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ATLANTA

Cool new attractions have Atlanta back in the game

By AUDRA D.S. BURCH

ATLANTA - The lobby bar is buzzing this late afternoon with a fashionable crowd sipping drinks and mingling in one of Atlanta's first boutique hotels -- The Glenn, a hotspot carved from the most stylish, if not theatrical, corners of the imagination.

Just down the street, at the epic Georgia Aquarium, the crowd, including an amazing number of kids, is a bit more casual, and presumably more excited about sharks than shots.

And farther across the downtown district, the talk is all about the spectacular collection of masterworks from the Musée du Louvre in Paris set to be exhibited here next month.

This is Atlanta in 2006, a sophisticated in-town destination with the right fusion of art and aquatics, culture and cuisine. It's an inspired journey that began a decade ago when Atlanta was chosen as the site of the centennial Summer Olympic Games, then bumbled along without enough attractions to woo more people.

Until now. Not since then has the city been so beloved by so many visitors, mostly led by those who want to experience the world's largest indoor aquarium, which opened in November.

Just last month, the three millionth person walked into this five-gallery celebration of sea life -- well beyond the 2 million mark officials expected to make by the aquarium's first birthday.

The draw of the Georgia Aquarium, this giant tank in a land-locked city, is simply the sheer scale (think theme park) and the variety of fish. Transparent walls and canopies of fish all lead to tanks of underwater rock stars, whether it's the muscled fresh water fish called arapaima, or the teeny-tiny eels nearly invisible to the human eye. There are fish that come in brilliant, jeweled shades of red and orange and purple, and sharks in gentle hues of gray. There are African black-footed penguins adorable enough to adopt and a Pacific octopus that can die of old age just 3 years old.

Perhaps the most fascinating, and surely most hyped, attraction is the mammoth Ocean Voyager tank. Larger than a football field, it holds 6 million gallons of salt water and some 85,000 fish.

By the numbers: 8 million gallons of water, 505,000 square feet of covered space, and more than 100,000 freshwater and saltwater fish and mammals representing 500 species. The cost: nearly \$300 million.

Along with the Georgia Aquarium, Atlanta's brand-new offerings include a \$124 million expansion of the High Museum of Art; a new children's museum; an expanded gourmet dining scene with chef-owned restaurants, a collection of boutique hotels and the opening of Atlantic Station, a sleek retail, hotel, condo and dining complex in the Buckhead neighborhood.

These are a nice complement to what first lured visitors to Atlanta: its warm and Southern ways, easy weather and beautiful vistas. Early visitors to Atlanta enjoyed the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Site, which is arguably the nation's most significant civil rights center; Underground Atlanta, the dining and entertainment complex; and Six Flags over Georgia theme park.

And coming next year: the re-opening of World of Coca Cola, which has been spiffed up and moved from the Underground to a new 75,000-square-foot space next to the aquarium. The shrine to one of the South's most enduring symbols will feature samples of drinks from across the globe produced by Coca Cola and fountains that shoot the bubbly to the skies.

STATE OF THE ARTS

Much of Atlanta's stock is in the arts, starting with the High Museum of Art, located on one of the many streets in the city named Peachtree.

Late last year, the High Museum doubled in size and holdings with an expansion designed by the Pritzker Prize-winning Italian architect Renzo Piano. The three new buildings connect to the original, Richard Meier-designed structure. Collectively, it is an elegant and understated piazza that makes art of light and canvas of the vast white walls outside.

Now, each of the genres of art -- contemporary art, African art, works on paper and folk art -- are displayed in separate galleries, creating a cultural village that critics are calling a museum rebirth.

An afternoon spent at the High Museum should be followed by dining at the new eatery on campus, Table 1280 and Tapas Lounge, the perfectly cosmopolitan place to regroup.

Next month, the Louvre begins showing works -- paintings, sculptures, and antiquities -- from its prestigious collection at the High Museum as part of an unprecedented, three-year partnership. The thematic exhibition traces the history of the Louvre from the 17th century to present. This year's *Kings as Collectors* features works assembled during the reigns of King Louis XIV and Louis XVI. The most significant masterpiece traveling to Atlanta for this year's exhibit is Raphael's Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione.

THE GLENN HOTEL

In February, The Glenn Hotel made a splash on the Atlanta scene, touting itself as the city's first boutique hotel and drawing A-listers such as Usher, Nicky Hilton, Dallas Austin and Denzel Washington. The 10-floor, 110-room hotel explodes in smoky tones, designer furniture, floor-to-ceiling curtains, and a sexy bar that serves drinks with names designed to stimulate the erotic imagination.

Built in 1923, the hotel is named after John T. Glenn, a former mayor of Atlanta. The three-level restaurant, B.E.D., which operates under the basic premise that there is something sensual about eating in a bed, also has popular outposts in Miami Beach and Los Angeles. Like other stylish restaurants that double as lounges, it has positioned itself on the must-do list for hipsters.

Beyond B.E.D., the city offers a full menu of gourmet dining choices. Most hyped is Chef Kevin Rathbun's eponymously named eatery, which garnered *Esquire Magazine's* Best New American Restaurant award in 2004. Rathbun specializes in New American cuisine, which re-interprets the classics. Think eggplant steak fries or chicken livers with fig molasses or banana peanut butter cream pie. If you can't get in the hotspot, try his nearby tapas eatery, Krog's Bar.

Near downtown, the laid-back Two Urban Licks offers an interesting fusion of New Orleans and Southwestern fare without forsaking the Southern zip code. A sample menu includes candied pecans, smoked gouda grits, flash-fried oysters and eggplant hush puppies.

And for the person who is as interested in the scene as the menu, head directly to Shout in the Midtown neighborhood. The place is so distracting, so interesting, it's hard to remember what's on the menu.

But if you can get beyond the beautiful people, past the four bars and past the striking rooftop views of the city, great global goodies are on tap, ranging from tandoori chicken to sushi. Dress to impress -- among the celeb regulars are Outkast, Lenny Kravitz and Ludacris. The theme says it all: ``food, fun and flirt."