

U.S. News & World Report Ranks Alabama Hotels & Resorts

GRAND HOTEL TOPS BOTH LISTS

The researchers at *U.S. News & World Report* analyzed multiple factors in determining Alabama's best hotels and resorts for 2018, and they came to the same conclusion. The Grand Hotel Marriott Resort, Golf Club & Spa in Point Clear topped both the Best Hotel and Best Resort lists for the national publication. Three of the top 4 hotels ranked were part of the RTJ Resort Collection and owned by the Retirement Systems of Alabama. Alabama's top resorts are owned by the Retirement Systems of Alabama, as well. The rankings are below.

BEST HOTELS IN ALABAMA –

<https://travel.usnews.com/hotels/Alabama-r51/>

1. **Grand Hotel Marriott Resort, Golf Club & Spa** – Point Clear, Ala. – **RSA owned**
2. **The Battle House Renaissance Mobile Hotel & Spa** – Mobile, Ala. – **RSA owned**
3. Grand Bohemian Hotel Mountain Brook, Autograph Collection
4. **Renaissance Birmingham Ross Bridge Golf Resort & Spa** – Hoover, Ala. – **RSA owned**

BEST RESORTS IN ALABAMA –

<https://travel.usnews.com/hotels/best-resorts-in-alabama-r51/>

1. **Grand Hotel Marriott Resort, Golf Club & Spa** – Point Clear, Ala. – **RSA owned**
2. **Renaissance Birmingham Ross Bridge Golf Resort & Spa** – Hoover, Ala. – **RSA owned** ●

RSA Receives First International Award



The Retirement Systems of Alabama was honored in Toronto, Canada, for being a long-time champion of economic development throughout Alabama by the International Economic Development Council's (IEDC) **Institutional Leadership Award**.

“On behalf of the IEDC board of directors and Honorary Awards Committee, congratulations to Dr. David Bronner. His outstanding achievements, hard work, and dedicated service to the profession goes above and beyond to improve the quality of life for others,” according to Michael Langley, 2017 IEDC Board Chair and founding CEO of GREATER MSP, the Minneapolis Saint Paul Regional Economic Development Partnership.

The award recognizes a leader of a community institution who has made significant contributions in support of economic development through their leadership, financial support, local investments, hiring/training or related activities, along with the demonstration of a sustained effort in the promotion and support of local economic development programs. ●

Grand Hotel Celebrates Milestones

BY CHERYL BLACKERBY, *PALM BEACH DAILY NEWS*

POINT CLEAR, Ala. – Craning their necks, a half-dozen workmen in hardhats studied the massive brick and stone fireplace that soared past the ornate second-floor wood balcony in the center of the circular atrium. The smell of

history hung in the air – the sawdust of several fresh-cut century-old boards and the lingering smoke of long-ago fires in the fireplaces. I had to wear a hardhat, too, to witness this moment in the Grand Hotel Marriott Resort, Golf Club & Spa's 170

years of history – the restoration of the historic main building. Originally constructed in 1847, the hotel is celebrating its big birthday with a \$32 million renovation that is expected to be completed by May.

Way Too Kind, But Thank You Lt. Governor

BY FORMER LT. GOVERNOR JERE BEASLEY

Alabama is fortunate to have Dr. David Bronner in charge at the RSA.

Dr. David G. Bronner, the CEO of the Retirement Systems of Alabama (RSA), has been in Alabama for about 47 years. He came to the state to attend law school at the University of Alabama. Fortunately for Alabamians, and especially for teachers and state employees, David stayed in our state. He taught at the University and later became Assistance Dean of the Law School. I met David in 1973 when he took the job at the RSA.

David has done a tremendous job for the RSA, and he has contributed greatly in many ways to his adopted state. However, David still has his critics. Some of these critics have ulterior motives of a political nature. Some of the critics would like to get their hands on the funds being handled by the RSA to use to plug holes in state budgets. Others just believe they could do a better job of handling investments, even though they have no prior experience.

One of David's strong points is that you never have to wonder where he stands on any given issue. He is outspoken and doesn't let controversy bother him. In my opinion, David is an outstanding American and a tremendous asset to Alabama.

Dr. Bronner wrote a short piece recently discussing a topic that affects all state employees, including teachers, in the state's retirement system. I am including his remarks here.

After decades of ERS Board meetings, I must admit I still marvel at how some politicians work to get their hands on ERS funds. Remember, the TRS Board is controlled by the members, the ERS Board is not. Maybe it is time for ERS members to do something about that! A first for me in my forty-plus years at the RSA was how some current ERS Board members wanted to hire their own outside attorney to make legal decisions for the Board. One trustee actually said, "We just need different voices." Great! Let's just have total chaos. Maybe he does not understand that lawyers are paid to argue one side or the other of an issue. The RSA legal staff has only one side: Our members' protection.

When I came to the RSA, we only had one attorney—me! Now, RSA members have a very professional legal department with only one objective: Making the RSA as sound and safe as possible. The 6-6 vote for hiring independent fiduciary counsel failed thanks to Board members David Bollie, Jim Fibbe, Bill Flowers, Ben Powell, Steve Walkley, and Steve Williams.

On top of this attempted move, the Finance Director suggested we have too much invested in stocks (oops, that gave the RSA its high returns for years), and the RSA now needs more bonds. Buying even more bonds at 2% or less would

truly give you a reason to criticize the RSA staff!

Maybe the general public and some members do not understand—the RSA made \$4.0 BILLION in "net investment earnings" in FY2017 (for those who focus on losses, losses are deducted) and paid out \$3.2 billion in pensions.

YET the assets increased by \$1.7 billion for the TRS and \$942.0 million for the ERS—or \$2.6 billion. By the way, YOUR RSA investment staff cost was only \$9 million for FY2017.

Two other southern states that are the same size but with "outside money managers" (that some politicians on the ERS Board desire) cost one state \$340 million and the other state \$360 million for ONE year!

David Bronner is one of the smartest individuals I have ever dealt with. He has brought together a talented, hard-working, and well-respected staff at the RSA. There are plenty of checks and balances in place to make sure the retirement system operates properly and efficiently. I trust David to do his job and to do it well. Handling the funds and making good investments is extremely important, and his record is one of the best in the country. My advice to the legislators is to let this man do his job! ●

CRIMINALIZING MENTAL ILLNESS

Forty Percent of County Jail Inmates Mentally Ill

BY KIRSTEN FISCUS, THE ANNISTON STAR

A year ago Joy Howell, Melanie Trantham, and Melanie Hurst died after an Ohatchee man, being treated for a mental illness, left the hospital, stole a pickup truck, and crashed it into the vehicle carrying those victims. The defendant, Jordan Stewart Baker, remained in the Calhoun County Jail on three murder charges: reckless driving, attempting to elude, and first-degree theft, according to court records. "If he'd been taken care of properly from the beginning this might not have happened," Calhoun County Sheriff Matthew Wade said earlier this month.

Cases like Baker's, in which offenders suffering from mental illness harm others, are becoming an all-too-familiar narrative for law enforcement officials, Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy John Garlick said earlier this month. Garlick is the county's mental health

officer, but he doesn't have as much power to commit patients as he feels he needs. About 200 of the Calhoun County Jail's 500 inmates have a diagnosable mental illness, including drug addiction, and about 10 percent of those have a severe personality disorder, Garlick said. The chief deputy, however, said those people should be in the care of mental health professionals who can give them individualized attention and medical care, unlike jail staff who attend to about 500 people on a daily average. "The state has successfully criminalized mental illness," he said. Garlick has had enough and he said the state needs to "suck it up and spend the money to build more beds."

Mental health professionals, however, say there also needs to be better preventive care for patients. Locally, Garlick has few options of where to take patients in a crisis, he said.

Regional Medical Center stopped taking patients without a court order about two years ago, the chief deputy said, and it can be difficult to get patients to the state-funded Highland Health Systems in Alexandria outside of regular business hours. Many people who don't receive the treatment they need end up committing crimes, and their care falls on the medical staff at the Calhoun County Jail, Wade said. "These people don't belong in jail," Wade said. "They have a disease and they can't help that."

In 2015, nearly half of Alabamians suffering from mental illness received no mental health services, according to a report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, an agency under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Garlick said it's that percentage without services that often commit crimes.... ●

Grand Hotel Celebrates Milestones CONTINUED FROM PAGE ONE

Meanwhile, life goes on at the Grand, perched on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay: Sailboats and fishing boats cruise into the resort's marina from Mobile Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, guests watch sunsets from wicker chairs on the beach and golf carts head to the beautiful courses. Over on the resort's Dogwood golf course, another renovation and celebration is underway. The course is one of two in the resort's Lakewood Golf Club, the southernmost layouts on the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, a legendary string of 26 courses and eight luxury hotel-resorts, which celebrated its 25th birthday last year.

Owned by the Retirement Systems of Alabama, the golf trail had a higher purpose than mere recreation – it would showcase the state's natural beauty, attract sophisticated travelers who would spend money in small towns that needed it, promote economic development, create jobs, and increase tax revenue. It was a daring and courageous investment by a public employee pension fund, organizations not known for fearless imagination. But the retirement system's CEO, David G. Bronner, was a bold visionary, who was tired of people driving through Alabama on their way to play golf and spend money in Florida. He hired Robert Trent Jones, Sr. to build the courses on the Trail (with the exception of Lakewood, which needed renovation), which was the largest golf construction project in the world. Since work began in the late 1980s, more than 100 miles of courses have been built on 11 different sites stretching from the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in the north to Point Clear's coastline in the south.

"It has changed the state of Alabama," said Niall Fraser, director of golf at Lakewood Club, over lunch in the historic clubhouse, which was built in 1947. A fire roared in the fireplace on the cold January day, but hardy golfers still played on the Azalea Course outside. "Fifty percent of golfers come from outside the state." Fraser, a Canadian from Alberta, thought the 45-degree weather was balmy, as did many of the players visiting the Northeast. Fraser worked closely with Jones for 20 years overseeing construction of the Trail. "RTJ was 84 years old when he started the Trail. Azalea was his last course." Jones

died in 2000 at the age of 93, and Fraser said Jones considered the Trail of public but beautiful and challenging courses his greatest accomplishment. "Other places have attempted to start golf trails, but couldn't do it." Fraser said.

Jones was arguably the most influential golf course architect of his generation. And unlike many designers, he built a collection of public courses in Alabama that made the sport accessible and affordable, carving a space beyond country clubs. *Golf Digest* has consistently rated the Trail's courses among the nation's top affordable choices for players of all skill levels. For less than \$100, a golfer can play a round on a championship-caliber layout that compares favorably with those on the professional tours. The courses in places called Anniston, Huntsville, Prattville, and Point Clear may not ring with the lore of Pebble Beach, Shinnecock Hills, or Augusta National, but they have become known as golf destinations for players throughout the world.

Numbers speak louder than names: An average of more than 500,000 players test the Trail each year, coming from all 50 states and more than 20 countries. More than 12 million rounds have been played on Jones' creation during the last quarter-century. Part of the genius of Bronner's original concept is the ease that very different golfing experiences can be packaged together. Golfers can mix and match courses as they choose, or stay in one spot and play multiple rounds. For example, on Thursday, a player can air out the long game on the 8,092-yard Fighting Joe Course in Muscle Shoals, then drive a little more than an hour to play the Scottish links-style course at Hampton Cove in Huntsville, and then finish the weekend 90 minutes away at Silver Lakes near Anniston, where the dramatic elevation changes of the Mindbreaker are waiting – all this, and be back at work Monday morning. For many golf lovers, the goal of a lifetime has become completing the Trail – playing every hole on every course – and thousands have achieved the feat.

The Lakewood Club, which has 700 members, has a residential community, whose members include former Dallas Cowboys great Lee Roy Jordan, former Cleveland Browns Hall of Famer Ozzie

Newsome, and *Forrest Gump* author Winston Groom. In the club's storied past, the two courses have been played by President Gerald Ford, comedian Bob Hope, Clint Eastwood, Tom Watson, and Lee Trevino. Bronner still visits the hotel and club twice a year. "He still walks around the property, checks the light bulbs. Makes sure everything is right." Fraser said. Lakewood is the only private club on the Trail but is open to hotel guests; members and guests play on alternate days.

Surprisingly, most guests at the Grand Hotel don't play golf. They come here for weddings – 75 a year – ranging from elaborate events with 500 guests to intimate seaside ceremonies. Honeymoons, anniversaries, girls' getaways, and family reunions are popular here. Conferences are also big business. And they come for traditions such as afternoon tea after the firing of a cannon at 4 p.m. in honor of the hotel's military history.

The 405-room Grand Hotel is full of guests in spite of renovations. One reason for many repeat guests is the helpful staff. For such a large hotel, the staff stops to chat and offers help, such as detailed directions a desk person gave me to a tiny Confederate cemetery hidden next to one of Lakewood's fairways. It holds the remains of 300 soldiers who died at the hotel when it was used as a Confederate hospital. As considerate as that was, the employee's good deed can't compare to the late staffer Bucky Miller. Decades ago, he asked two guests, who he knew were big University of Alabama fans, if they were going to the big game the next weekend. They said they tried to get tickets, but it was sold out. Bucky called Bear Bryant, a frequent Grand guest, who told Bucky the guests could pick up their tickets at the stadium. Look for the statue of Bucky outside Bucky's Lounge. Then watch the sunset over the bay. ●

WANT TO HELP?



**A FREE
CAR TAG**

Tired of that worn-out dealer tag on the front of your car? Would you like to help the RSA and our Alabama Tourist Department advertise "Alabama's Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail" on your front bumper? If so, call to request a tag at 334.517.7000 or 877.517.0020, or write: Tag, P.O. Box 302150, Montgomery, AL 36130-2150

Start Planning Your Spring Getaways at RSA's Outstanding Hotels, Spas, and RTJ Golf

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ENJOY YOUR SPRING
A Special Deal
FOR RSA MEMBERS

The Battle House,

A Renaissance Hotel—Mobile—\$119

- March 2-6, 11-17, 20-22, 24-31
- April 1-5, 8-12, 15-25, 29-30
- May 1-3, 6-10, 13-17, 20-31

The Renaissance Riverview Plaza—Mobile—\$109

- March 1, 11-15, 21-22, 24-29, 31
- April 1-4, 10-12, 15-26, 29-30
- May 1, 6-9, 18-24, 27-31

Marriott Grand—\$127 plus a 15% resort fee

- March 1, 4-5, 14-15, 18-21, 25-26, 29
- April 1-2, 11, 15, 22-24, 29-30 • May 6, 13, 28-29

Marriott Grand—RSA Golf Package—\$199

plus a 15% resort fee —Promotional code—R2A

Includes: Deluxe Room, One Round of Golf for Two People.

Call for Tee Times after booking package

- March 1, 4-5, 14-15, 18-21, 25-26, 29
- April 1-2, 11, 15, 22-24, 29-30 • May 6, 13, 28-29

Marriott Shoals—Florence—\$109

- March 1, 3-6, 11, 14-19, 21-25
- April 1-2, 5, 7-8, 14-19, 22, 24-26, 29-30
- May 1, 3-7, 10, 13, 15, 17, 28, 31

Renaissance Ross Bridge—Hoover—\$119

- March 4, 8, 11-22, 28-31
- April 1-4, 8-12, 15-17, 24-26, 29-30
- May 1-3, 6, 10, 13-16, 20, 28-31

Opelika Marriott—\$109

- March 8, 11-12, 15, 18-19, 22, 25-26, 29
- April 1-4, 8, 15-16, 22-23
- May 1-2, 7-8, 13-16, 23-24, 28-31

Prattville Marriott—\$89

- March 3, 11-12, 18-19, 25
- April 1-2, 8-9, 15-16, 19, 22, 29-30
- May 6-7, 10, 14, 17, 22, 25-30

Renaissance Montgomery—\$119

- March 1, 18, 24-26, 29-31 • April 1-2, 5, 8, 29-30
- May 6-13, 24-31

RSA Spa Package—\$199—Promotional code—R2A

- March 1, 24, 29-31 • April 5
- May 8-12, 24-26, 29-31

*Specific room requests may require additional charge.
Rates available the 1st of the month and
are not applicable to groups.*

800-228-9290 Ask for RSA rate. **Promotional Code: R2A** on www.rsa-al.gov
Book Online and Save RSA \$4.

ERS Board Seeks Candidates for Upcoming Election

Candidates are being sought for three positions on the ERS Board of Control: State Employee, No. 1; Local Employee, No. 1; and Retired State Employee. The State and Local Employee positions have a four-year term, while the Retired State Employee position has a three-year term. All terms begin October 1, 2018. State Employee, No. 1, is currently held by Steve Walkley; Local Employee, No. 1, by Steve Williams; and Retired State Employee by Jimmy Rowell. The election will take place this May.

Nomination packets are available at www.rsa-al.gov or by contacting the election coordinator at 334.517.7192 or 877.517.0020. The completed packet must be returned to the ERS office by 4:00 p.m., April 16, 2018. ●

TRS Board of Control Election Results

The TRS Election Committee met Thursday, February 15, to certify the runoff election results. Kelli D. Shomaker was elected to the Higher Education Position, No. 2; and Russell J. Twilley was re-elected to Support Personnel Position, No. 2. Their three-year terms will begin July 1, 2018. Congratulations to the winners! ●

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