

Southern Splendor 2009

Because of our four Trans Atlantic flights in 3 months last year, we planned trips solely in the Western Hemisphere for this year. Kathy and I have never visited the southern Atlantic states, so we booked a trip to Charleston South Carolina, Savannah Georgia, and St. Augustine Florida.

Since our home is now in Santa Paula in Ventura County, it takes an hour longer to get to LAX than it did from the San Fernando Valley. This meant we would have to leave at 4:30 AM to catch our flight. Instead, we left the night before and stayed at a hotel near the airport.

We got to the airport in plenty of time, but there the wheels came off. It seems someone at Delta messed up the weight and balance of the aircraft, and they had to remove 12 passengers and 6000 pounds of cargo! That delayed us about an hour and a half, which meant we would miss our connection to Charleston. To Delta's credit, however, they had an automatic system where we could scan our boarding pass, and the machine printed out new boarding passes for the next flight.

We were met by our Tour Director, Chris, who was absolutely fantastic! After our experience with a rather tired Tour Director on our South American tour, Chris brought a great deal of enthusiasm to our trip.

By the time we got to our hotel, most restaurants were closed, so we asked at the front desk for anyone that would deliver. They gave us a menu from a Pita place about 2 blocks away, and we called and ordered pita sandwiches. We were sitting out on the front porch of the hotel in our rockers sipping wine, when a young lady appeared on a bicycle. She opens her backpack and pulls out our pitas, still piping hot!

CHARLESTON

We were taken on a city tour on our coach, stopped at the Citadel. It is one of the two state military colleges, the other being Virginia Military Institute (VMI). From there we were taken to city hall, which used to be a bank. The chambers featured many historic paintings, including a portrait of Andrew Jackson, who is on the \$10 bill. In the main lobby, we also saw the grillwork for the tellers' cages.



The city hall sits at an intersection called the "Four Corners of the Law" On the other 3 corners are a church, a County building, and a Federal Building. So they have religious, city, county and federal sites there.

From there we took a tour of the Calhoun Mansion, the largest residence in Charleston, which has 35 rooms, a grand ballroom, Japanese water gardens, 35 fireplaces, 75 foot high domed stair hall ceiling, koi ponds, private elevator, three levels of piazzas, ornate chandeliers, a 90 foot cupola, and many more wonderful surprises that make up the house's more than 24,000 square feet.

After the original owner's death, the house went through a succession of occupants and uses, gradually deteriorating until, in 1972, it was condemned. The house was subsequently purchased by a Charleston native who spent the next 25 years and 5 million dollars restoring it.

Unfortunately, we were not allowed to take pictures inside, I assume to protect the artwork and fixtures.



Front of mansion



Side View of front of mansion

The gardens were beautiful, with the Azaleas blooming, and across the street was a home given to the original owner's daughter. Kathy fell in love with the two porches!



After the tour, we were dropped in the Historic section to wander through the area. The first stop was at a restaurant called the "Noisy Oyster". We ordered oyster poor boy (poboy) sandwiches. They came with Collard greens, which I had never tasted. They were quite different, sort of like spinach, but very tasty. We were going to tour the old market and take a carriage ride later, but we passed by the booking person and he said if we went now, they would give us a discount. Well, that was all it took, so we hurried down the street to catch the carriage.

The beauties of a carriage ride are the slow speed it goes, so you have time to look at everything, plus the narration is by a local who can give you all the background as you travel.

After the carriage ride, we shopped in the old market, but did not really see anything that interested us.

Dinner that night was at a restaurant called Poogan's Porch, which was named after a dog that used to live there. It was a very unmemorable meal. The best things about it were the biscuits and dessert!

The next day we went to two Ashley River plantations. Unfortunately, the weather took a turn for the worse and we started to get rain. We went to Magnolia Gardens first, and took a tram around the plantation. The timing of our trip was such that the Wisteria was in full bloom! Apparently it only blooms for about 2 weeks in the spring, and the rest of the year looks like brown vines. Kathy had wisteria at her old house, and was just blown away with the profusion of blooms, some up into the treetops!



From there we went to Middleton Place, home to America's oldest landscaped gardens. Unfortunately, the heavens opened up, and unlike Magnolia Gardens, where the paths were gravel, these paths were ankle deep rivers of mud! We were taken on a roundabout path to the restaurant, and when we got there, we could see a straight shot from the road that was shorter and drier! Kathy was wearing open toe shoes, and the mud acted like sandpaper on her feet, causing blisters! The House Museum, built by Henry Middleton in 1755 as gentlemen's guest quarters, is the only surviving portion of the three-building residential complex that once stood overlooking the Ashley River. The House contains one of the finest collections of family-owned artifacts. We saw Middleton family furniture, paintings, books and documents dating from the 1740s through the 1880s. Again, we were not allowed to take photos in the house. That night we ate at Hyman's, a very good seafood restaurant and a refreshing change from the previous nights' dinner. The place had a small store on the ground floor and about 5 rooms on the second floor to accommodate diners. The prices were reasonable for both the food and wine.

BEAUFORT

Beaufort is a quaint 1711 town with narrow tree-lined streets and historic homes. We took a carriage ride through the town and took many pictures of the homes for a friend of Kathy's who lived there when she was first married many years ago.

We took a carriage ride through the streets looking at all the homes and listening to the comments of our driver. Apparently, when someone refers to another person, and says, "Bless his or her heart", it means they are going to talk trash about that person.

The homes were arranged to capture the cooling breezes in the summertime. As you can imagine, it must get hot and humid there.

Here are pictures of some of the homes.



After a delightful visit to the town of Beaufort, we boarded the coach and headed to Savannah, but stopped at a chocolate shop and I bought 3 kinds of truffles which were out of this world!

SAVANNAH

After checking into our hotel, we freshened up and headed to Mrs. Wilkes' Dining Room. We sat at a long table family style, and the profusion of dishes on the table was fantastic!



The were about 15 dishes in all; fried chicken, rutabagas, cabbage, black eyed peas, dressing, okra, barbecue beef, biscuits, baby lima beans, rice, potato salad, macaroni and cheese, corn, mashed potatoes, and sausage. Plus dessert and coffee!
After we got back to the hotel that night, we were taken over the bridge and took a ferry back to the hotel. I got a picture of the bridge just about at sunset.



The next day we drove past the Old Cotton Exchange and through River Street. We stopped at the Andrew Low house, which was the home of Juliette Gordon Low, founder of the Girl Scouts of America.

I wanted to see the synagogue of Mikveh Israel, the third oldest congregation in America, and the only gothic synagogue. Unfortunately, it was closed after Sabbath services.



So after visiting the Low house, we went into the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. The altar and stained glass windows were beautiful.



After our visit, we were taken to River Street to have lunch, and were to meet the bus at the “Waving Girl” statue. It was erected in honor of Florence Martus, who for 40 years greeted each ship with a waving towel by day and a lantern by night.

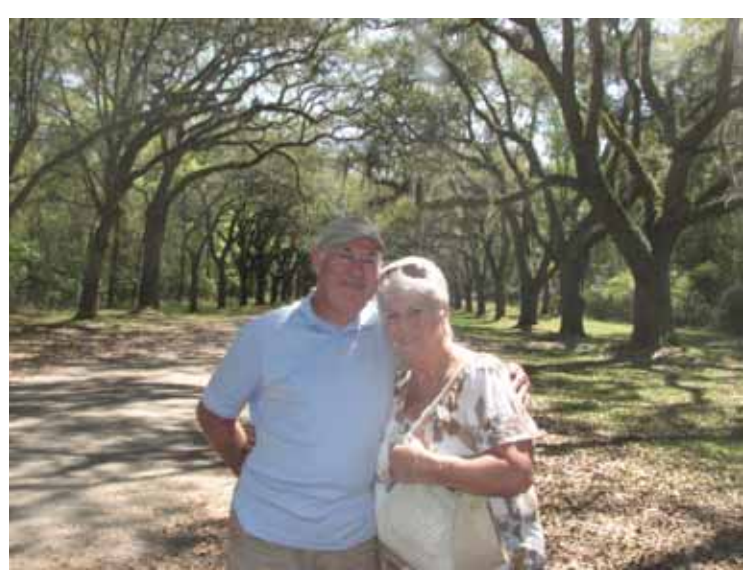
She was young, and it was sort of lonely on the island for a girl, so she started to wave to the ships which passed. They would return the greeting, and sometimes salute. Gradually they came to watch for her friendly wave from shore. She had many friends on the tugboats, and among the bar pilots. Next to her statue was a sculpture commemorating the Atlanta Olympic Games.



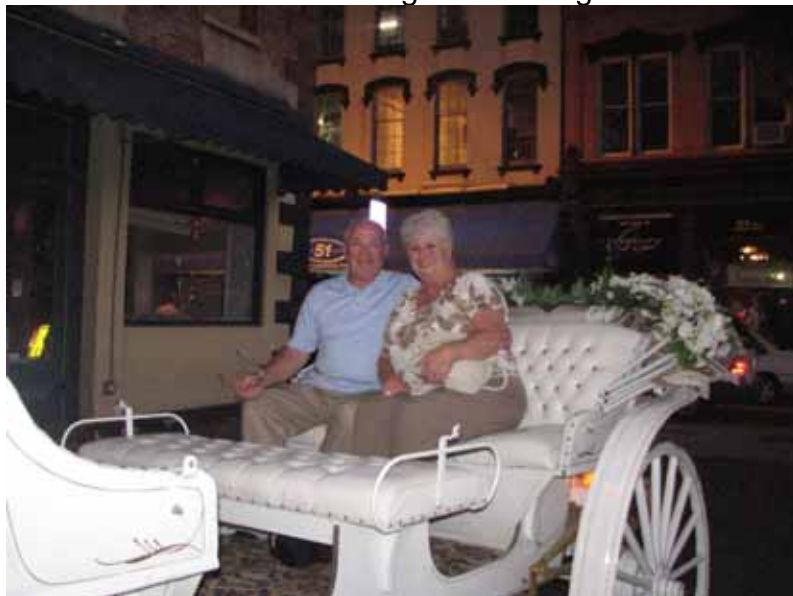
In the afternoon, we were taken to Wormsloe Plantation, which is famous for its mile long avenue of overhanging oaks. The house itself was in ruins, but there was a nature path the led past the ruins and along the river.

The walls were made from tabby, which is a mixture of shells, lime and sand, and is quite common in this area. The inset shows the shells used in the construction.

The grave of Noble Jones, the first owner is also on the site.



That evening we were taken to Paula Deen's restaurant, The Lady and Sons. When we went by at 9 AM on our city tour, there was a long line of people waiting to make reservations for that night. We got seated fairly shortly, and frankly, it was a disappointment. It was buffet style, and the entrees were fried chicken and fried catfish! We agreed that the previous dinner at Mrs. Wilkes was better. I guess people expected a lot more after watching her cooking shows.



We were walking back to our hotel when we came across a horse drawn carriage a block from the restaurant that was waiting for someone. Well they did not show up, so they offered us a trip at the group rate which was less than half the going private rate.

The trip was wonderful, reminiscent of the night gondola ride in Venice. We rode through the darkened streets of Savannah with just lights from the homes showing.

JEKYLL ISLAND

The island was once the private hunting preserve for the wealthiest millionaires before the 1900's. Goodyear, Pulitzer and Rockefeller built elaborate "cottages" there. The main lodge, which was in Victorian style was turned into a hotel. The rest of the pictures are of the "cottages"



Just as we arrived, a thunderstorm struck, and the rain was of biblical proportions! We were in an annex, and could not cross the bridge without getting soaked! We had to do an end around through the lobby, bar and 3 other rooms to get to our room. Also, the ice machine was down below in a semi exposed place so I had to handle both the ice bucket and an umbrella.

We dressed for dinner, and we were allowed to have choice of menu tonight. We had a seafood appetizer, a seafood salad, and the main course was a beautiful filet. We could not finish them (actually we wanted to leave room for dessert), so I sliced the steaks thinly and put them on a roll which we put into our refrigerator to have on the bus the next day.

ST. AUGUSTINE

With its 17th-century fort, old city gates, horse-drawn carriages clip-clopping along narrow streets, historic buildings, and reconstructed 18th-century Spanish Quarter, St. Augustine seems more like a picturesque European village than a modern Floridian city. This is, after all, the oldest permanent European settlement in the United States (no, it wasn't Jamestown in 1607 or the Pilgrims' settlement at Plymouth Rock in 1620). A group of French Huguenots settled in 1562 near the mouth of the St. Johns River, in present-day Jacksonville. Three years later, a Spanish force under Pedro Menéndez de Avilés arrived on the scene, wiped out the Huguenot men (de Avilés spared their women and children), and established a settlement he named St. Agustín.

Our first stop was at the oldest house in the city



The docent described living conditions in the original house, which were not pretty. There was no glass in the windows, and a smoky fire burned to keep the mosquitoes at bay. Also the food was placed on a hanging shelf to prevent any “critters” from getting to it.

From there we were taken to the Leightner Museum, which was fantastic.

We explored the Leightner Museum, which was Henry Flagler's opulent Spanish Renaissance-style Alcazar Hotel. It was built in 1889, closed during the Depression and stayed vacant until Chicago publishing magnate Otto C. Lightner bought the building in 1948 to house his vast collection of Victoriana. The lobby of the museum is exactly as the hotel lobby was back in the 1800s. The building is an attraction in itself and makes a gorgeous museum, centering on a palm-planted courtyard with an arched stone bridge spanning a fishpond.

Among the many treasures that caught our eye were a large wooden clock and a rooster.



To save time we decided to eat lunch in the café in the museum. We discovered that it was actually in the deep end of the former indoor swimming pool of the hotel. Service was extremely leisurely, to a point where we were afraid of missing our carriage ride, but we made it.



The carriage ride was OK, but the narrator was speaking in a monotone and was boring. In fact, Chris said they would drop that ride from future trips and include the one in Beaufort instead.

We left St. Augustine and headed for our hotel in Jacksonville, so we could catch our flight the next morning.

Our hotel room was the last one on the floor, and I paced it as 250 feet from the elevator. The plus side was that it was a huge room with a river view. However, the way the room was configured, we could not see the river. I took the coffee table and put 2 big pillows from the bed on it, and moved the side table in front so we had a place for our glasses.

All in all, it was a great trip, in spite of some inclement weather. We both enjoyed the graciousness of the old South, and it made the history of the antebellum era come alive.

There is nothing like the South in the spring, with the profusion of flowers, especially the azaleas and wisteria in bloom.

Our flights home were uneventful, but we landed at the peak of rush hour. It took us a little over 2 hours to get home, but we use a car service and it was the driver's job to get us home.

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