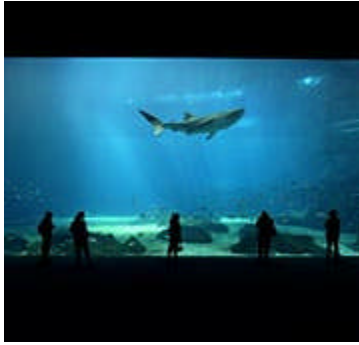




A sea change in Atlanta

By Laura Bly, USA TODAY

ATLANTA — Bernie Marcus is clearly distracted.



A whale shark swims in the Georgia Aquarium's large tank, which holds more than 6 million gallons of saltwater.

Michael A. Schwarz, USA TODAY

The billionaire co-founder of Home Depot is trying to explain why so few passengers who connect through Atlanta's airport — the world's busiest — take extra time to explore his city, and why so many conventioners blow out of town as soon as the last speaker leaves the podium. (**Related item:** [Photo gallery](#))

"Atlanta has never been a major tourist destination," Marcus says, "because there's never been a major draw."

Suddenly, the 76-year-old entrepreneur's eyes light up like a 4-year-old's. At the far end of a 6-million-gallon tank in Marcus' brand-new Georgia Aquarium, he spots Norman and Ralph, a pair of 20-foot juvenile whale sharks that manage to appear both benevolent and monstrous.

"Just *look* at those guys," Marcus says, leaning in for a closer view. "It's worth coming here just to watch them turn into the size of boxcars."

IF YOU GO ...

- **Getting there:** It's home to the world's busiest airport, and the old joke still holds up: "When you die and go to heaven, you have to connect in Atlanta." From the airport, MARTA trains (\$1.75) whisk travelers downtown in about 20 minutes.
- **Where to stay:** Most tourists head for Midtown, home to the affordably hip Hotel Indigo (800-980-6429 or hotelindigo.com; from \$139 per night) or Buckhead, where a high-end favorite is the Ritz-Carlton (800-241-333 or ritzcarlton.com; from \$219 a night).
- **Where to eat:** The High Museum's new **Table 1280** (entrees \$18-34) is generating buzz, as is the bluesy **Two Urban Licks** (entrees \$16-22) and Kevin Rathbun's just-launched Mediterranean wine bar, **Krog Bar**, next to his "modern American" restaurant, **Rathbun's** (entrees \$15-\$35).
- **Diversions:** Admission to the new Georgia Aquarium is \$22.75 for adults, and the just-expanded High Museum of Art, featuring an Andrew Wyeth retrospective through Feb. 26, costs \$15 for adults. The CNN Studio Tour costs \$10 for adults, while the World of Coca-Cola (\$9 for adults) includes free samples of Coke drinks from around the world.

That Norman, Ralph and more than 100,000 of their finny friends will become a civic sensation is as predictable as a slam-dunk by former Atlantan Shaquille O'Neal. The aquarium, which opened this week, already has sold more than 80,000 annual passes and booked everything from bar mitzvahs to conferences

in a ballroom that features catering by Wolfgang Puck and views of marauding hammerheads and giant grouper. (During weddings, Marcus notes, a curtain will be drawn to avoid upstaging the bride.)

But whether the world's biggest fishbowl can redefine a city that a local columnist recently described as "a great place to live, but boring to visit" remains open to debate. (**Related story:** [High-profile Atlantans share their best bets](#))

Built with a \$250 million grant from Marcus, the aquarium is the splashiest element of a multi-pronged effort to give "the city too busy to hate" a more compelling tourist image.

This month, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta's trendy Midtown neighborhood unveiled a major expansion by Pritzker Prize-winning Italian architect Renzo Piano. The \$178 million redo of the city's most prestigious museum doubled its exhibit space and created an open-air piazza anchored by "House III," a cartoonish, mind-bending structure by pop artist Roy Lichtenstein.

Downtown Atlanta, a clutch of high-rise office buildings and convention hotels that's still considered a foreign country by many suburbanites, is working hard to upgrade its checkered reputation — and take advantage of its higher profile in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The city landed several major events that had been slated for New Orleans, including the Nokia Sugar Bowl Jan. 2.

This summer, the city passed a panhandling ban that applies to the downtown core (including Underground Atlanta, a much-maligned shopping and entertainment complex) and the nearby Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site.

Flanking downtown's Centennial Olympic Park, which was created for the 1996 Summer Games, the Georgia Aquarium joins a new children's museum, an expanded public tour of CNN's headquarters, a boutique hotel opening in January, and a relocated World of Coca-Cola visitor center, scheduled for completion in 2007. Next up, assuming Atlanta beats out a handful of other finalists: a NASCAR hall of fame.

Atlanta boosters also have launched an \$8 million branding campaign with TV ads, citywide banners, and a swirling red logo incorporating ATL, an acronym that does double duty as the official airport code and city nickname made popular by the town's growing roster of hip-hop artists.

But the campaign's ambiguous new tagline ("Every Day Is an Opening Day") and "The ATL," a commissioned hip-hop anthem written by local music producer Dallas Austin, are generating more guffaws than applause in the capital of the New South.

Former Georgia congressman Bob Barr blasted the theme song as "nearly unintelligible moaning." Still others argue that the lyrics of local hip-hop mogul Jermaine Dupri's 2001 hit *Welcome to Atlanta* ("Big beats, hit streets, see gangsters roamin'... And parties don't stop 'til eight in the mo'nin'") are more representative.

Tourism spokeswoman Lauren Jarrell acknowledges that the city faces a challenge.

"Atlanta for a long time has been identified by our corporations, and the tours at CNN and Coke are two of our top attractions," she says. "But do you brand yourself on a corporation? That only gets you so far."

Also hampering the city's nearly 18 million annual visitors, notes *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* travel editor Amanda Miller, is the geographic dispersion of such tourist sites as the Carter Presidential Library, Turner Field, and the Martin Luther King Jr. district, coupled with a limited public transportation system, confusing street patterns (more than 50 Peachtrees alone), and traffic gridlock that rivals that of Los Angeles.

Atlanta officials hope to start a tourist-friendly trolley service between major sites within the next few years. But that will be too late for Pat Phelps, a native Chicagoan and 20-year Atlanta resident who ran a sandwich shop called Uncle Harry's in Auburn.

Located in the transitional Old Fourth Ward a few blocks from the National Park Service's Martin Luther King Jr. museum, King's gravesite and boyhood home and the Ebenezer Baptist Church where the civil rights leader was co-pastor with his father, Uncle Harry's is up for sale.

Despite being one of the few restaurants within walking distance of the King complex, business had been slow, Phelps says. And while visitors could stroll to "Sweet Auburn" from downtown in less than 30 minutes, "there are still a lot of homeless people, drug addicts and con men," Phelps says.

"The city is headed in the right direction. What's been happening here is all for the good. But they've got a long way to go."

Over the past few years, Atlanta tourism promoters have worked hard to lure both African-Americans (who make up 60% of the city's population) and gays (the town's Pride Festival is third in size to San Francisco and New York, notes Jordan McAuley, co-author of the new guidebook *ATLANTAboy: An Insider's Guide to Gay Atlanta*). They've spotlighted the area's abundance of shop-till-you-drop malls and growing roster of innovative restaurants.

Yet one of the city's most enduringly popular attractions is also among its most stereotyped: The restored Midtown apartment house where Atlanta native Margaret Mitchell wrote *Gone with the Wind*. Second only to the Bible as the best-selling book of all time, the novel, and the 1939 film that followed, continue to stir controversy.

But museum docents describe Mitchell's long-standing efforts to help integrate the city, and the conviction of Martin Luther King Jr.'s father that despite its romanticizing of a painful era, the novel and film did more than anything else at the time to put Atlanta on the map.

Strolling through the basement apartment Mitchell called "the Dump," 26-year-old visitor Kameelah Martin, a Tallahassee grad student in town for a literary conference, is impressed by what she has seen — and can't wait to return. She may check out the whale sharks and belugas at the glitzy Georgia Aquarium. But for Martin, the city's appeal extends far beyond imported fish.

"There's something to be said for Southern culture," from its literary past to crunk, a locally famous form of hip-hop. "And Atlanta is the crux."