

Sweet Georgia



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FOUNDING FATHER: The statue of General James Oglethorpe in Chippewa Square.

They'll make you feel right at home

Savannah is the place to experience some of that legendary Southern hospitality, writes **Rob McFarland**

OF ALL Savannah's 22 elegant, park-like squares, there is one in particular tourists make a beeline for. It's called Chippewa Square and the reason is because it's where Forrest Gump sat on a bench and famously declared that, "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get."

Visitors to Savannah seem to have a pretty good idea what they're going to get because 50 million of them have been to the city in the past 10 years. Lured by its rich history, graceful architecture and scenic squares, they descend on the region by the coachload.

Tourist hot spots can easily become over-developed and kitschy, but Savannah has managed to retain its charm despite its popularity. Much of this is due to the region's legendary Southern hospitality.

People really do talk like Forrest Gump around here and you'll find they're just some of the friendliest darn folk you're ever gonna meet. (Someone actually said that to me.)

A good way to get your bearings is to take one of the many hop-on/hop-off trolley tours that leave from the visitor centre on the outskirts of town. I boarded a bright blue Oglethorpe trolley bus and for 90 minutes trundled around the sights while learning about its history.

Savannah's grid-like system of streets and 24 squares was laid out by British General James Oglethorpe in 1733. It was the US's first planned city and has been heralded as one of the prettiest cities. Ironically, the design was

driven by more practical reasons – the squares provided space for military exercises and were an attempt to reduce the cramped conditions that had fuelled the Great Fire of London in 1666.

Today, the 22 remaining squares are shaded havens of green that explode into colour each spring.

Dotted around them are dozens of elegant historic homes that offer guided tours.

I'd recommend visiting the Andrew Low House, which has been carefully restored to how it would have looked in the mid-18th century when it was owned by the city's richest cotton trader. This is also the house where Juliette Gordon Low, the founder of the Girl Scouts, lived for much of her life.

If you want to see where Juliette was born and learn more about her upbringing, a few blocks away is the Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace, which is now owned and operated by the Girl Scouts of the US.

The home I was most impressed with was the Owens-Thomas House. Imagine being asked at the age of 24 to design a house for someone who lives more than 6000km away in a place you've never visited? That was the task given to English architect William Jay in 1816 and the house he designed is considered to be one of the finest examples of English Regency architecture in the US.

From the Owens-Thomas House, it's a short stroll down to cobblestoned River St, which runs along the Savannah River.

There's a nice atmosphere here, with a good range of shops, bars and restaurants. You can take a cruise on a Mississippi-style paddle-steamer or sit back and listen to the jazz or gospel choirs perform.

Things would have felt a little different around here in the mid-1700s when Savannah was a thriving seaport. Legend has it that pirates used to lure men to a tavern near the river, ply them with drink and then shanghai them through secret passageways on to ships never to be seen again.

Allegedly, the practice was only uncovered after a local policeman stopped by for a friendly drink and awoke on a four-masted schooner sailing to China. It took him two years to get home and alert the rest of the city.

This notorious inn, which is mentioned in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, has since been turned into the Pirate House restaurant and museum and is well worth a look.

To finish off my day I hopped back on the Oglethorpe trolley and headed for Forsyth Park, a 12ha park famous for its scenic avenues of oak trees draped in Spanish moss.

It's also home to a Parisian-style fountain and a striking memorial to those volunteers who died fighting for the Confederacy (the 11 southern states that fought against the north in the Civil War).

It's one of Savannah's many reminders of the Civil War and when I ask the trolley driver about how people feel today about the conflict, she replies: "You're in the deep South here, honey. There's some people who don't reckon the war has ended yet."

The writer was a guest of United Airlines, El Monte RV and Savannah Area Convention & Visitors Bureau.