

PLAY AUGUSTA ON AND OFF THE GOLF COURSE

I recently met a Canadian who, upon learning that I'm from Georgia, declared, "It's my dream to one day visit Augusta." That seemed to be an achievable goal. "I'm a golfer," he explained. Though I didn't want to trample upon his fantasy, I felt obligated to point out that visitors can't get on to the Masters golf course. "I know," he said, "but just visiting the home of the Masters Tournament would be enough." I passed along the Georgia tourism contact information and like to think that I helped his dream come true.



One of the 145 guest rooms at The Partridge Inn.

Augusta's reputation as a golf destination so overwhelms its many other offerings that unless you're a golf fan(atic) it may not be your dream destination. But based on two recent visits, I heartily recommend adding it to your list of getaways whether or not you enjoy golf. With its range of food-, history- and nature-based activities, Augusta definitely warrants visiting again and again.

From Atlanta it's an easy two-and-a-half-hour drive along I-20 East to reach Augusta. It's feasible to begin a weekend getaway after work on Friday. One benefit of such an itinerary is the chance to

participate in "First Friday", a festival held in downtown Augusta on the first Friday of each month from 5 to 10 pm. I strolled along Broad Street and popped into the boutique shops, art galleries and studios of Artists' Row. On a barricaded side street an artist decorated a canvas while a jazz band played for an audience that was often inspired to dance.

On my first trip I checked into the Partridge Inn, a historic property with modern updates thanks to a multi-million-dollar renovation completed in October 2006. All 145 guest rooms—from studios to two-room suites—boast rich reproduction furnishings and amenities like plush towels and high-speed Internet access, yet "almost no two guest rooms are exactly alike," said Deborah Stone, public relations representative. I discovered the best treat upon climbing into bed: the unique "Partridge Perfect Sleep" ensemble of top-of-the-line triple sheets. Established in 1892, the hotel is conveniently located in Augusta's Summerville Historic District. Before heading to downtown attractions, I drove around neighboring streets to peek at historic houses.

Looking for cozy sleep on a budget? On my second visit I lodged at the Country Inn & Suites by Carlson. It's also conveniently located with quick highway access and offers all basic amenities plus free Internet access. Warm cookies await guests who stroll through the lobby in the afternoon, and a complimentary continental breakfast is available each morning.

One Saturday morning I headed to the Market on Broad at Macarten Street. Vendors sold a range of goods from fresh pumpkins to boiled peanuts. Other foodstuffs included cheese straws, pastries, cantaloupe pies and a sweet dark brown local honey; there were also plants and craft items available.

For lunch I ventured to Hildebrandt's, a grocery store and deli that's been operating for over 125 years and is the oldest continually operating



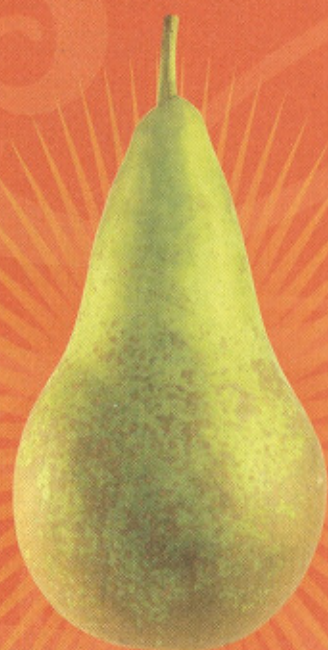
Luanne Hildebrandt prepares a reuben sandwich.

business in Augusta. Here I found a retro atmosphere and old-time prices: it's possible to purchase candies for five cents and sandwiches for well under five dollars. No wonder it's been dubbed the "best time warp" in Augusta. Owner

Luanne Hildebrandt, the fourth generation of her family to run this place, offers a menu boasting a variety of German deli meats, including a yummy yachtwurst. Sandwiches are made to order, and several sides are available, including German potato salad.

Options abound to fill an afternoon. The Morris Museum of Art showcases 3,000 works of art celebrating the American South. The Augusta Museum of History showcases 12,000 years of local history with exhibits such as a 10,000-year-old projectile point, a 1914 locomotive, a 1920s trolley car, Augusta healthcare and much more. The Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History highlights the influence of African-Americans on education, banking, the arts and more. The boyhood home of President Woodrow Wilson depicts life in Georgia during the Civil War and Reconstruction. My favorite stop was the National Science Center's Fort Discovery, located on the scenic downtown Riverwalk, where over 250 interactive exhibits inspire imagination and hands-on exploration of electronics, communications, robotics, power generation and more. I was determined to complete a 3-D puzzle and finally, after several attempts, succeeded in doing so without peeking at the answer card.

Exercising the brain leads to hunger. Luckily, Augusta restaurants range from sophisticated to down-home, and it's not necessary to compromise on quality—even better, menu prices are typically lower than Atlanta. Calvert's, a 30-year Augusta tradition, serves an elegant menu with European flair prepared by Chef Craig Calvert, who has mentored many of the city's restaurateurs. La Maison, located in a restored 1853 mansion in Augusta's quaint historic district, features upscale cuisine prepared by Chef Heinz Sowinski, whose résumé includes a stint at the acclaimed Nikolai's Roof. Bistro 491 in the Surrey Center serves up elegant, seasonal fare prepared by Chef Todd Schafer. Blue Sky Kitchen, located downtown, presents global dishes prepared by Chef/Owner Barry Blackstone. Rae's Coastal Café, tucked inside a residential neighborhood, is an off-the-beaten-path gem serving up well-crafted Caribbean fare and seafood. Sconyers has served up old-fashioned pit-cooked barbecue since 1956; its founder created hash with rice, a tasty side dish thick with shredded pork. Among Sconyers' fans is President Jimmy Carter, who had the food shipped to the White House while he was in office. Larry Sconyers,



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president, has patented a cooking technique that leaves his meats fork-tender and grease-free. The Verandah Grill, at the Partridge Inn, is famous for its outdoor seating and boasts a long legacy of culinary excellence. For example, in 1923 it hosted a welcoming banquet for President Warren G. Harding. Today The Verandah Grill serves contemporary Southern cuisine prepared by Chef Bradley Czajka, whose famous Sunday brunch buffet includes made-to-order omelet and waffle stations, a carving station, fresh seafood, multiple desserts and much more.

Since the weather was pleasant, I spent Sunday exploring nature. To take in the sights along the Augusta Canal, Georgia's first designated National Heritage Area, on one visit I opted for a guided tour aboard a replica canal cargo boat. Built in 1845 to harness the water and power of the Savannah River, the 8.5-mile canal today offers opportunities for walking, biking, canoeing and kayaking in addition to the informative, relaxing historical



The Augusta Farmers' Market is held off Broad at Macarten Street each Saturday morning until noon.

cruise. On another trip I strolled the boardwalks at the 1,150-acre Phinizy Swamp Nature Park where the wildlife includes blue herons, egrets, otters and alligators. The picturesque

setting provided several photograph opportunities.

Before I was ready, my visits each came to an end, so I know I'll return. Visit Augusta, and odds are you'll discover many ways to play—even if you never make it to the golf course. 🐾

For more information:
Augusta Convention &
Visitors Bureau
800-726-0243 or
706-823-6600
www.AugustaGA.org

Augusta Visitor
Information Center
706-724-4067

Where to stay....
Country Inn & Suites
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