

# Atlanta: *a peach of a place*



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MARY ANN DESANTIS

*Although I was not born there, Atlanta was my adopted hometown for many years and is the place where I still return when I need a dose of sweet, Southern culture.*

Like so many people who live and work in the suburbs of a metropolitan area, I did not go downtown as often as I would have liked — or should have. A recent whirlwind tour exploring some of the city's best-known sites gave me a new perspective — that of a tourist. Many of the attractions have greatly improved since I left more than a decade ago and others are on the horizon including the new College Football Hall of Fame in 2014.

If all you know about Atlanta consists of changing planes at Hartsfield International Airport, you will be surprised at how much the capital of the South has to offer. Ride the MARTA rapid rail train north from the airport and check out these “Hotlanta” highlights:

## DAY ONE:

No trip is complete for me without a stop at the High Museum of Art on Peachtree Street in midtown Atlanta. The High's unique architecture by Richard Meier and Renzo Piano has evolved from one modernistic, light-filled structure built in 1983 to an entire complex of galleries that opened in the last decade. On previous visits, I would dart in to see traveling exhibitions. This trip, however, I wanted to see how the permanent collection had changed over the years. And change it had with the addition of more than 40 American Neoclassical sculptures scattered throughout the third floor and the inclusion of photography in the permanent collection, which numbers over 11,000 pieces of art.

The Margaret Mitchell House is within walking distance to the High Museum, and *Gone with the Wind* fans will enjoy the tour of where the feisty writer perfected her craft. The Mitchell House is affiliated with the Atlanta History Center, and the admission price includes both facilities.

Speaking of history, the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site has expanded to 42 acres in downtown Atlanta's Sweet Auburn district. Visitors can see not only where King and his wife, Coretta Scott King, are enshrined but also tour MLK's birth home and the recently restored Ebenezer Baptist Church.

## DAY TWO:

The High Museum of Art is my old, familiar friend, but I now have some new acquaintances that are helping to make Atlanta a family-friendly destination and attracting 35 million visitors a year.

High on the list is the Georgia Aquarium, a 10-million-gallon playground where dolphins cavort with trainers and beluga whales glide across their football-field size tank to greet guests in a behind-the-scenes tour. In her recent book, actress Betty White described the *Beluga and Friends Encounter* as one of the best adventures she has ever had. I enjoyed staying dry and watching *Dolphin Tales*, a glitzy multimedia experience with amazing performances.

Just across Pemberton Place, a plaza named for Coca-Cola creator John S. Pemberton, is the new World of Coca-Cola, which opened in 2007 to replace the original Coke museum that had been adjacent to Underground Atlanta. My favorite stops included a photo op with the company's favorite mascot, the Coca-Cola Polar Bear, and *Taste It!*, which features 70 different Coke products from around world.

After a brisk walk through the nearby Centennial Park, I arrived at the CNN Center, the global headquarters for the Cable News Network. The digital information age has changed news coverage since my previous CNN tours in the 1980s. One thing that hasn't changed is the stair climbing... or I should say stair descending. The 55-minute Inside Studio Tour descends eight flights of stairs. Tours with elevator access are available, but they require reservations and sell out quickly.





Photo courtesy of Atlanta History Center



Photo courtesy of Atlanta History Center



Atlanta has no shortage of after-hours entertainment venues and restaurants, but I was not finished being a tourist. I visited the Fernbank Museum of Natural History for its popular Martini and IMAX® event. The Friday night mix of culture and cocktails makes the drive to the Emory University area definitely worthwhile.

### DAY THREE:

The Atlanta History Center turned out to be my favorite new discovery. The name is a misnomer because the 33-acre complex in Buckhead offers much more than Atlanta history. The Southeast's largest history museum also includes two historic houses and gardens. I leisurely spent the day studying *Turning Point: The American Civil War*, a highly regarded permanent collection of Civil War artifacts; enjoying the Bobby Jones *Down the Fairway* golf exhibit; listening to old-time music in the well-organized folk art collection; and reminiscing about Atlanta's 1996 Olympics. I was so immersed in the exhibits I missed my afternoon appointment to tour the Swan House, one of Atlanta's most photographed landmarks. But as Scarlett O'Hara said, "Tomorrow is another day."

I ended my tour with a "Bubbly Atlantan" at the iconic Swan Coach House Restaurant and planned my next visit. The jasmine liqueur and champagne cocktail was the perfect complement to my new role as a tourist in my former hometown.

### IF YOU GO:

- Get a four-day MARTA Breeze pass for \$20. Atlanta's rapid rail system has always been my favorite way to get around the city. No traffic congestion, no expensive parking. MARTA even has a mobile app that keeps riders up-to-date on schedules.
- Purchase a CityPass to visit five popular venues, including the Georgia Aquarium, for \$69... less than half what individual admissions would cost. See [citypass.com/atlanta](http://citypass.com/atlanta) for information.

### About the writer



After receiving a bachelor's degree in journalism, Mary Ann DeSantis began her career as a newspaper reporter before moving into a public relations career in Atlanta. She has written for *Style* publications since 2006 and was recognized with a first place Florida Press Club Excellence in Journalism Award for Travel Writing in 2012.