

Five For the Road: Southeast

By Suzanne Wright

Fall is an Atlantan's reward for surviving summer. No matter what you crave, one of these retreats is right for you. So pack the car and head for one of these great getaways, all less than four hours from home.

Coastal Luxe/Charleston Place

The flat tire turned out to be a good omen. Less than an hour west of Charleston, my pal Laura and I notice it at a gas station in Orangeburg. A Southern gentleman takes a look, declares a nail has punctured it and sends us to Gerald's Tires & Brakes on Dorchester Road. Within an hour are safely on our way, the recipients of speedy repairs and a red rose given to "special customers."

Our destination is Charleston Place. Owned by the upscale Orient-Express Hotel Company, the hotel is sandwiched between busy King and Meetings Streets, yet manages to be soothing. Our room is pretty in shades of yellow, cream, black and taupe; our balcony overlooks a fountain; the beds are plumped with a down comforter. The bathroom is luxurious with marble, two sinks, plush towels, Gilchrest & Soames toiletries and a fabulous showerhead.

On this trip we didn't visit any of the myriad historical attractions such as the plantations lining the Ashley River or the historic houses. Instead, we stroll through City Market, which stretches from East Bay to Meeting Street and is filled with peddlers of t-shirts, jewelry and gourmet foods. Better still are the African-American sweetgrass basket weavers, keeping a Gullah tradition alive with their tightly formed bowls.

And we eat, not counting calories. Our first meal was a special treat—The Charleston Grill in the hotel. Chef Bob Waggoner has been nominated for a James Beard Award for his cuisine, which fuses low country cooking with French influences. The room is sumptuous and a jazz trio provides entertainment. Although there's a tasting menu, we hopscotch through the many choices ourselves, especially enjoying a warm salad of diver scallops, an outstanding rabbit loin, velvety veal sweetbreads and a marscapone cheesecake kissed with orange sauce. Sommelier Roberto is not at all pretentious, but a rather an excited professor. Allowing him to pair wines with meals is good excuse to fill table with lots of lovely glassware. Although it's after midnight, we take a long late walk through the now-hushed town, to the famed Battery with its palatial homes, working off our indulgence.

At the hotel's spa the next day, I am handed a basket tied with a blue ribbon; it contains a robe, slippers and a locker key. Added four years ago, the spa is done up in quiet shades of beige, with wicker chairs. Tamara gives me great rosemary scrub that exfoliates my skin to a silky glow. That is followed by the vichy shower with its multiple heads, moving back and forth across my body, nearly lulling me to sleep. Next I enjoy a 30-

minute massage with a combo of relaxing and more vigorous strokes. Finally, Rachealle gives me a pretty French pedicure. I return to my room to nap.

That evening we head to Peninsula Grill for a cocktail in their pretty courtyard. Later we return for a decadent dessert: a 12-layer coconut cake with whipped icing. Dinner is at McCrady's, a low-key yet sophisticated bistro that claims to be America's oldest tavern. The large space boasts exposed brick, arched doors, dark woods, stained glass and chocolate upholstery. We have an outstanding meal featuring a refreshing crab with watermelon and avocado, halibut with white beans and tomatoes and a rich coffee-rubbed filet. As we leave, I am presented with a thoughtful touch: the label of the Syrah wine I quaffed is affixed to a card.

The next morning, I take a jog through Down Meeting Street to the Battery. As I route onto King Street, the stores are just coming alive, with the antique shopkeepers nodding and sharing friendly good mornings.

We head to High Cotton and its Sunday jazz brunch. Slow-moving palm-leaf ceiling fans, heart of pine floors and a witty bartender lend the place a lazy elegance. The Hangtown fry, an oyster, sausage and goat-cheese filled omelet and a crawfish quiche are terrific. A Bloody Bull—a twist on the Mary with beef bouillon—is the perfect accompaniment. Later we check out jazz vespers at the circular Congregational Church and spend the balance of the sultry evening lounging by the pool.

A Found Jewel/The Woodlands Resort & Inn

Word travels fast in the Carolina low country. A Relais & Châteaux property located in sleepy Summerville, just 30 minutes from Charleston, The Woodlands is a mansion-turned-hotel, boasting croquet lawns and the state's only AAA Five Diamond dining courtesy of chef Ken Vedrinski. Vedrinski was tipped off that we were coming to his property and he wanted to give us a taste of his artistry even though it was only lunchtime.

The airy dining rooms features yellow walls and classical mix of patterns; it encourages leisurely dining. Vedrinski spent time at the famed Oriental in Bangkok and his multiple course menus, which change nightly, are a revelation of low country, French and Asian accents. Perhaps you'll be treated to exquisite sashimi tuna topped with a tiny quail egg or a buttery skate wing served with creamy risotto bursting with sweet corn and oysters. Butter poached main lobster sitting atop a disc of vanilla and coconut spiced egg Foo Yong is exceptional. Dessert might be light lemon-rosemary ice cream paired with blackberry shortbread or excellent blueberry soufflé. This is exceptional food served in a lovely room; I wish we were staying the night.

We peek at the suites and they are grand, replete with a Bose Wave radio, VCR, fireplace, heated towel rack and whirlpool bath; the hotel greets guests with a split of Perrier-Jouet and fresh flowers. With only 19 rooms on the 42-acre property, you feel rather like a guest of an impeccably restored 1906 country house. With a staff of 75 to

pamper you, it's tempting to just hang out in one of the light-flooded sitting areas scattered throughout the inn. I image sipping a libation on the front porch with a good book.

Mountain Magic/Brasstown Valley Resort

There's a good reason Atlantans flock to the North Georgia Mountains in every season: they are close, cool and calming. But fall offers a special enticement to travelers: a pageantry of color in the southern Appalachian foothills.

Opened in 1995, Brasstown Valley Resort is has 134 rooms and cottages nestled in the still-quiet, rolling hills of the Blue Ridge mountains not far from Brasstown Bald—Georgia's highest mountain at 4,874 feet above sea level. You'll cross two wooden bridges on your approach. The main lodge blends in with the adjacent 503-acre Chattahoochee National Forest, and the lobby or "great room" is warm and welcoming thanks to the 72-foot stacked fireplace, gently worn chocolate leather furniture, antler chandeliers, floor-to-ceiling windows and pine paneling.

Your room is just as comfortable, with handcrafted a twig armoire and headboard and hunter green and blue plaid bedspreads. An in-room coffeemaker allows you to sip a cup of morning java on your balcony, enjoying the blue-green mountains shrouded in early morning mist.

Known as The "Enchanted Valley," this land was once home to Cherokee Indians. Today there are still signs of this rich legacy that dates back more than 9,000 years ago, especially in the archeological finds such as "Track Rock." Susan, the concierge, will be glad to point you to the site. You'd also do well to stop by the American Indian Gallery and chat with Tony and Nancy Plemmons who are members of the Ioway and Cherokee tribes. They have a wonderful collection of handmade crafts including drums, dance staffs, knives, rattles and pottery—and will gladly share their knowledge of the area with you.

Breathtaking foliage is all around you, and the hotel offers great hiking on its 9.2 mile forested trail that winds along babbling creeks and afford a glimpse of more than 100 native birds, foxes, deer and black bears. Want to peer skyward? The nearby Rollins Planetarium offers star shows on Friday evenings. Want to fish? There's trout fishing on clear, spring-fed streams brimming with brown and rainbow trout. Boating can be arranged on Lake Chatuge. There's also tennis, horseback riding, mountain biking and whitewater rafting. If you're a golfer, the resort is one of Georgia's premier courses and is a member of the Leading Golf Courses of America. A model of environmental sensitivity, the natural landscape creates a challenging, well-bunkered course with stunning views from every hole.

And after you've worked up an appetite, the resort has hearty food to replenish you. The dining room offers satisfying but not-too fancy food at every meal. I enjoy dinner one crisp night on the porch with the sound of crickets as accompaniment. Don't miss the

signature forest mushroom soup, the pecan-crusted trout and the indulgent filet slathered in bleu cheese. The bread pudding is a rich celebration with its whipped cream and raspberry sauce. I nibble at it while watching the pink-orange sunset give way to the indigo sky.

Urban Retreat/The Chattanooga

“It’s like Atlanta 15 or 20 years ago,” says one young man of Chattanooga. Indeed, the town is a kind of slowed-down version of our hometown, which makes it pretty darn appealing.

Sleek but inviting and opened just 18 months ago, this isn’t the Tennessee you know. The Chattanooga is a \$43 million property with 202 guest rooms offering an oasis of urbanity. There’s also small spa where I enjoyed a relaxing stone massage using stones from local rivers. I love the sophisticated, tawny-colored palette in the lobby, restaurant and rooms, accented with high-end lighting and tasteful objects made by local artists. I also love the Southern charm of the staff. When there’s a chill, the lobby fireplace burns cannonballs, a nod to its design that evokes a foundry. My suite is gargantuan, with a killer view of Lookout Mountain in the distance.

Just steps from the hotel the charms of Chattanooga await your exploration. The Southside shops—a collection of antique stores as is outlet shopping at upscale Warehouse Row. You can catch the free, electric-powered downtown shuttle or walk 10 blocks to the Tennessee Aquarium, the world’s largest freshwater aquarium. The architecture—it looks as though giant glass fins are sprouting from the brick building—brings a smile.

The picturesque Walnut Street Bridge, which spans the Tennessee River, claims to be the world’s longest pedestrian bridge. The Bluff View art District offers breathtaking vistas and both permanent and changing sculpture gardens. Also in the district, The Hunter Museum of American Art features works by Andrew Wyeth and Andy Warhol. Have a drink at St. John’s on Market Street, a refined renovation of a former hotel lobby. Although loud, it features an attractive crowd not unlike Buckhead’s best.

My favorite meal was at the hotel’s Broad Street Grille, which offers a seasonal, eclectic menu featuring local produce and meat. If you’re lucky, talented Chef de Cuisine Jonathan Jackson will present a four-course tasting menu. \$40 bought butter poached lobster claw on a roasted portabello mushroom with chardonnay and cream-braised leeks and sugar snap pea anglaise; a knockout summer squash sautéed, carved out and filled with lima beans, corn and succotash; flavorful, falling-off-the-bone lamb shank with feta cheese; and an icebox watermelon soup topped with star fruit that recalls the Caribbean. I happily gorged myself to the strains of live jazz, knowing my commute was just an elevator ride away.

Posh Spa/Grove Park Inn

The legendary Grove Park Inn put Asheville on the map in 1913; its magnificent new spa will keep it there for years to come.

Since its opening last year, the spa has become a destination for visitors from across the U.S. and Europe. 4,000 tons of native granite was used to construct the \$40 million, 40,000 square foot facility. But perhaps most stunning are the 12 water features, including a body-temperature, chlorine-free mineral pool with underwater music; a lap pool that twinkles with fiber-optic “stars” when the sun sets; and a waterfall pool. I was here to be spoiled with the signature Fire, Rock, Water & Light treatment.

My therapist Katie, is warm and friendly and offers me a choice of five types of music to relax to; I select New Age. First is an invigorating exfoliation with sugar and fragrant oils. Next, I sip a cooling kava-kava elixir while sitting in a buttermilk Jacuzzi bath. Katie places an icy washcloth on my forehead and sprinkles cool water on my shoulders to counteract the heat and massages honey into my face. Back up on the table, she paints my body with more buttermilk and honey and wraps me in Mylar. Then she performs a facial massage with cool basalt rocks and massages my feet with hot stones. Finally, a vichy shower washes remaining cares. It’s an hour and a half of bliss; it’s worth the price tag.

After my treatment, I relax in darkened room with a heated pillow on my neck. I nibble on cookies, nuts and cranberries, drinking water from a pitcher with thin cucumber rounds in it. Eventually, I amble out to the pool and take in the view of the city and the mountains. I peek into the inhalation room and the sauna; chilled peppermint towels are thoughtfully provided. Everyone speaks in the honeyed tones of the truly, deeply centered. After a dip in each of the pools and some contorting of my lower back and neck under the waterfall (thus ensuring maximum water pressure), I head upstairs to my room.

“I’ll see Asheville itself another time,” says my friend Erin as she leans back on the supremely comfortable bed (you can buy the handcrafted mattress and box springs for your home), gazing out the window at a sweeping view of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the 11th hole of the golf course from our renovated room in the Sammons wing.

That night we eat dinner at the Flying Frog. Selecting a glass of wine from their terrific menu, we opt for mostly Indian specialties from their menu which includes French, Cajun and Caribbean dishes. The café is a series of darkly lit, stucco-walled adjoining rooms.

The next day we work up an appetite at the Biltmore House; we sate it with dinner back at the hotel’s Horizons restaurant. Paul, our knowledgeable and genial waiter presides over our four-course prix fixe meal. The menu is broad and ambitious, which can often be a bad sign. But our meal is tremendously creative and satisfying. Highlights include a refreshing watermelon salad with goat cheese; an invigorating lobster concoction with couscous and citrus; and earthy Moroccan-style lamb with a tasty chickpea mouse and roasted eggplant. We end the night with a cheese course and a trio of miniature fruit tarts, sipping champagne and toasting our good fortune.

