the party plays out much of the week, offering a more civilized version of Mardi Gras. In addition to the standard mugs of green beer, Savannah serves up green grits, and city officials spill green dye in the Forsyth Park fountain. A festival of food and music spreads along the river on March 16 and 17. Room rates spike for the occasion. Information: (912) 234-0295, www.savriverstreet.com.

Lush even in winter, Savannah becomes riotous in spring, with wisteria, magnolia and clematis enveloping the city and its green squares. During the weekend of April 2 and 3, the Savannah Garden Exposition transforms a 19th-century railroad depot into a palette for floral displays. There are also plant seminars and peeks at private gardens. An open-air market is the place to find heirloom roses and antique garden ornaments. At the Roundhouse Railroad Museum, 601 West Harris Street. Tickets are \$8; \$20 for walking tours. Information: (912) 236-4795 or www.savannahgardenexpo.com.

After more than 100 years in a stately manse, the Telfair Museum of Art's Academy of Arts and Sciences, 121 Barnard Street, (912) 232-1177, www.telfair.org, is expanding into a daring new building by Moshe Safdie, the architect of Habitat '67 in Montreal and the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles. The city's historic review board was not thrilled with initial plans for this modernist confection, requiring Mr. Safdie to rework his design. The \$24 million expansion will open next year; for now you can see the stunning spare outlines from Telfair Square. From March 10 to June 13, the Lowcountry tableaus of Ray Ellis will be on view at the museum; \$8; open daily.

Sightseeing

There is still no escaping John Berendt's monster novel while in Savannah. Locals now refer to his "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil" as simply "the book." Tour guides make endless references to houses and characters, and on certain weekends you can still see Lady Chablis's drag show at Club One, the city's main gay bar. Even if you have no interest in Berendt literary landmarks, it is worth making a visit to Bonaventure Cemetery, where Mr. Berendt and his elderly friend, Mary Harty, sipped martinis on the grave of the poet Conrad Aiken. Shadowed by mammoth live oaks and the haunting grace of Spanish moss, the graves of many of Savannah's most illustrious citizens can be found in this Victorian-era cemetery, including Johnny Mercer.

To glimpse life in 19th-century Savannah, visit the Telfair's Owens-Thomas House, 124 Abercorn Street, (912) 233-9743, an urban villa that restorers are still trying to bring back to its 1816 English Regency roots. The house, built for a cotton merchant who promptly went bankrupt, was one of the first in the nation to include indoor plumbing; some of the waterworks are still visible. The compact, formal gardens are soothing. There are rough-hewn slave quarters and a carriage house. Tickets, including an hour's tour, are \$8.

Compact and visually enchanting, Savannah should be savored on foot. There are dozens of tour companies, and some of the more offbeat ones are especially worthwhile. There's the Victorian Lady, who dresses the part, carries a parasol and squires tourists around with a lively narrative, (912) 236-1886, \$65 an hour; a nighttime ghosts and legends tour, (912) 236-4467, \$15 for an hour and a half; and others that rely on boats, carriages, and even a hearse.

Where to Stay

Lording over the commercial heart of Savannah with its great iron verandas, Marshall House, 123 East Broughton Street, (800) 589-6304, fax (912) 234-3334, www.marshallhouse.com, recently reopened after 40 years of abandonment followed by an astonishing \$12 million renovation. The 1850's hotel features original pine flooring, claw-foot tubs and period reproduction furnishings. There are 68 rooms, some with veranda access, and a clubby bar and lounge area. Rooms are \$139 to \$229 (for a suite), with Continental breakfast.

The Columbia Square Inn, 125 Habersham Street, (912) 236-0444, www.columbiasquareinn.com, is a small-scale, intimate affair occupying an 1840's peach-colored beauty. The owners, Royce and Barbara Fricks, treat visitors like long-lost family. Their three expansive guest rooms have sitting areas with fireplaces, refrigerator and microwave; \$125 to \$195, with Continental breakfast.

Magnolia Place Inn, 503 Whitaker Street, (800) 238-7674, fax (912) 236-1145, www.magnoliaplaceinn.com, overlooking Forsyth Park, is a frilly 1878 Victorian with framed prints, antique porcelain and canopied beds in each of its 13 brightly painted rooms. As the birthplace of Conrad Aiken, it is also steeped in history. Rooms, most with Jacuzzis and fireplaces, are \$165 to \$295, which includes a full breakfast and tea, wine and hors d'oeuvres served in the garden, parlor or on the veranda.

Budget: The Days Inn, 201 West Bay Street, (912) 236-4440, fax (912) 232-2725, www.daysinn.com, at the edge of the historic district and a quick walk to the waterfront, occupies a 160-year-old building. There is a cafe. The 253 rooms, tastefully appointed, are \$109 but go to \$175 March 12 to 17, St. Patrick's Day.

Luxury: One of the city's most elegant B&B's is the Kehoe House, 123 Habersham Street, (912) 232-1020, fax (912) 231-0208, www.kehoehouse.com, a stately Italianate mansion whose 13 rooms have fine linens, balconies and high-speed Internet access. At

sunset free wine and hors d'oeuvres are served in the music room. A new addition provides elevator access to all floors. Rooms are \$250 to \$420, including a made-to-order hot breakfast, such as quiche, pancakes, French toast and grits.

Where to Eat

Serious eaters will invariably be dispatched to Elizabeth on 37th, 105 East 37th Street, (912) 236-5547, a 1900 mansion that serves imaginative fare inspired by Lowcountry produce and traditional Southern cuisine. In addition to ever-changing specials, the menu features a black-eyed pea patty with greens and curry cream appetizer, a pecan-molasses-crust rack of lamb with creamy sage grits and sesame-and-almond-crust grouper. The wine list is expansive. Dinner for two without wine runs to \$100. Open daily; dinner only.

Despite powder-wig portraits and stiff-backed chairs, the Olde Pink House, 23 Abercorn Street, (912) 232-4286, is anything but fusty. Like many Savannah restaurants, seafood is the star here, including batter-fried salmon with a honey walnut glaze, she-crab soup and almond-crust tilapia pan-seared with a herb lemon sauce. The setting is as compelling as the food: a Georgian-style gem that briefly housed one of Sherman's generals. Dinner for two with wine, \$85. Open daily for dinner.

In November, Paula Deen moved the Lady & Sons to this four-story temple to grits and greens, at 102 West Congress Street; (912) 233-2600. This was supposed to cut down on the waiting time. Fat chance. Hungry patrons still clog the front entrance, so reservations are advised. Go for the buffet, and the endless helpings of catfish, sauce-slathered ribs and the Lady's Cheesy Mac. If possible, save room for the sweet-potato gooey butter cake and peach cobbler. Lunch and dinner daily; the all-you-can-eat buffet runs \$12.99 for lunch, \$16.99 for dinner, \$14.99 Sunday, from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

A former family grocery of the same name, Belford's, 315 West Julian Street, (912) 233-2626, serves unadorned steaks and sautéed seafood in a high-ceilinged brick-lined space. A patio offers good people-watching at City Market, Savannah's miniature Faneuil Hall. Staples include lamb chops with mint pesto, herb-dusted grouper and a \$29 filet mignon. Dinner for two with wine is \$75. Breakfast, lunch and dinner Monday to Saturday; brunch, dinner Sunday.

The Express Cafe and Bakery, 39 Barnard Street, (912) 233-4683, a cozy, cafeteria-style restaurant, serves freshly baked quiches, stuffed croissants and standard breakfast fare, along with imaginative veggie sandwiches and specials like shepherd's pie for lunch (no dinner). Nearly every entree is less than \$7. Closed Monday.