

TRAVEL

# Savannah: magnificent

By AILEEN ADAMS

SAVANNAH, Georgia — Twenty-five years ago I spent 25 minutes in Savannah and for 25 years I have been yearning to go back.

On that first all-too-brief visit, en route home in a hurry from Florida, I only glimpsed the waterfront—but that was enough to entrance.

Five-storey high cotton warehouses rose straight up from the river's edge and it was easy to imagine factors (cotton brokers) standing on the lace-like wrought iron balconies that jut out from the stone facades.

These factors, dressed in morning coats and striped trousers, a soft tie closing their white shirt fronts and, no doubt, cigars in their bejewelled hands, would signal the price of baled cotton the ships waiting below.

Now I am glad I had to wait a quarter of a century to see it again because in the past years the Savannah that was being ruthlessly obliterated in the name of progress has been rejuvenated, refurbished and restored.

Savannah was founded in 1733 and has been blessed with people of ability and foresight.

General James Oglethorpe established the early settlement and laid out America's first planned city. If you can

imagine a checkerboard with houses on the black squares and parks on the white squares, you have a picture of old Savannah.

The city's situation is much like that of the Niagara escarpment—a high flat plain dropping sharply to a narrow river front. This was a superb site because it provided not only sustenance on the plain for the settlers, but also a natural fortification that protected the towns to the north against the Spaniards in Florida.

As in Niagara, it was planned to have vineyards to produce wine and mulberry orchards to provide Britain with silk. These plans petered out when it was found much more profitable to plant rice and, later, cotton. Then Savannah really flourished.

The Savannah that flourished is the same Savannah travellers see today.

Cotton brought wealth. Mansions of magnificent proportions were added to the blocks of delicately balanced Georgian homes: the earlier high and low stoop cottages and the row houses with their wrought iron entrance stairways just barely touching the brick sidewalks.

Miraculously, this beautiful, intelligently planned city was spared pillaging when General William Sherman, in a cynical gesture, offered it

to President Abe Lincoln as a Christmas present.

But, in our time, the city was nearly pillaged again.

In the 1950s, Savannah suffered a recession and the city core fell into neglect and disrepair. It wasn't until 1955, when it was rumored that handsome Davenport House was to be demolished to make way for a parking lot, that rapid action was taken.

Then, the Savannah inheritors of foresight came to the fore—notably Anna Hunter and Mr. and Mrs. Hansell Hilliers.

A telephone campaign was organized. Five people each phoned another five and the calls multiplied throughout the night until the entire city was alerted. By dawn, the Historic Savannah Foundation had been formed.

Today, you don't speak of parking lots to these gentle southern women of Savannah—the words are blasphemous. To preserve the 20 squares of the city core, the foundation, with the help of private financing, developed a holding fund. With funds subscribed, the foundation purchased 1,100 houses. These were then resold to persons who agreed to restore the exteriors, at least to their original condition.

Now, you can wander through the restored area at will. Every street, every square tempts you

to stroll along the brick-paved streets. Run your fingertips across the intricate wrought-iron railings. Find the rare cast-iron downspouts shaped like open-mouthed dolphins.

Or you can simply sit and revel in the mass of color in the park-like squares by the planting of azalea, camellia, wisteria, magnolia, rhododendron and flowering trees.

Probably the best introduction to Savannah is the Historic Savannah Foundation Tour. Air-conditioned buses take you on a tour of the National Historic District and to the Davenport House, which began the whole restoration movement, and to the magnificent Regency-style Scarborough House. Each spring in late March, there is an annual tour of Savannah homes and gardens sponsored by the women of Christ Episcopal Church. For more information, write Tour of Homes, 18 Abercorn Street, Savannah, Georgia, 31401.

There is also, in late April (this year on Friday, April 27 and Saturday, April 28), a tour of hidden gardens, sponsored by the Garden Club of Savannah. This tour includes the gardens of seven private homes and an ante-bellum tea at the Green-Meldrim mansion. At any time of the year, a number of the historic

homes of Savannah are open to visitors.

Among these are the Green-Meldrim House (one of the south's finest examples of Gothic Revival); the Wayne-Gordon House (built in the style of an English Regency townhouse, where Juliette Gordon-Low, founder of the American Girl Scouts grew up), and the Andrew Low House, where Juliette Gordon low later lived.

The magnificent Owens-Thomas House (another English Regency-type with authentic furnishings) and the William Scarborough House, are also open. A donation at each house of under \$2 is requested from visitors.

Accommodation in Savannah ranges from the opulent to the practical. From the gliden charm of the De Soto to the ubiquitous Holiday Inn. There are even off-beat accommodations, such as the Eliza Thompson House in the historic district, where you can have a bedroom, kitchen, bath and dressing room at \$30 a night singles and \$33 for a double (U.S. funds).

Savannah has scores of fine dining places, including the Olde Pink House, which is contained in another restored historic house. One of the rooms, now an antique shop (hours by appointment, or by chance) is said to be the finest example of the late

Georgian period in coastal Georgia.

The food almost surpasses the excellence of the architecture—but spare thought and space for the scrumptious southern desserts, each portion must be 1,000 calories.

Then there is Mrs. Wilkes' Boarding House, a real boarding house with boarders. It is best to be there at 11:30 a.m. for lunch, which begins at noon. By then the lineup will be blocks long.

Mrs. Wilkes serves heaping platters of fried chicken, bowls of steaming vegetables and mounds of homemade biscuits, all plunked on the centre of the table for you to practise your boarding house reach.

After you have eaten your fill, you take your plate back to the kitchen and pay your \$3.

For further details about Savannah and its environs write Jenny Stacy, Savannah Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, 301 West Broad St., Savannah, Georgia, 31401.

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