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Reflections

Travelers share the lessons they have learned about the world and about themselves

Alabama: Charming Small Towns and Downtowns

By Max Hartshorne
GoNOMAD Editor

I remember well, on a visit to Atlanta for a tradeshow, asking my old friend Harry if we could go out and see some of the small towns nearby.

"There ain't any," he said, and it was true. The whole area outside of the city is wall-to-wall suburbs, strip malls and nothing resembling a small southern town.

But on my trip to Alabama I found towns like Fairhope, Foley and Monroeville that are as charming to me as my home village, South Deerfield, Massachusetts... a little burg with everything you need: pharmacy, video store, hardware store, general store and of course, cafe.



A Victorian mansion in Mobile's Government Boulevard. Photos by Max Hartshorne. Click on photo to enlarge.

And I found downtown Mobile equally charming with its shady lanes and pocket parks, beautiful historic architecture and friendly, upbeat people.

What's New in Mobile?

We touched down in our needle-thin regional jet at Mobile's airport, where driver Bill Hyde met me and the group. I sat up front and kept my attention on Bill, peppering him with those questions I like to ask when I first arrive at a new city.

"How far is the ocean?" I asked.

"Gulf shores is about an hour fifteen from here. Beautiful sand, gorgeous beach, he said.

"Who's the biggest employer here in Mobile?" He said that there are two shipyards here, one called Austal where they are building a new class of stealth ships for the navy. I saw one right outside my window, it looks like something Darth Vader would like if he wanted a ship... grey and sinister.

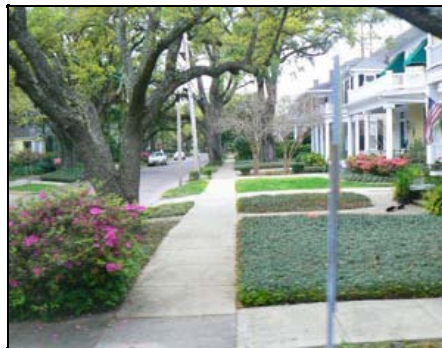
Next to the stealth ship is a second Hawaii car ferry. A court battle in Honolulu has temporarily docked the first ferry that was operating between the islands.

Bill took us on a detour down a lovely street lined with Live Oak trees, their branches spreading out and providing shade up and down the street. The houses were Victorian gems, ornate with fancy latticework and turrets, and he pointed out a rare yellow Azalea bush. The bush behind it was an orange Azalea. "You won't see many of those," he said.

The big news, he told us, is that 12 miles from here, Thyssen Krupp is building a new steel plant, which will open this year and bring 2600 jobs.

"I might be applying for one of those jobs," he joked.

He pointed out another street called Government Boulevard,



The trees are lined with Live Oaks in Mobile.



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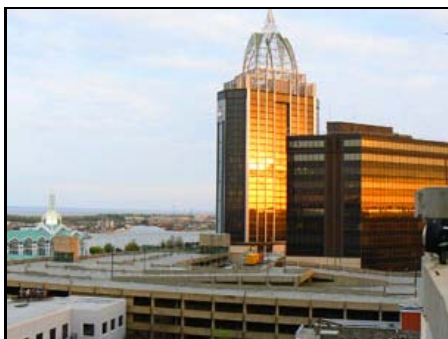
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that runs all the way down right to the Mobile River. It too was lined with huge houses many of which had been converted into law offices.

It's time for a hotel tour. This property has been lovingly restored, and we met the PR chief Bill Lang in the lobby. He's proud of the place so I better not be late for my tour!



View from the Riverview Hotel in Mobile.

Closed for 31 Years, The Battle House Is Alive and Well

The Battle Hotel is a gem that was closed for 31 years. Two years ago the retirement systems of Alabama, (in other words the pension funds of state workers), invested heavily into many tourism facilities such as cruise ship terminals and hotels in the region. That makes sense I'm sure to people who live here, keeping their money in the state doing good.

This hotel's lobby has a round glass ceiling and up at the top you can walk around and look down from wraparound balconies. Debutantes make their debuts strolling down the wide staircases of the Chrystal room, and the balconies that face North Royal Street are cherished especially during the Mardi Gras parade.

We toured the Presidential Suite, with its own outdoor firepit and hottub, with views of the river and the vast downtown.

We were told that when the CEO of the retirement system

first saw this elegant suite, he said no, no, no, it's not good enough. So he made them redo it to be even more dramatic and presidential.

At an elegant dinner, we were served a sumptuous meal including Kobe beef, diver scallops, and fish flown in from Europe. We got to know each other and talked about our business and laughed about press trips we have been on.

This city is looking at the future with shades on... They're pumped up about the new steel mill and excited about these hotels that now provide more than 6200 rooms in the city. Perfect to house people who are coming to their new convention center, right on the Mobile River.

Sweet Home Alabama... In a Good Way!

Just as I suspected... Mobile, Alabama, is full of upbeat people who have a great city to show off. I knew it and laughed when I was met with derision in the cafe when I told people my next destination. They'd start singing "Sweet Home Alabama," and mocking my choice of a trip.

But hey... today we toured a gorgeous old plantation called Bellingrath Gardens, where a rich local who owned the first Coke bottling plant decided to build a beautiful old house that he had his wife stock with priceless antiques. The grounds are stunning, even in this early time of year.

Then we got a chance to see the city's downtown arts center. Dauphin Street is lined with wrought iron balconies and wonderful beaux arts buildings. There is a cathedral that looks out on a grassy square, and the city's neighborhoods are full of 'pocket parks,' one dedicated to the English, another to the Spanish.



I also couldn't resist this little cutie in a park.

Oakley, Church Street East, they are both full of streets with huge sagging limbs of live oaks, Spanish moss flowing off of them with stately clapboard mini-mansions and Creole Cottages. I love the shady lanes and the way the houses are so close to each other. The architecture has definitely been a highlight here.

People are pumped up because the unemployment rate is still at 5.5% and there are huge developments like a contract to build navy ships, a potential contract to build airforce tanker planes and a definite commitment to a new steel plant that will employ 2600. It's all good news here in this sleepy state we don't think about much up north.

Sweet Home Alabama indeed!

Hurry Down to the Beach -- It's a Jubilee!

We drove south toward the Gulf of Mexico and on the bus we met Alex Robinson, the pretty and young chamber of commerce representative from the town of Fairport, population 16,000. She said that when she was young she used to come to Fairport to visit her grandparents, now she and her attorney-husband make it their home with their five-month old son.

"You know there's one thing we have here that only happens in one other place in the world," she said tantalizingly. "It's called the Jubilee!" It turns out that this is a natural phenomenon in Mobile Bay that's not easily explained, involving the oxygen levels in the gulf during the summer. At certain times it gets so low that all of the fish, crabs, eels and shrimp make a

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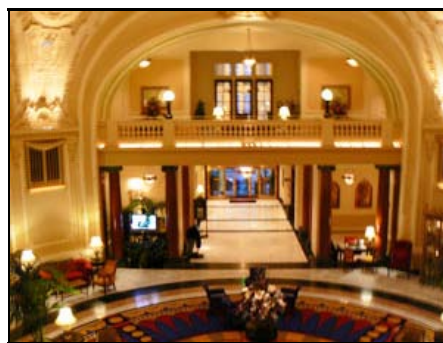
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The lobby of the Battle Hotel which was restored after 31 years of being vacant.



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beeline for the shallowest water near the shore, and begin beaching themselves frantically, trying to get more oxygen.

The locals then pounce on all of this fresh free seafood and scoop them up to bring home in ice chests to their freezers.

"It could be four in the morning, or four in the afternoon, you get a call and then you all run down to the beach and there are thousands of flounder, shrimp, all sorts of crabs, and people make gigs, long strings to collect as many as they can. It's a really neat thing," said Alex. "One woman one time grabbed a handful of shrimp and then just drove off, one hand on the wheel the other holding six or seven shrimp!"

This Jubilee, so named because of the joy the old timers used to get out of picking up all of this free fish, is easier now in the age of cellphones. You can get a call any time and when you hear about it--bam, you're down at the beach ready to pick up whatever you can find. "And the fish don't even flop around, the crabs don't wriggle," said Alex. "It's like they've accepted that it's time to go."



Free seafood at an Alabama jubilee

On Mobile Bay, Hurricanes Are Regular Visitors

It looks like rain for the next three days. That's always a bummer on a press trip to a beach community that likes to brag about the great weather. Oh well. Tonight we'll stay at some condos in Gulf Shores, the beach community where you can walk down the beach and step over the border between Alabama and Florida.



A&M's Peanut shoppe, where they roast fresh peanuts in the shell in a 90-year old roaster.

Last night the chef here at the Grand Hotel Marriott Point Clear Resort and Spa used his own vegetable garden for much of his herbs on the food. He created what he calls a 'fossilized' chip, two super thin potato slices with herb leaves inside. His Kobe Beef was as ruby red and tender as it should be since the cows live their lives being massaged and drinking big bottles of Kirin beer.

This resort is right on Mobile Bay, so hurricanes are a common occurrence. Our host Bill said that they just rebuild when a 'cane blows in and tears up the place. That explained the new wooden fence along the bay and the remodeled dining room in the hotel.

Roll Tide or War Eagle...In Alabama You've Gotta Make Your Choice

In Alabama you've got to make your choice at a very early age. Unless you're bound by your family tradition, it's never too early to decide whether you love Auburn or The

University of Alabama. Here, there is no doubt about which camp anyone is in. It's refreshingly unambiguous.

I asked our bus driver Doug where he stood. "Alabama!" he thundered.

Our guide from Orange Beach Gulf Shores, Kim, said she was a Tiger. That's the mascot for Auburn, they're the Tigers. Alabama is the Tide. The Crimson Tide. One of the writers we traveled with is a lifelong Alabamian who graduated from The U of Alabama.

She still recalls the absolute shock and awe that her and her cheerleader friends experienced once when they were practicing in a gym and Coach Bear Bryant walked in. "We all just stopped and our jaws dropped, it was so amazing, nobody said anything, we were speechless."

Such was the power of the legendary coach, who won more national championships for 'Bama than any other mere mortal ever since.

To Auburn fans, the way you greet them seems a little odd. You say "War Eagle." For their rivals, the way to address a fellow fan is "Roll Tide!" It's nice to hear how certain and solid these constituencies remain, and that there's absolutely no grey area at all. It's one or the other. You gotta choose.



Bellingrath Gardens, on the Fowl River

Foley Alabama Brings Their Heritage On the Road

The town of Foley, Alabama, is truly a little engine that could. Kathy Danielson joined us on our bus and introduced us to this vibrant and creative town about 30 miles south of Mobile. She runs the visitor's bureau for the town of about 10,000 and talked about some of the ways she's managed to get more than five million visitors there every year.

One idea that really put Foley on the map was when they began Heritage Harbor days. Instead of just having their own festival, they reached out and brought an Oklahoma town to Alabama and show people all about chuckwagons, cowboy songs and cattle.



Paul Schultz of Foley

Then they did the same up north, driving a shrimp boat and bringing Foley's gospel choir a long day's drive north to Oklahoma. The next year, they did the same thing with Grapevine, Texas, then Ozark, Missouri, and other faraway towns. They set up their visitor's attractions in Foley and then sent Foley's attractions up in Texas and Missouri and Tennessee.

It gave Foley national attention and jazzed up the festivals for both home and away participants.

Then they sent out emails to everyone on Google they can find with the last name of Foley and invited them to come to town for the festival. Many families did. And when the terrible hurricanes Ivan and Katrina hit the towns, their festival exchange friends came through with truckloads of supplies, reaching out to help Foley in their darkest hours.

They bring in a truckload of snow every December to show their kids what it's like to play in the white stuff. They're working on a father's day balloon festival. In short, Kathy and the people here may be tight on money, but they're full of great ideas that really bring people to town and get the town working together.

For our visit they rounded up interesting local people to share their lives with us. One was 96-year-old Paul Schultz, who still mows his big five-acre lawn and is walking around spry and lively. His brother-in-law his him beat, he's 98 and still going strong.

Model Trains and Sweet Pie in Foley, Alabama

Foley has an attraction that fascinated me during our visit this week. It's a complex and detailed array of O gauge model trains that is located inside a former train station downtown.

The set up is a model train lover's fantasy -- sixty feet long, twenty-two feet wide, multilayered and full of neat little details like tunnels, a whole miniature town, and a bunch of freight trains and passenger lines. There's even a little streetcar that rolls up and down the tiny town.

It's all run by a team of train aficionados who wear engineer's caps and control the animated displays and keep the trains rolling. At a miniature drive-in restaurant, tiny car-hops flit from car to car; at the scene of a fire, a ladder trucks roars to the rescue, up in the hills, a tiny still is in operation.



Electric trains in Foley

Not only the visuals are here but there are sound effects the men can turn on, and our guide shined a light on the action as the fire raged and the carhops hopped.

The set-up was donated to the town and in turn, Foley built a big building to house their new treasure. There's also a history museum in the building that was the former train station.



Tammy Mason at Sweetie Pie's

After we enjoyed the model trains, we got a chance to sample some mighty fine pie at **Sweetie Pie's**. I asked Tammy Mason, the boss, which pie was the most popular. Coconut creme, she said, pointing at one of gravity-defying slices.

But Southern Living magazine thinks her pecan pie is the best. She proffered a plate with three different pecan pie varieties for me to enjoy. How can you not love pie!?

Once Again the Dolphin Sighting Guarantee Comes Through

As we set out on a cruise on Alabama's Intracoastal waterway, Captain Ritchie Russell began the patter marks every voyage. He joked about his first-mate Alan, and how he'd have to don a dolphin suit if no dolphins showed up.

He talked about how his wife says he eats dinner like the dolphins do, swallowing the fish whole. Up on the top of the boat's tower, he told us some of the habits of the creatures they chase around all day to earn their living on the Dolphin Express 2.

When the cute mammals did appear, you could sense the captain's sigh of relief. What a bummer it would be to take all of us out on a dolphin cruise and see no dolphins.

There they were, bobbing and jumping beside the boat. Then he sped the boat up to a level where it produced a big wake and soon he had the dolphins jumping through the wake and making high pitched squeals.

There are a lot of dolphins in this part of Alabama's coast. And nearly as many boats that take people like us out and gawk at them. It was a nice way to spend an afternoon. We met a couple who had just married and were on their honeymoon down from Fort Smith Arkansas.

She beamed as he shot minute after minute of dolphin footage on his video camera. "I got 'em baby, I got 'em good," he shouted with delight.



Dolphin sightings, as advertised

Further Information

Alabama Tourism



Max Hartshorne writes a daily blog called Readuponit, and is the editor of GoNOMAD.com.

Read Max Hartshorne's story Alabama Attractions: A WWII Battleship and a Classic Performance



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