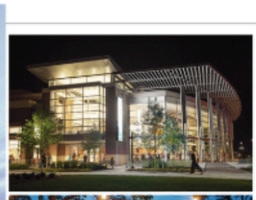

Southern Hospitality

THE BEST WAY TO EXPERIENCE ATLANTA? ONE DISTINCTIVE NEIGHBORHOOD AT A TIME. **BY ANNE WAINSCOTT-SARGENT**

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Château Élan Winery & Resort; Georgia Aquarium; Skyline Park on the Ponce City Market rooftop; Sandy Springs Performing Arts Center; Serenbe; The Atlanta BeltLine; Porsche Experience Center Atlanta; SweetWater 420 Fest.

Atlanta's appeal goes much deeper than its heritage as the birthplace of the civil rights movement and Southern hip-hop—it's rooted in the city's eclectic collection of neighborhoods.

"Travelers want to go to vibrant cities that have a lot of momentum—that's one of the great things about Atlanta," says William Pate, president and CEO of the Atlanta Convention & Visitors Bureau. Pate has overseen Atlanta's dramatic tourism growth over the past decade while at the helm of the ACVB. Last year, metro Atlanta hosted a record-high 56 million visitors, who spent $16 billion (a 6 percent increase over the prior year). Pate attributes that growth to the city and state's commitment to making the Atlanta region a world-class travel destination and to a continual swell of new development.

A City of Neighborhoods

For visitors, Atlanta's charm begins in its distinctive neighborhoods. The recently renovated Centennial Olympic Park, in the heart of the downtown convention district, offers enhanced city views. Its new interactive medal podium plaza honors the park's origins as a key attraction during the 1996 Olympic Games.

According to Pate, volunteers in the park constantly interact with visitors. "We have wonderful residents here who are very proud of their city and want visitors to have an exceptional experience," he says.

With its restaurants, Zoo Atlanta, Historic Oakland Cemetery and sites such as the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Park and Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, Atlanta's Eastside draws visitors seeking some of the city's best food and history destinations—many accessible on foot or by bicycle via the Atlanta BeltLine's Eastside Trail. For those seeking an upscale shopping experience, Buckhead—one of Atlanta's oldest neighborhoods—is home to Atlanta Square, Phipps Plaza and Lenox Square in addition to the Atlanta History Center. With its opulent architecture and tree-lined boulevards, Buckhead is the city's mecca for high fashion, posh hotels and trendy rooftop bars.

Just to the south is Midtown, Atlanta's arts hub and home to the Woodruff Arts Center, the High Museum of Art, the Fox Theatre, the Atlanta Botanical Gardens and the Center for Puppetry Arts. The Alliance Theatre, readying for its 30th annual production of *A Christmas Carol* starting November 16, has created an intimate seating experience that includes cutting-edge acoustics and a masterful blend of architecture, art and technology.

Kevin Green, president and CEO of the Midtown Alliance, the nonprofit credited with Midtown's revitalization through coalition-building, says Atlanta neighborhoods offer many opportunities for people to experience what locals love about the city.

"Midtown is where you get to experience a big-city life with a neighborhood feel in a very walkable place," Green says.

A large number of upscale downtown hotels are within a walkable convention center area. The Georgia World Congress Center is within a mile or less of the Georgia Aquarium, the World of Coca-Cola, the National Center for Civil and Human Rights and the College Football Hall of Fame. These big attractions are only one dimension of Atlanta's appeal, as visitors are drawn to exploring the "true Atlanta"—its neighborhoods.

"That's what I love about Atlanta—the surrounding neighborhoods all have a totally different vibe," says John Walker, senior sales manager for the Georgia Aquarium, who brings conventions and tourists to Atlanta and the country's largest aquarium. "Going to Buckhead, you're going to get an upscale, Beverly Hills-type experience with restaurants and shopping, or you can go to Little Five Points for an edgier, artistic, San Francisco-style experience."

The "Real Atlanta"

Visitors often are surprised by Atlanta's abundant trees, with 48 percent of the city covered by an urban tree canopy. The lush greenery has given it the nickname of "City in a Forest."

"You hear how green Atlanta is but you don't realize it until you are coming in on a plane or you're in a high-rise," says Carrie Burns, an 18-year resident of Castleberry Hill, the place where she launched her film and TV tourism company, Atlanta Movie Tours, which gives visitors an opportunity to tour tons of filming locations around the metro area. More than 1,700 movie and television shows are filmed in Georgia, including *Stranger Things*, *The Walking Dead* and *Avengers: Infinity War/EndGame*. Burns calls Castleberry Hill "Atlanta's backlot" because of all the productions crews who film here. Pointing to her neighborhood and others along Vine City and English Avenue, Burns says, "These places are the real Atlanta—the way it looked 50 or 60 years ago."

"The neighborhoods here blend at street corners, and you can go from one to another," adds Karen Anderson Singer, the artist behind Tiny Doors ATL, an Atlanta-based art project bringing big wonder to tiny spaces. Singer lives in a factory loft in Reynoldstown, an Eastside historic district and artist haven.

"A tunnel over 100 years old forms the entrance and exit to my neighborhood. It's at a train yard underpass and is a live community

ATLANTA BY THE NUMBERS

22 MILES
LENGTH OF THE WALKING AND BIKING TRAILS THAT WILL MAKE UP THE ATLANTA BELTLINE.

7TH
ATLANTA'S NATIONAL RANKING FOR HOTEL INVENTORY.

19 WEEKS
ATLANTA ARTIST LIL NAS X HOLDS THE RECORD FOR THE LONGEST-RUNNING NO. 1 SONG ON BILLBOARD'S HOT 100 CHART.

23,000 TONS
WEIGHT OF THE TOTAL STRUCTURAL STEEL OF MERCEDES-BENZ STADIUM.

808
THE TYPE OF DRUM MACHINE THAT'S CENTRAL TO THE ATLANTA HIP-HOP SCENE.

1837
THE YEAR ATLANTA WAS OFFICIALLY FOUNDED.

SOURCES: ATLANTA CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU; EXPLORE GEORGIA; BILLBOARD; ATLANTA HISTORY CENTER

art piece—someone's always painting there," says Singer, who created her first "tiny door" in the Krog Street Tunnel. From there, she found her creative calling. To date, she's installed 18 7-inch-tall doors in 14 neighborhoods, each reflecting the spirit and architecture of the local community. Several are scattered along the BeltLine, including a supersized door commissioned to welcome fans to Atlanta for the 2019 Super Bowl.

The Atlanta BeltLine: Transit Trailblazer

Nothing has quite changed the fabric of Atlanta's intown neighborhoods as much as the BeltLine. When complete, it will be a 22-mile loop of former rail lines that connects 45 neighborhoods with trails, green spaces and a streetcar system. "The BeltLine is like Atlanta's waterfront—it's not just a trail, it's a place to go to see and be seen," says Ryan Gravel, the urban designer who first envisioned the BeltLine while he was a graduate student. "It creates a way to get out and see the city in a casual way. You don't have to plan ahead. You just go, enjoy the weather and see all the diversity of the people in Atlanta."

The Eastside Trail opened in 2012, followed by the Westside Trail in 2017, with restaurants and breweries now cropping up along it. Gravel is planning to open up his own restaurant, Aftercar, this summer along the Eastside Trail. About half of the trail is now built, Gravel says, with the city soon breaking ground on the Southside section, which will connect the Eastside and Westside trails.

Beyond Downtown

That neighborhood feel expands south of downtown to neighborhoods surrounding Atlanta's Airport District and beyond. Take Hapeville, a 2-½-square-mile enclave.

Fighting to survive encroachments in all directions from Atlanta, airport expansions and the rise of freeways, Hapeville now is dotted with public butterfly canvasses and art murals in addition to serving as home to the Porsche Experience Center Atlanta and the headquarters of Porsche Cars North America. The Academy Theatre, Georgia's longest-running professional theater, relocated to Hapeville in 2013 and will open its 2019-20 season in a newly expanded performance stage.

"Life is slower here, with real small-town charm," says improv actor and comedian Dewey Chaffee McGeoch. Back in January 2018, McGeoch was suffering through a freezing winter in Manhattan when he flew to visit a friend in Hapeville for a couple of weeks. A year and a half later, he's still here. "No one knows what a gem Hapeville is yet—that's what's really exciting. I'm lucky because I was here right at the tipping point," says McGeoch, who is also the town historian and works for the Hapeville Depot Museum.

Fortune 500s and Fishing: Sandy Springs

Sandy Springs, about 15 miles north of downtown Atlanta, is home to Fortune 500 companies, plenty of outdoor recreation and new cultural diversions. And it's fast becoming an edge-city destination for travelers.

With easy access to Buckhead, Midtown, downtown or nearby SunTrust Park, Sandy Springs also has 22 miles of Chattahoochee River shoreline, making it ideal for fishing, canoeing and kayaking. "You literally can be here for a business meeting and within a five-minute walk from your hotel, be knee-deep in one of the South's most important trout streams," says Mayor Rusty Paul, who was elected the 13-year-old city's second mayor in 2013. "Few rivers in North America go through an urban environment that is pure enough to support trout—Chattahoochee is one."

Mayor Paul expresses excitement for City Springs, his community's vibrant downtown city center that features retail shops, restaurants and the Byers Theatre, a 1,010-seat modern performance hall within the Sandy Springs Performing Arts Center. Visitors also enjoy Sandy Springs Theatre Company and the City Green, an outdoor stage that hosts concerts every Friday night in summer. The growth of chef-driven restaurants in City Springs has earned it a reputation as an "eat street" among locals. Paul calls his city a "great jumping-off place for anything in metro Atlanta." Or, he adds, "you can just enjoy the amenities here."

Baseball Central: Cobb County

SunTrust Park, home of the Atlanta Braves Major League Baseball team and The Battery Atlanta, a mixed-use development adjacent to the ballpark, are funneling visitors to Cobb County. Master-planned and developed by the Braves, The Battery Atlanta will represent more than $900 million in private investment when complete.

"Our tenants are doing very well. The 81 home games help, but we activate The Battery Atlanta year-round, which helps with the success of the businesses inside our complex," says Beth Marshall, vice president of communications for the Braves. The Battery Atlanta offers diverse restaurants and retail experiences, a live entertainment venue, the Coca-Cola Roxy Theatre and luxury accommodations at the Omni hotel, which has had a 78 percent occupancy rate during the 2019 season.

According to Holly Quinlan, president and CEO of Cobb Travel & Tourism, nearby historic Vinings and Smyrna also are benefiting from their proximity to a world-class ballpark and entertainment district. Old Vinings Inn and Vinings Jubilee offer a unique dining and shopping experience and are close to the Cumberland Mall, Cobb Galleria and the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre.

Both Smyrna's Village Green and Market Village are surrounded by 33 acres of parks and green space within a mile of downtown. "Smyrna likes to celebrate," Quinlan says. "They have a big birthday celebration every August with fireworks and a large cake that the mayor cuts in the Village Green. Everybody gets a piece."

CASE STUDY

William Pate, ACVB

In the decade that William Pate has led the Atlanta Convention & Visitors Bureau, Atlanta has seen a 60 percent increase in the number of visitors—which equated to a $16 billion economic impact in 2018. Building on momentum that brought the Super Bowl and a host of other high-profile events to Atlanta, ACVB already has booked 85 groups for major citywide events between now and 2023. Pate "really is our chief hospitality officer—he does a magnificent job of bringing our hospitality industry together," says Dexter Warnior, 2019 chair of the ACVB board of directors. In addition to serving on many local and regional boards, Pate, an Atlanta native, serves on the board of the U.S. Travel Association and as immediate past chair of the board for Destinations International. Under Pate's leadership, ACVB has expanded Atlanta's international tourism presence—particularly with China. (Atlanta hosted some 75,000 visitors from China in both 2016 and 2017.) Pate credits Atlanta's success in attracting major events to the way local business, government and community leaders come together as they did during the 2019 Super Bowl, when hundreds of volunteer ambassadors ensured that visitors felt welcomed throughout their stay. "We call it the Atlanta way—everybody is working on behalf of the city; nobody is looking to get any credit," Pate says. "It's one of the great things that makes our city unique—how collaboratively everyone comes together." —A.W.S.

MISSION + MARKET

"The year-old restaurant from Executive Chef Ian Winslade is already a Buckhead staple for both business and pleasure."
– *The Atlantan*

404.948.2927
3550 Lenox Road NE, Suite 950
Atlanta, GA 30326
missionandmarket.com

JOHN GRESHAM / ATLANTA EVENT PHOTOGRAPHY

INNOVATOR

Steve Nygren

Founder and CEO, Serenbe

Located about 35 miles from downtown Atlanta, the thriving sustainability-first community of Serenbe continues to innovate city planning, community development and individual wellness. CEO and founder Steve Nygren has created an idyllic, 1,400-acre-plus community with a walkable environment, restaurants and stores, an organic farm, arts programming and other services catering to its residents, in addition to an onsite inn for visitors. At the core of its mission, Serenbe builds on environmental sustainability principles and deeper connections with nature and to each other.

Why is nature and community at the center of Serenbe's mission?

There are a lot of issues with how we're building places for people to live today that aren't working. We're sicker than we've ever been. We're disconnected. Current medical research shows that time in nature and with each other positively affects our mental health and our physical health. A lot of the current zoning laws have sanitized the way we live so much that it has taken the vitality out of where we live. When we were building [Serenbe], we intuitively understood what we were making—we're connecting people.

Are communities like Serenbe the way of the future?

We're already seeing other cities and towns emulating our self-sufficient, more sustainable model. When we started looking at these principles 20 years ago, there were only a few voices. But the needle has moved to where people understand economic wisdom. That's why every Fortune 500 company requires a [LEED]-certified building—that's one key indicator. But in Atlanta, for instance, people reacted positively to the Atlanta BeltLine—they were starved to connect with nature and one another. Now that's quality of life. We happened to be an early adopter, but now everyone wants to get away from their cars and create walkable communities. —M.K.

Luxury in the Foothills

Situated in an idyllic setting an hour south of the North Georgia Mountains, just 45 miles northeast of Atlanta, Château Élan Winery & Resort transports visitors to the French countryside with its 16th century-styled chateau, complete with lush vineyards and a full-service winery.

In addition to access to one of the most awarded wineries on the East Coast, guests enjoy myriad upscale amenities, including a romantic AAA Four Diamond Inn, an immersive 35,000-square-foot European spa, 45 holes of championship golf, a newly renovated tennis center, several restaurants, a spacious terrace pool and more.

This month, Château Élan Winery & Resort will unveil a $25 million renovation aimed at beckoning a new generation of visitors. Atlanta-based interior and architectural design firm BLUR Workshop promises a complete transformation, introducing a modernized design, while delivering a distinctly Southern concept dressed in French undertones that honor the existing estate's old-world charm.

Connecting with Nature and Neighbors

About 25 miles southwest of Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, another enclave is flourishing and gaining international attention: Serenbe, the lush green community synonymous with wellness founded by retired Atlanta serial restaurateur Steve Nygren, who was named the 2019 Most Respected Business Leader by *Georgia Trend* magazine.

What began in the early 1990s as a farmhouse getaway for Nygren, his wife, Marie, and their three young daughters has blossomed into a sustainable wellness community and movement for responsible, innovatively zoned development. Serenbe turns the relationship between the built environment and the land on its head, allowing people a chance to live in a place that reconnects them to nature and to each other.

"One of the common things we hear is we are an authentic town in a modern-day era that reminds people of yesteryear," says Nygren.

Patterned after post-World War II English villages and hamlets, Serenbe embraces denser housing to preserve green spaces. Neighborhoods follow the undulations of the land so the landscape isn't disturbed. Homes and porches are close to the street, and each neighborhood has a walkable commercial center designed to enhance quality of life: arts, agriculture, health and education.

Nygren considers balanced growth to be Serenbe's legacy. "There is a perception that to do something that helps the environment or saves land has a cost premium and, in reality, it's the reverse," he says. "That's why we were able to bring developers and preservationists together—because economically, it's more sustainable."

Visitors can get a taste of the community at The Inn at Serenbe. A stay in one of the inn's main-house rooms, guest houses or cottages allows travelers to enjoy Serenbe's gourmet dining, shopping, arts and wellness diversions, or even a Saturday tour of Serenbe Farms, the community's organic farm. Connect with Serenbe's artists-in-residence, view an exhibit or enjoy an outdoor show at the Serenbe Playhouse. Visitors also can explore the many trails that wind through the forests and pastures surrounding each neighborhood center.

"It is uplifting," says Nygren, noting that many visitors opt to buy in Serenbe because they find peace away from what he calls the "treadmill of life." "People say, 'I feel good here; I feel different.'"

You've made it through the week. Now get acquainted with the real Sandy Springs.

Take a lazy tube ride down a pristine, wooded length of the Chattahoochee, or embark on an invigorating early-morning hike along our beautiful trails. Catch a performance at City Springs, indulge in some world-class shopping and dining, or join the locals for one of our awesome seasonal concerts, markets and celebrations. We're ready when you are.

visitsandysprings.org

VISIT SANDY SPRINGS GEORGIA

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