

Plumbing the deep South

A visit to America's Deep South leaves **David Malone** with Georgia, not to mention the Blues and even St Patrick, on his mind

THEY say The South is less of a place, more a state of mind. Strolling along the banks of the Savannah River one balmy evening, I overheard two young lovers chatting. "If I sweep you off your feet" he told her "I'm going to take you to the mountain."

Now if an Irishman were to say that, it would somehow manage to sound threatening, but in Georgia words are spoken differently; people feel passion and aren't afraid to express it. Most visitors arrive in Atlanta, the world's busiest airport. Driving in Atlanta is not for the faint hearted – a freeway, 14 lanes in places bisects this modern city, but it is worth taking the turn off for Centennial Olympic Park, home to the CNN Center, Georgia Aquarium and the World of Coca-Cola.

But this trip is all about escape, so we head east towards Georgia's Atlantic coast. First stop, a couple of hours clear of Atlanta is the tiny village of Juliette. Its moment in the sun came 20 years ago as the setting for the movie *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*.

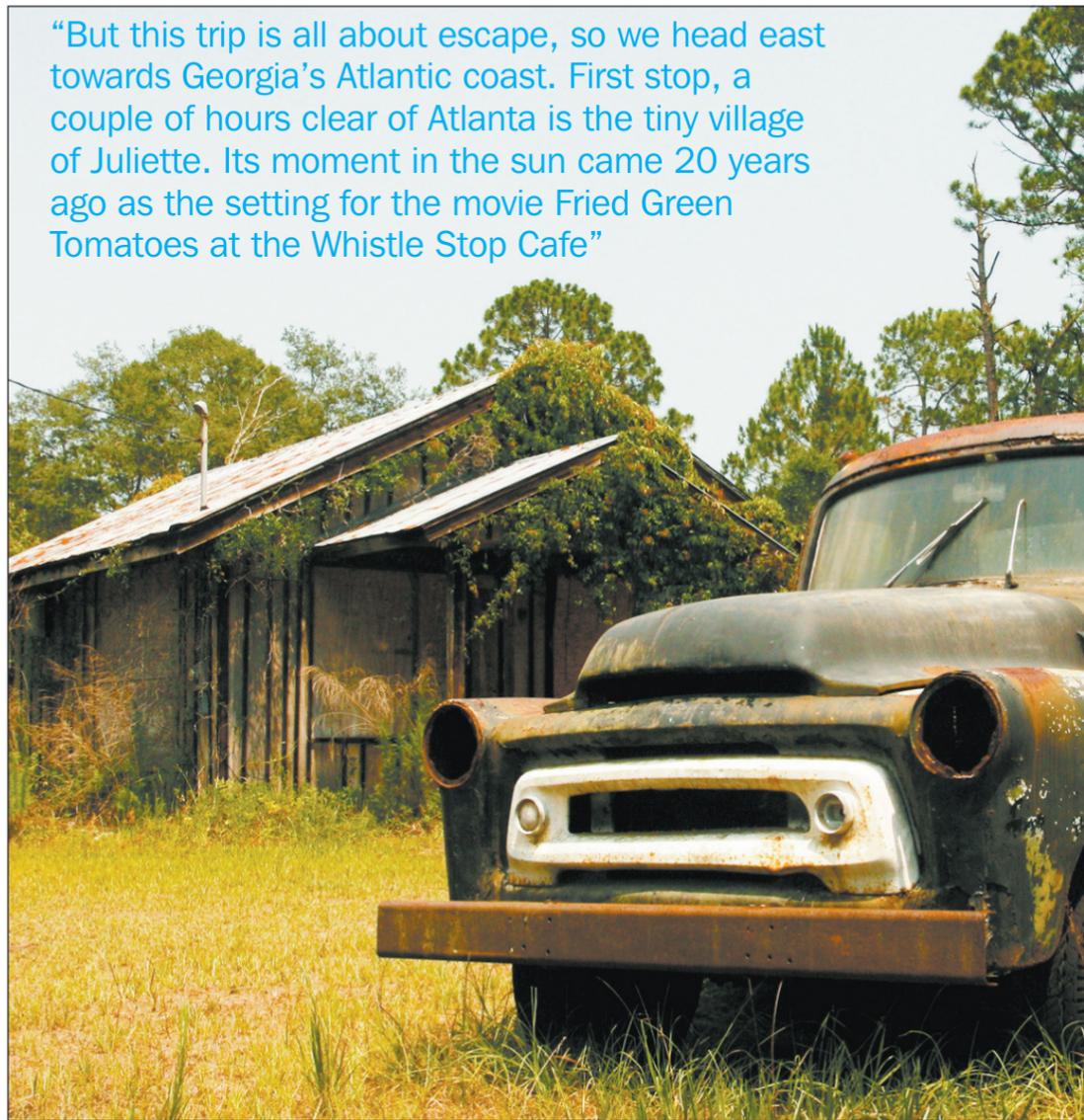
Juliette is a laidback one street town where you can easily spend a couple of hours sitting on verandas shooting the breeze, meeting former marine The Bear at his curiosity store, or Mr Moon who is worried that honey bee numbers are dwindling, then watching the slow freight trains pass at the *Whistle Stop Cafe* while tucking in to Juliette's signature dish, Fried Green Tomatoes.

A few miles down the road is Macon, two hours from Atlanta, yet a million miles away. Relaxed, spacious and hospitable, Macon has many fine colonial houses dating from before the American Civil War. It's also a blues town, and Grants Lounge has been Macon's blues hub for the last 40 years. Here, the music is solid, the beer is cold and the company convivial. Talking to two old black men propping up the bar, they told us of living through the Civil Rights movement, of serving in the US military, and of seeing on this very stage local singer Otis Redding, the great James Brown and more.

Continuing east, road signs inspire several

unscheduled stops: Dublin is an unashamedly Southern town, except for the green shamrocks painted down the middle of the main street. But it is not just the month long Paddy's Day festival for which Dublin is famed. This is also the site of the annual Redneck Games when each July, competitive seed spitting and toilet seat throwing prove raucous alternatives to traditional sports. Not far away is the city of Santa Claus. Population 250. Named by two founding brothers seemingly short on inspiration, every day may not be Christmas here, but Candy Cane Road, Noel Drive, Rudolph Way, Dancer Street, Prancer Street, and the palm trees on Sleigh Street always raise a smile, whatever the season. All these are in their own way fun diversions on the journey to our real destination: Savannah, Georgia. Formally laid out with squares that serve as small parks, with fine colonial houses throughout the Historic District, Savannah is above all atmospheric. Perhaps its mood comes from the Spanish Moss, eerie cloaks that hang from the year round Live Oak trees? But then it could be fact that the crumbling centre has been so sensitively restored. Or maybe it is just that the big fast food chains have been banished to the outskirts? This is a creative town: Savannah musician Johnny Mercer penned Moon River, inspired by the slow languid landscape; the city rewarded him by naming an inlet after the tune. The book and film *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, a true story about a scandalous society murder set in Savannah, is a popular read amongst visitors. Known simply as 'The Book', there are tours to the various locations within the story, including to Bonaventure Cemetery, where beautifully crafted ornate headstones each tell their own ghostly tale. But the most surprising aspect to Savannah is that it boasts the second largest St Patrick's Day parade in the world, bigger than Boston, Chicago, Toronto or Dublin and only marginally dwarfed by New York. I had a beer with Michael Foran, chairman of the St Patrick's Day Parade Committee in a building that he shares with the Knights of St Columbanus, just as he was assembling plans for the 2012 parade. "It's

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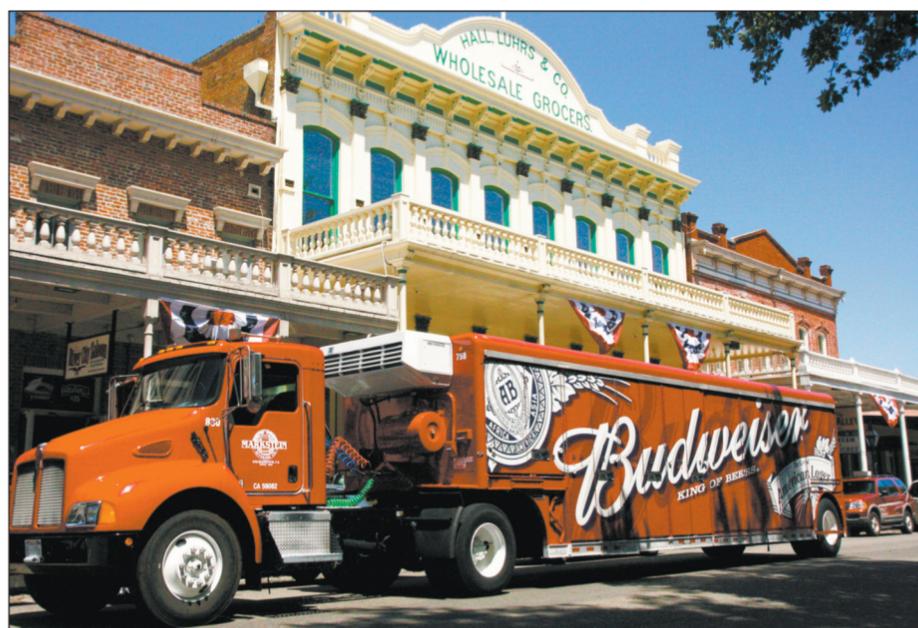


huge", he hollered, the third-generation Irish-American towering over me. "For almost a month, starting at the end of February, a city of 250,000 grows to over a million people." He is right. Savannah puts on a great show, bringing in marching bands and dance troupes from across Ireland in a larger than life celebration of all things Irish. Savannah's first St Patrick's Day Parade was in 1813, only 80 years after the city was founded by the English General James Oglethorpe. Over the years the city prospered with Irish immigrants gradually working their way up the city's ladder. "The Jews own it," Michael Foran declared "the Irish run it and the Blacks work it. That's just the way it is." South of Savannah, St Simons Island is an upmarket beach resort, a local favourite, while a short drive away at Darien is the Blue Heron Inn, a spectacular hideaway lakeside lodge popular with nature lovers. Journey's end was a 'shop till you drop day' at an American discount premium outlet. We chose North Georgia Premium

Outlets, being close to Atlanta from where we would fly out the next day. Popular brands offering deep discounts – up to 70 per cent – include Timberland, Banana Republic, Burberry, DKNY, Skechers and Samsonite. For comparison, and with all prices converted to sterling, Guess Jeans 5 pocket Skinny at the Premium Outlet retails at £28.19, compared to a £70 at home. Similarly Converse All Stars High Unisex Tops cost £15, against £40 here. Having filled that extra suitcase with bargains, a struggle between God and Mammon can quickly follow, calling for some calming spiritual time. When it comes to churches, in Georgia you are spoiled for choice. Driving through Deep South villages, there are pretty white churches every couple of miles, often with most unusual names: 'The Freewill Baptist First Pentecostal', was one; 'The Ebenezer Church of God of Prophecy' and the 'Only Primitive Baptist Church' all fight for their flocks. Georgia may not quite be heaven on earth, but it gets mighty close.



■ **CALIFORNIA DREAMIN':**
Route 101 in all its glory - New meets old in Sacramento (right) the Californian Chardonnay that won the 'judgement of Paris' in 1976 (below right)



■ **CALI CASTLE:** Hearst Castle, one of the must-sees on Route 101 and the vineyards which produce some of the best wines in the world (left)



James Stinson

SHORT HAUL

Blackpool's big attraction

BLACKPOOL'S bid to reinvent itself as a 21st century tourist destination is taking shape with the re-opening of the town's famous tower after a major refurbishment. The regeneration project, aimed at encouraging families to stay longer in the resort, is part of a £250 million investment for the tower and promenade.

The observation platform at the top of the Grade I-listed structure becomes the Blackpool Tower Eye and features a skywalk. It has floor-to-ceiling glass and overlooks the coastline.

Other new features include a dungeon attraction, a new entrance and a '4D' cinema with a vibrating floor.

Manager of the tower, Kate Shane, said: "We used to have a walk of faith, which was a metre square of glass which looked down the legs of the tower. Now the entire west elevation is glass.

"It makes the back of your knees go, but on clear days you can see Cumbria and over to the Isle of Man."

All inclusive not so hot

HOLIDAYMAKERS hoping to keep a lid on the cost of overseas trips by choosing an all inclusive package could end up paying hundreds of unbudgeted extra pounds. Research by Post Office Travel Money found that four out of five all inclusive holidaymakers paid for items they expected to be covered as part of their package deal.

For example, Post Office research found that a la carte dining, drinks, watersports and internet access could cost a couple 24 per cent extra – over £300 – on a week's all inclusive holiday in Egypt.

While Post Office research revealed that 94 per cent of all inclusive holidaymakers expected all meals in all restaurants to be included, its survey of 54 hotels in 24 destinations worldwide found that 65 per cent charged extra or put restrictions on using their a la carte restaurants. Instead guests were generally limited to buffet meals in one restaurant.

One in five of the holidaymakers surveyed admitted paying extra for a la carte meals during their all inclusive holiday.

Worse still, instead of taking foreign currency to cover extras, the research showed that 48 per cent of people paid on plastic – potentially leaving them open to fees and commission charges. And 19 per cent withdrew cash at an ATM, another costly mistake.

Sarah Munro, Post Office head of travel Money, said: "Although it is perfectly possible to stick to all inclusive deals, our research found that in practice only one in five holidaymakers actually spent nothing extra on their trip.

"The best advice is to check the small print carefully before booking to see what is included and make sure you carry enough foreign cash to pay for extras. Avoid the expense of a debit card by loading cash for unforeseen costs onto a pre-paid card or use a credit card offering zero per cent commission."

Fact file

DRIVE:

Surprisingly cheap. A jeep for a week with satnav came to £240

SLEEP:

America has an impressive range of bed and breakfast inns. Usually competitively priced, they offer a personalised experience and uniformly high standards. Recommended inns along the Pacific Coast Highway include:

■ Simpson House Inn, Santa Barbara (Simpsonhouseinn.com)

■ Cambria Pines Lodge (Cambriapineslodge.com)

■ Spindrift Inn Monterey (Spindriftinn.com)

■ The Good Hotel, San Francisco (Thegoodhotel.com)

■ Cottage Grove Inn, Calistoga (Cottagegrove.com)

■ Amber House Bed & Breakfast Inn (Amberhouse.com)

TOP TIP:

On arrival buy a local sim card, or cheap throwaway mobile phone. Calls cost 10c/min to anywhere in the USA, so a \$15 top up would cover most travellers' needs.