

Georgia: Southern Charm Meets History and Culture

By Selene Muldowney and John Tapley

Georgia in many respects is historically distinctive as it is the largest state east of the Mississippi, the youngest, and the southernmost of the 13 colonies, and by 1860 the most populous southern state. Human history in Georgia began well before colonists arrived with a significant Native American culture that dates back to the Paleo-Indian Period at the end of the Ice Age, nearly 13,000 years ago. Along with Alabama

and Mississippi, the land [state] was home to a significant Native American populace for much longer than any other state along the eastern seaboard.

The colony of Georgia was established in 1733 as the last of the original thirteen colonies to be founded by the British in America. Interestingly, in the colony of Georgia slavery was originally banned; however, Georgia ultimately became an infamous slave state. Rum, lawyers, and Catholics were also originally banned in the colony. By 1860 the "Empire State of the South," as an increasingly industrialized Georgia had come to be known, was the second-largest state in area east of the Mississippi River. Georgia, not unlike most other states in the Union began with a tumultuous history from

playing a prominent role during the Civil War to becoming the home the civil rights movement. In fact, its Capital city, Atlanta is home to not only the Georgia Aquarium but also the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site, dedicated to the African-American leader's life and times.

Georgia boasts a diverse and rich natural beauty. While many refer to Georgia as The Jewel of the South, it has never formally adopted a state motto however in 1799, when the legislature adopted a new state seal, it provided an arch containing the word constitution supported by the three pillars aptly named: Wisdom, Justice, and Moderation. The state is home to a wide variety of citizens, from the people creating the rich culture coming out of Atlanta to the polite landed gentry in Savannah. The state's terrain spans coastal beaches, farmland, and mountains. Energetic and lively cities, a relaxing coastline, and breathtaking mountain scenery offer rich and unique experiences that can only be found in Georgia. Within the beautiful skyline of Atlanta you'll have access to the largest aquarium in North America, the chance to follow in



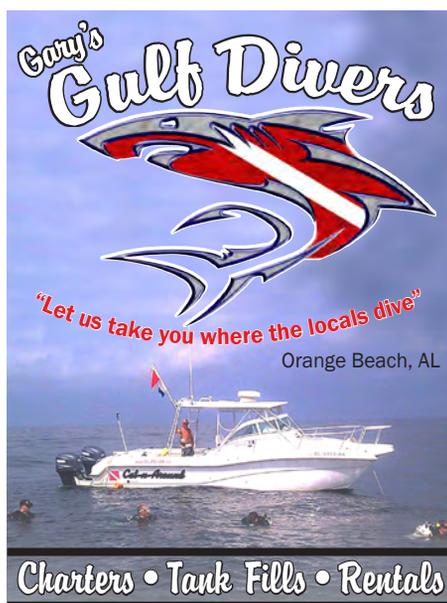
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Covered bridges line the country roads

the footsteps of one of the country's most notable civil rights leaders and even see the world's largest collection of Coke memorabilia at the World of Coca-Cola.

In other parts of the state, visitors can stroll down cobblestone streets, embrace natural beauty with wild horses roaming the beaches, take an adventure rafting or kayaking in one of the 47 state parks, or explore the underwater world diving in the local quarries, rivers, lakes, as well as reef diving. Land lovers and historians can explore over 400 Civil War sites offering a wealth of battlefields, cemeteries, arsenals, and museums.

The Peach State is filled with exciting things to do. It is home to Coca Cola, Home Depot, and Turner Broadcasting as well as the country's top producer of pecans, peanuts, and Vidalia onions. The state's onions are considered some of the sweetest in the world. No matter your interests you are sure to be welcomed by some southern charm.

Inland Locations

Although Georgia straddles the Atlantic Ocean, and its many wonders, there are still many enjoyable sites to be found

inland. According to Rob Arnold, owner of Atlanta Scuba and Swim Center in Atlanta, there is a clear divide in this interest:

"One group [is] like, 'you only want to take your customers to real diving' where there's warm pretty water and spend a lot of money. People want to do what they like to do every single day. Why not make it all available? People who dive locally have thicker logbooks and that's the goal. Frequency is the key to diving these days."

Chattahoochee River

Spanning 430 miles in length, the mighty Chattahoochee River is an iconic part of the southeastern United States and borders Alabama, Georgia, and parts of Florida. Locals tell tales of fishing expeditions, rafting, scuba diving, and having a plain ol' good time on the water and under the sun.

According to Joshua Blair, owner of Chattahoochee Scuba in Columbus, the river is a great spot for up and coming divers to train:

"We focus on the diving that is there. You don't need 100 feet of visibility, and you don't need to see pretty fish.



Laser shows light the summer skies

On the Chattahoochee we teach a lot of navigation and search and recovery classes, drift diving, public safety, and underwater criminal investigation classes."

Dive Georgia Quarry

Dive Georgia Quarry in White, Georgia has switched names and ownership a few times since its inception: in years past it has been called White Stone Quarry and Dive Haven. After one switch, the quarry was closed until it reopened under its current name in 2014. Spanning 19 acres, the privately owned site is filled up with water to about 165 in depth and is open on weekends from the end of April until November.



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Structures are a strong way to encourage divers to get involved and finish their certification, and Dive Georgia Quarry is replete with submerged objects that inspire. Divers can find a crane down to about 40 feet along with other structures including several boats, a van, and a school bus. Within these artificial habitats live inland creatures such as bass, turtles, and freshwater jellyfish in autumn.

Dive Georgia Quarry is a facility for divers and by divers, and includes on-site accommodations and services such as rentals and sales, an air compressor with EANx, and training platforms. The latter is especially important in training new scuba divers.

"For me it's 28 miles away and I can take people into a 15 to 20-foot visibility scenario at 80 degree water for six or seven months out of the year; in an afternoon, I can have two to three dives done," Arnold says. "The rivers, lakes, and quarries around here are all mud-based - they're Silt City - so you have to get a place where you can build platforms off the bottom to keep [divers in training] off the bottom."

"[Dive Georgia Quarry] does a wonderful job. I'd highly recommend advanced divers check [it] out. It's a good place to get some deep diving done," adds Lee Sessions, owner of Dive, Dive, Dive in Atlanta. "Visibility isn't wonderful and it's cold, but it's a better environment [compared to other inland locations] to start seeing more of what they can expect when they get to the warm waters of Florida and the Caribbean."

Georgia Aquarium

For more a more contained type of excitement, Georgia Aquarium, located in Atlanta is a solid vacation destination. The aquarium carries the distinction of being the largest aquarium in North



Open water at Dive Georgia - courtesy Dive Georgia

America and the second largest in the world. Georgia Aquarium is beloved for its diverse array of creatures big and small, from sawfish to zebra sharks and manta rays all the way to the mighty whale shark.

Visitors to the aquarium will be able to see many of these creatures up close and personal and even have opportunities to swim with them. Through the *Journey with Gentle Giants* exhibit, certified divers can take some time off with whale sharks and manta rays within the safe, warm confines of a massive aquarium, which holds nearly seven million gallons of water.

"Whale sharks, as in the wild, typically congregate in the top third of the water column, especially during feeding. [Through] the swim program you're right there with them," says Georgia Aquarium Dive Immersion Coordinator Chris Duncan. "It wasn't until I got hired when I realized how massive these animals are. I've had divers get out of the water and want to do the swim."

Although this is the only exhibit in which the public is allowed to dive, the aquarium also offers several interactive programs with animals. Visitors can feed

beluga whales, chill out with African penguins, play with inquisitive otters, and connect with dolphins.

"They're [exhibits] all educational-based. Guests are not only getting face to face with these animals: they're able to learn about them," Duncan adds. "Some kids and adults have never been able to experience this, being in a landlocked state, and are able to take the message out and deliver it to other people."

Additionally, Georgia Aquarium hosts other events and fun activities, which include behind-the-scene tours, birthday parties, sleepovers, school participation, catering, and much more.

Lake Lanier

Located about 40 minutes north of Atlanta, Lake Lanier is a reservoir considered one of the best inland lake diving locales in the state of Georgia. Lake Lanier is man-made, created via flooding for the Buford Dam by the Corps of Engineers.

Encompassing 38,000 acres (59 square miles) and nearly 700 miles of shoreline, the lake enjoys fresh water pumped through the nearby Chestatee River.



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Lake Lanier with Boat - Courtesy Visit Georgia

Maximum depths at Lake Lanier reach about 160 feet to a muddy, silty bottom. Visibility at Lake Lanier is a mixed bag, largely because of its bottom composition, and ranges between five and 30 feet: good for an inland location, but often challenging nonetheless. The lake is also a hot spot for fishing so scuba divers should be on guard for fishing line and dismissed equipment.

According to Doug Lane, co-owner of Dive Educators in Flowery Branch, Georgia, Lake Lanier has a certain stigma that disincentives divers from enjoying it:

"There's a lot of misconceptions about Lake Lanier because of old wives' tales and urban legends: there's [buildings] and bridge spans underwater. People think it's not diveable, but we're working to change that mindset in people. We do dives there quite frequently during late spring to early fall. We dive it every evening until the water cools off"

Lane and company enjoy multiple sites at the lake, including Van Pew Park North, West Bank Park, and Lower Overlook.

Unfortunately for the environment, Lake Lanier is often used as a dumping ground

for locals; however, this could make for some one-of-a-kind experiences worthy of a photo album. In addition to the usual assortment of rubbish (bottles, phones, cameras, etc.), divers can often find discarded larger objects and devices such as cars and snowmobiles.

Divers often divide Lake Lanier into three separate dive sites. West Bank Park includes plenty of amenities such as restrooms, BBQ pits, picnic tables, and options for adolescents; diving is done at two coves: Mask Cove and Divers Cove. Two Mile Creek is often used as an entry point due to its boat launch and offers similar amenities to West Bank Park. Lastly, Cocktail Cove is a site where most discarded "treasures" can be found.

St. Marys River

Rivers in and near Georgia have been popular spots for local and regional divers to uncover natural relics and artifacts dating back to prehistory, specifically the Ice Age. As glaciers pressed on the region, ancient animals such as woolly mammoths and mastodons were buried below; their remains can be found in fair condition throughout the area. Places such as St. Marys River, the Savannah

River, and South Carolina's Cooper River offer hidden treasures ready to be discovered. St. Marys borders Georgia and Florida and is located on Georgia's southernmost tip.

Dustin Rhyan has been diving in Georgia waters for six years, and through his charter operation, Subpay Charters, shares the splendor of fossil hunting with his clientele.

"I've had woolly mammoth teeth, mastodon teeth, Bimini shark teeth (which are rare and valuable), and six-inch megalodon teeth," he says. "I can't guarantee you'll find a tooth, but there are a lot of them out there, and in incredibly good condition."

Rhyan and his divers will dip into around 25 feet of water to find these fossils, though visibility on the St. Marys River (ranging from a few inches to about three feet) often hinders these efforts.

"You're in the current crawling around on your stomach on your hands and knees. All of a sudden, right in front of your face, there will be a beautiful megalodon tooth," he states. "It's amazing. The first time I was terrified, but I reached down and pulled out a three-inch megalodon tooth: almost like sensory deprivation: a neat experience to try."

Larger objects often come up as well. In the spring of 2016, local professional diver Bill Eberlein discovered a fossilized 60-pound mastodon jaw (teeth and all) within the St. Marys riverbed. A skilled fossil hunter, Eberlein initially believed the jaw to be a submerged log, but when he felt the mastodon molars, realized it was a valuable artifact.

Offshore

Venturing into the Atlantic, divers can uncover more treasures in deeper waters.

A promotional graphic for Dive Pirates. It features a skull wearing a red and white striped diver's hat on a yellow circular background. Below the skull is the website 'divepirates.org'. To the right, the text reads 'Buying Booty Backs the Crew!' in a stylized font. Below this, there are images of a white t-shirt and a red polo shirt, both with the Dive Pirates logo. Further right, the text says 'Your purchase supports divers with disabilities'. At the top right, it says 'DIVE PIRATES' in large letters. At the bottom right, there is a red circular button that says 'SHOP NOW' with a white scroll icon.

These sites are remote and outlying, and as such, are more challenging to reach; but great rewards await for those who have the skill and patience for deep water diving.

Artificial Reefs

In conjunction with local diving groups and organizations, Georgia's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has sunk structures aimed at attracting fish life. From World War II vessels to culverts and reef balls, these groups have sunk a diverse array of sites. Wreck divers can enjoy exploring the remnants of sites such as the *R/V Jane Yarn*, *Optimist*, *Scalper*, *Striker*, and *Esparta*. Historically significant ships used by the U.S. Navy, liberty ships, are also popular: the 441-foot *A.B. Daniels* and *Nettleton* chief among them.

Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary

Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary is a national treasure and one of the most beloved dive locations in the southeastern United States. The sanctuary is located roughly halfway between the cities of Savannah and Jacksonville, Florida about 16 miles east of Sapelo Island within the South Atlantic



Diver taking video at Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary. Photo credit Greg McFall/NOAA

Bight. Under the protection of NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS), the sanctuary is considered one of the largest near-shore, live-bottom reefs in the region. Geographically, the sanctuary rests in an area where tropical and temperate waters mix, giving the site its own unique character and a bountiful cast of underwater creatures.

Spanning 22 square miles, Gray's Reef carries a very unique trait: unlike many reefs, which are primarily formed from coral, the sanctuary is made from sediment: the remnants of shellfish and natural mud fused through calcium-carbonate seawater over millions of years. This has resulted in a hard substrate, on which invertebrates can thrive. Gray's

Reef also contains many rocky ledges littered with sponges and coral; within and along these shelves live delightful creatures, including loggerhead turtles, manta rays, grouper, snapper, sea bass, and many others; over 200 species of fish call the sanctuary home.

Alison Scott is a local diver who has enjoyed Georgia's waters for five years and has worked for government agencies such as NOAA and the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, helping these groups service and maintain equipment vital for marine research. Much of her work has taken place within the beloved waters of Gray's Reef: a place that has much more to offer than meets the eye.

"A lot of people go fishing there, but they don't know what's underneath the surface. They don't realize, until about 60 feet underwater, the beautiful life that lives down there. There are tons of fish that interact with each other and the natural live bottom habitat.

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It's incredible: everything is densely clustered and there's so much to see. There's something new every time you go there - it's spectacular and unique."

For scuba divers, these aforementioned features are huge benefits, and in addition, the sanctuary enjoys moderate depths around 65 feet and pleasant, 80-degree temperatures during summer months.

The sanctuary does have its challenges, however, with its lengthy distance from shore being a chief deterrent. Anchorage is prohibited, due to restrictions that protect fragile sealife within the sanctuary: divers must descend down a shortened line, often battling limited visibility and strong currents. However, according to Rhyan, the rewards are well worth the cost of admission:

"It's a beautiful, but challenging dive. If you aren't advanced open water or better...it's tough for a new open water diver to do it. You have to contend with the current: not that you can't overcome it, but if you're a lake, pool, or spring diver it won't be something you're used to. The visibility is such that when you roll over in 60 to 80 feet of water, you have to follow the line down and can't see the bottom from the top.

"It's difficult, but people I had who were on the game saw a plethora of local saltwater flora and fauna. There's a lot of colors, and with good light and photography equipment there's some breathtaking stuff out there."

Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary Superintendent Sarah Fangman has recognized this concern and is making a concentrated effort to encourage scuba divers to visit the spectacular menagerie of life and color:

"We're doing our best to encourage divers to come out and experience Gray's Reef. Unfortunately, a lot of people can't get out there because they don't have their own boat. We're trying to promote dive operators to put together their own trips and giving people the experience. I believe they'll have a fantastic experience, and if they see it for themselves, they will want to make sure it stays healthy, vibrant, and diverse."

Divers generally explore the site during summer months when temperatures are comfortable. But according to Fangman, there are many special wonders to behold during other times of the year.

"When you get into your drysuit in wintertime, you're rewarded," she says. "We have the nicest visibility during that time of year and you get to see a different community: the basic habitat and structure [look the same], but fish species assemblages are different."

Other States

Scuba divers from Georgia often venture into nearby states where more adventure lies in wait.

June Baughm, owner of The Dive Shop in Marietta, shares one reason why Georgia divers would consider an out-of-state site: adventure:

"I want to take some people to southeast Tennessee (where I'm used to diving) because the old Coca-Cola manufacturing was there. There were Coke bottles; and I had instructors selling them for \$800 on eBay. We were pirates - and I hope this next group will get that same passion."

There is much more to this story. Read the rest of the story in the **NEW Southeast Dive Guide** coming out summer of 2017 at a dive store near you or online at www.DiveNewsNetwork.com

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