

Heading South

Georgia's peach

Aquarium, new hotels make city a must-see

By Suzanne Wright

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A decade ago, Atlanta captured the attention of the world by playing host to the centennial Summer Olympic Games. Ten years later, the city once again is in the spotlight with new, world-class attractions and a marketing campaign that features a hip-hop song, "The ATL," written by Atlanta's super-producer Dallas Austin, and the tagline "Every day is an opening day."

Perhaps the biggest lure to the Big Peach is the Georgia Aquarium, the world's largest, which opened last November and hooked its millionth guest on March 1. The \$290 million project is the brainchild of Home Depot founder Bernie Marcus and has made a splash with locals as well as visitors. The aquarium has 8 million gallons of fresh and marine water, more than 100,000 animals -- including Ralph and Norton, a pair of whale sharks -- and more than 12,000 square feet of viewing windows.

It's the city's hottest ticket, and its success has caused a ripple effect on downtown businesses and spiked occupancy at downtown hotels. The Ritz-Carlton offers a family-friendly aquarium package that includes an executive suite with two full baths, a pull-out couch and king bed, untimed tickets to the aquarium, breakfast and an aquatic-themed edible delivered to your room.

If you want a more up-to-the-minute experience, check into the Glenn Hotel, one of the city's new boutique hotels. Built in 1923, the hotel is named for former Mayor John T. Glenn and has 93 sleek rooms, 16 suites and a "manager of desires" to help you achieve your goals while visiting. The Jezebel Suite, named for Atlanta's glossy magazine, features a state-of-the-art projection TV, his-and-hers baths and the Kama Sutra on the coffee table. The Glenn also is home to restaurant BED, the Atlanta outpost of the Manhattan and Miami restaurants where you dine horizontally with other reclining hipsters.

While downtown, you'll likely see folks whizzing along city streets and sidewalks on battery-powered personal transportation devices called Segways. A 2½-hour City Segway Tour is a great way to explore the downtown area, and as tour guide Kara Cantrell says, "You'll be a rock star."

She's right; the eye-catching machines inspire lots of stares and conversation. Steve and Paula Amentrout, visiting from Washington, D.C., said they were especially impressed with an up-close look at the Georgia State Capitol, the Martin Luther King Jr. Center and Centennial Park. Also new downtown is Imagine It!, The Children's Museum of Atlanta, designed for children 8 and younger. Here, youngsters and their parents can touch, pull, spin, draw and paint in a larger-than life environment.

Heading north to Midtown, the Boisseuillet Jones Atlanta Civic Center has the controversial "Bodies, The Exhibition," through September. The fascinating and

dramatically lit exhibit features 12 real, full bodies (preserved in a plasticizing process) and more than 250 partial bodies and organs.

Midtown's dramatic skyline continues to take shape along Peachtree Street from Ponce de Leon to 17th Street. The High Museum's \$124 million expansion has doubled the original Richard Meier-designed space and has created a Village for the Arts in its three interconnected new buildings. Renzo Piano's architecture has been called luminous, and looking up at the bright blue sky visible in clever "scoops" in the gallery ceiling, you'll agree. If looking at art whets your appetite, don't miss Table 1280, the museum's restaurant, with cutting-edge cuisine and smart good looks.

Cross the yellow 17th Street bridge that spans 21 lanes of traffic near the intersection of I-75 and I-85, and you'll be smack in the middle of Atlantic Station. A \$2 billion, 138-acre redevelopment of the rubble that was the Atlantic Steel plant, Atlantic Station is billed as a live/work/play arena with a 26-story hotel and condominium complex called Twelve, a 16-screen theater, restaurants and shops, including the mega retailer IKEA.

The Atlanta Botanical Garden expects to meet or exceed last year's blockbuster exhibit of Dale Chihuly's glass with this year's "Niki in the Garden," the world's largest outdoor exhibit of renowned artist Niki de Saint Phalle, which runs through October. The exuberant, massive sculptures -- some weigh as much as 6 tons -- include her famous Nanas, powerful, dancing women celebrating life.

If shopping is your bag, head into Buckhead and Phipps Plaza. Saks Fifth Avenue has a fresh look and is the city's most stylish department store; new boutiques in the mall include Barney's Co-op, Jimmy Choo, Juicy Couture, Tory Burch, Intermix, Theory and Nordstrom. Across the street at Lenox Square, you'll find Bloomingdale's.

When the sun sets, Atlanta really shines, due to an explosion of chef-owned restaurants in the in-town corridor. Midtown's The Globe is popular with nearby Georgia Tech students for its creative libations and affordable nibbles, while Nan, near Atlantic Station, is the city's finest upscale Thai dining.

In Inman Park, Kevin Rathbun holds sway with two eateries: Rathbun's, his boisterous New-American see-and-be-seen room, and Krog Bar, an intimate Mediterranean wine and tapas bar. Nam, Atlanta's most polished Vietnamese restaurant, will wow your palate with its subtly layered dishes, while nearby Metrofresh will be kind to your wallet with made-from-scratch soups, sandwiches and entrees.

Arguably the city's hottest evening venue is Shout at Colony Square near the High. As you take in the stunning skyline views, you may just be tempted to shout yourself.