

Eclectic Athens, Georgia is Southern, and more

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It wasn't until the family was taking a mid-afternoon stroll around downtown Atlanta, with several greetings from panhandlers, that we realized just what a Goldilocks experience our trip to Georgia had been.

Atlanta was big, but not altogether comfortable. Clayton, a bedroom tourist town about 90 minutes north-east of Atlanta, was quaint, but a wee bit small.

And Athens, a college community about a hour from Atlanta, was just right.

Athens is to Georgia what Ann Arbor is to Michigan. Home to the University of Georgia, Athens offers a diverse campus community along with a thriving business and entertainment district. Having sponsored alternative bands like R.E.M., the B-52's and Widespread Panic, Athens remains a musical mecca.

Wasn't that Sister Hazel at the table next to us at the Thial Cafe on N. Lumpkin? You bet. The Georgia Theatre just up the street draws in many nationally known acts. And it's not unusual to find an Ani DiFranco wannabee or two strumming a guitar on a street corner.

On warm spring days - which are frequent here - even music instructors take to the streets, sometimes with the trombone section of the University of Georgia's marching band in tow for a spectacular rural treat.

Athens is also home to some of the most beautiful gardens in the South. If you're lucky enough to visit in early spring, you'll catch the brilliant colors of the azalea trees. They make even the most vibrant azalea bush here seem scrappy.

One of the smallest but historically significant gardens is on the UGA campus.

The formal Founders Memorial Garden, which features an ornate fountain, rare flora and brick pathways, is the



A musical mecca, downtown Athens draws the University of Georgia trombone players out of the classroom.

site of America's first garden club.

For those who prefer to see a little more red, Sanford Stadium, home to the UGA Bulldogs, is just a short walk away.

Memorials to Uga I-V, the bulldog mascot made even more famous in *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, are located on the grounds. Don't dis the dog - he's waaaaay loved around here.

In addition to numerous music clubs and bars, Athens also offers numerous dining options, from outdoor cafes along to steak and wine lunches. Retail stores reflect the town's eclectic personality. Patchouli-scented clothers and specialty shops fill the historical Victorian-era buildings downtown, and offer a charming antidote to the identical malls and retail outlets that line the highways.

BED AND BREAKFAST

Several adorable bed & breakfasts can be found close to the UGA campus including the Magnolia Terrace, but kids will appreciate the amenities - read, indoor pool - that the Holiday Inn downtown has to offer. Opt for the suite and you'll still get a bargain, free continental breakfast, and a

door between you and the little ones.

Though less so than in some Southern towns, the Civil War still looms large in this city's legacy.

It's not atypical to see men in Confederate garb riding horses to who-knows-where to do who-knows-what. And an absurd military artillery failure, the double-barreled cannon, is now a cherished landmark on the grounds of City Hall.

It's just another example of Southern ingenuity, and smart marketing. It may not have won the war, but the South has certainly won the hearts of history buffs and building preservationists.

Some of the finest examples of Federal and Greek Revival architecture can be found on the campus of UGA and in the city of Athens. And with several examples of architectural splendor, a thriving music scene, unique shops and tremendous gardens that highlight natural beauty, a trip to Athens means everyone wins.

For more information about Athens, check out www.visitathensga.com.

Alice Rhein lives in Huntington Woods and writes about a variety of topics for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.



The Founders Memorial Garden is the site of the first garden club.

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