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Worth The Visit

A look at five destination cities across Georgia that are attracting tourists.

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Welcoming Spirit: St. Marys Mayor John F. Morrissey

Eliot VanOtteren

When travel is as easy as jumping in a car and driving a few hours to try someplace new, how do you get people to put your town on their must-see list? How do you draw the tourists who will invest money into your businesses and help contribute to a good quality of life for residents and visitors alike?

This year, in partnership with the Georgia Municipal Association, *Georgia Trend* takes a look at five cities that are doing it right to see if there's a magic ticket to tourism gold.

What we found is that there's no one rule for success. Turns out that what makes a place worth visiting is as different as the foothills of the Appalachians and the glistening Atlantic coast.

On the coast, St. Marys may look like a sleepy town draped in Spanish moss, but don't be fooled. A world-class submarine museum, tours

of its historic downtown and the St. Marys Rock Shrimp Festival are just a few of the many things you can do on a weekend visit.

In Duluth, a vibrant downtown and an increased focus on the outdoors makes it a city to visit. Farther north, in Blue Ridge, downtown is the place to be, but it, too, prides itself on outdoor activities like hiking and trout fishing. In Colquitt, in southwest Georgia, the small town has big ideas for drawing visitors, and it seems to be working. And in Springfield, just northwest of Savannah, the rehabilitated 1945 Mars Theatre is drawing people in from miles around 57 years after the curtain last closed.

These cities aren't just great places to visit; a lot can be learned by how each area became a destination. Whether it's through working with a neighboring city like Duluth and Johns Creek or reinvesting in downtown and the arts like Colquitt, each one made a commitment to

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create a thriving community – not just for visitors, but for residents to enjoy, too. In a time when people are craving a sense of place, that’s reason enough to jump in the car and see what these towns have to offer. – Christy Simo

A Coastal Treat

For most of the 50,000 annual visitors to Cumberland Island National Seashore, St. Marys is merely the sleepy fishing village where you catch the ferry to tour the island paradise. Sure, it’s quiet; you can actually hear yourself talk when downtown shopkeepers invite passersby to stop and chat beneath moss-draped live oak trees. Restaurants and the historic Riverview Hotel face the picturesque St. Marys River that meanders out to the sea.

But there is more to St. Marys that makes it the quintessential small city, the kind of place where you feel safe keeping your car door unlocked. As home of the Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay, one of only two Trident submarine bases in the world, St. Marys hosts a world-class submarine museum. A narrated golf-cart tram tour of the thriving historic district passes by Orange Hall, an antebellum mansion. There is even a braille trail for the blind. Throngs jam the \$700,000 waterfront park during the annual St. Marys Rock Shrimp Festival, and in January 2015, St. Marys inaugurated a new history walk to celebrate the end of the War of 1812, when a famous battle took place at Point Peter, a peninsula jutting into the St. Marys River.

As a bonus, big-city amenities such as a symphony orchestra are just 30 minutes away in Jacksonville, Fla. What’s not to love?

“We have a very satisfying lifestyle that a lot of people want,” says Mayor John F. Morrissey. “What makes it work is the enthusiasm and commitment of our citizens to keep it quaint but definitely make the city better.”

The naval base is the city’s chief employer with 9,100 workers, yet population growth is on the horizon as retirees see St. Marys as a place to call home and entrepreneurial merchants eye it as a viable place to do business. Morrissey estimates that about one in four people who visit are considering it as the idyllic livable community.

John Long, for instance, settled here and co-founded the Georgia Radio Museum & Hall of Fame. Volunteers manage the museum, as they do for other local attractions. The city’s merchants are heavily engaged in building tourism, and it pays off. On an average day, tourists spend more than \$230,000 on related expenses in Camden County as a whole. St. Marys, with a population of 17,000, is its largest city.

If Morrissey spots you as a tourist, he’ll personally take you to City Hall and give you a token gift as a thank you. “That’s who we are,” he says. “And that’s how everybody is here.” – EB

The Great Outdoors

In Duluth, several new park additions and a bustling downtown are helping draw residents and visitors alike.

Scattered around the community, Duluth’s parks have added three new projects thanks to a 1 percent Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST). In the Rogers Bridge Park, a new canoe launch encourages people to tool around the Chattahoochee River. The Bunten Road Park has a new playground, and the Lodge at W.P. Jones Park opened this past September.

Another project will turn a 114-year-old trestle at Rogers Bridge Park into a pedestrian link between Duluth and Johns Creek. By thinking outside of their boundaries, officials with both suburban Atlanta towns, in partnership with Gwinnett County and the National Park Service, are creating a bridge for pedestrians and cyclists, which will cost an estimated \$2.4 million. The bridge will join the communities and give residents a scenic way to explore both sides of the river.

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“I think Duluth is pretty unique in providing opportunities and building relationships,” Parks and Recreation Director Kathy Marelle says. “It can’t happen soon enough for all the parties involved.”

At the launch, people can start canoeing, tubing and rafting adventures down the Chattahoochee from Rogers Bridge Park, which also has hiking and biking trails. The concrete pad debuted in 2013, replacing a beaten path on the site of a former ferry crossing. Also at Rogers Bridge Park, a short walking trail along the water has been started, with the hope of eventually creating a river walk connecting it with the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area.

Duluth’s other recreation spots include the Town Green, a sloping terraced space with a play fountain, pavilion stage, amphitheater and town hall. Bordered by shops, restaurants and condos, the Town Green has hosted holiday events, concerts, quirky activities such as a cornhole tournament, and annual festivals including the award-winning Barefoot in the Park Fine Arts Festival, which celebrated its 10th year in 2014. The 2014 Duluth Fall Festival used the slogan, “Local is Good,” a concept that continues to be promoted on Twitter and Facebook and among businesses.

Nearby, on a recent Saturday different generations gathered around tables making clay creations at Eye Candy Art Studio, across Main Street from Eddie Owen Presents at Red Clay Music Foundry, which brings people to downtown Duluth for live music. Miniature chocolate and fruit treats beckon from the glass cases at Crave Pie Studio, across the street from PURE Taqueria, with its hip vintage vibe and garage doors that can rise to offer more open-air dining.

Marelle recognizes that being a destination requires having places and programs for all segments of the population. The Lodge at W.P. Jones Park is a senior center by day and a community rental building at night and on weekends. For the playground at Bunten Road Park, parents and kids helped the parks and recreation staff determine the type of equipment, the landscaping and the color palette. Citizen input and investment, through SPLOST, is what is making Duluth successful, Marelle says. “To have that community support is actually what makes our city a destination.” – LJ

A Mountain Retreat

Many of Blue Ridge’s business owners moved to the north Georgia hamlet because they fell in love with the mountain setting. But the natural amenities presented a challenge: How could they lure tourists and second home owners out of their cozy cabins, off the trout streams and trails, and away from the waterfalls and lakes to experience downtown and its businesses?

The answer: Create a hub with diverse shops selling mountain decor, equipment and attire for adventure-minded visitors, artisan wares and artwork, and restaurants ranging from breweries to upscale dining to sweets. Plus, plan an annual lineup of free events, including chili cook-offs, arts festivals, parades and tree lightings.

The Blue Ridge Business Association now produces 16 events, which are funded and advertised by the Fannin County Chamber of Commerce. The groups work with local governments, the Blue Ridge Lodging Association and Blue Ridge Mountain Arts Association. The largest event, the town’s annual Light Up Blue Ridge, attracts 12,000 people over two days during the holidays.

In February, the Fire and Ice chili cook-off and tour of ice sculptures, which was introduced in 2014, offer a cure for cabin fever. Blue Ridge Community Theater actors also stroll downtown in character. (Famous lovers are planned this year.)

“It’s just adding that little element of surprise and interest to try to come up with things that are enjoyable for all ages and all types of people,” says interior designer Cindy Trimble, president of the Blue Ridge Business Association.

The spark for transforming downtown Blue Ridge into a destination and pumping up its tourism industry began about 12 years ago with the closure of its last factories – Levi-Strauss, Shaw Carpet and American Uniform. But Trimble says data showed that although Blue Ridge had lost 500 jobs with the factory closings, it gained a net 30 jobs.

“There were a lot of people like me that left Atlanta and left the big cities following 9/11 and moved to a rural town and started over,” she says. “So we had a proliferation of small entrepreneurial businesses with one to three employees. Simultaneously we had some key individuals in town who were buying up the storefronts and renovating the buildings on Main Street.”

At that point, in 2002, the Blue Ridge Scenic Railway was running along Main Street, which had one restaurant, one art gallery and one antique store, remembers Jan Hackett, Fannin County Chamber president. Trimble says Blue Ridge business owners wondered: What will bring people to town?

They focused on creating events, while downtown merchants increased, with an unwritten agreement to not duplicate products, Trimble says. Restaurant growth surged after 2008 when voters approved the sale of wine, beer and liquor in restaurants. The second-home market doubled to more than 4,000 homes, and merchants offered decor, art and other fine goods for second homeowners, instead of touristy “T-shirts and tattoos,” Hackett says.

Since then, the Blue Ridge Business Association has grown to a record 120 members.

“When we used to do our surveys, people used to say they come here to see the mountains,” Hackett says. “Today, when we do our surveys, downtown Blue Ridge has gotten to be the No. 1 attraction, along with Mercier Orchards and hiking.” – LJ

Artistic Endeavors

Swamp Gravy is a big hit in Colquitt, but not, as you might imagine, something slathered on biscuits. It’s a theatrical production written, directed and performed by some of the 1,981 citizens of the southwest Georgia town. Local residents from toddlers to senior citizens grace the stage of downtown’s Cotton Hall Theater and share their stories, drawing appreciative audiences from across the U.S. The play changes from year to year, but Colquitt hasn’t changed much since it was established in 1856. Until now.

At 8.3 square miles, Colquitt is a small town with big ideas and is in the midst of an intense revitalization project focused on tourism.

Planned for a 2015 opening is the new multi-use Woodstork Conference Center and Theater, a half-million dollar renovation of a 1960s theater. The name comes from an endangered bird species discovered by the EPA when U.S. 27 was scheduled to bypass Colquitt. Doing so would have adversely affected the bird, so the road was rerouted straight through town.

“The wood stork saved Colquitt,” claims Mayor Jerry M. Chapman.

He expects tourism to offset losses in sales tax revenues from the exemptions extended to farmers. “When you are struck with these exemptions, the only way to pay for it is to spread out your ad valorem tax to homeowners, so we have to encourage tourists to offset that and get people from other counties to visit. Other South Georgia cities are struck the same way and we are glad to see farmers getting their fair share, but when you have bills to pay for the city you have to make up that revenue somewhere else. We have to build upon that with tourism.”

And build they have. A testament to the town’s pervasive civic pride, the Colquitt/Miller County Arts Council hosts the Millennium Mural Project, consisting of 13 murals in locations throughout Colquitt, with themes saluting its heritage. Towering over the town is its tallest mural, a 400-foot depiction of a peanut farmer that is visible for miles.

Colquitt is also the Mayhaw Capital of the World. Every year up to 5,000 people attend the

National Mayhaw Festival, now in its 32nd year, to celebrate the tart berry that grows in the nearby swamps and bogs of Southwest Georgia. Orders for mayhaw jelly and other products come into Colquitt from around the world.

The town also boasts a new 18-hole golf course, which brings in visitors from Florida, just 50 miles away.

Colquitt native Leigh Ribolzi explains that the strength of the town is based on the “strong morals and values that we were raised on that many in society have forgotten. It’s that sweet hometown where everyone welcomes you and waves when they pass by.” – EB

In the Limelight

In the 1940s and 1950s, the Mars Theatre in Springfield coaxed movie patrons inside with the promise of “air-conditioned comfort.”

Now it offers a cool vibe as a state-of-the-art entertainment venue.

Reopened last April as a theater – 57 years after screening its last picture show – the Mars has attracted new businesses as well as new life to downtown Springfield, some 30 miles north of Savannah.

“It’s really exciting to see people on the street and life in town after 5:30,” says Tommy Deadwyler, director of cultural affairs for the city of Springfield, which owns the Mars Theatre.

While Springfield’s 2,800 citizens appreciate that they can once again see a first-run movie or a classic on a big screen without leaving town, live music has made the 230-seat theater a regional draw, too.

Deadwyler, who is also theater director and in charge of downtown development, says 60 percent to 70 percent of concert ticket sales come out of the Savannah area. People from as far away as Charleston and Hilton Head bought tickets to see Karla Bonoff in November.

“We’re filling in a niche that was open in the area,” he says. “It’s kind of neat that the people in Savannah are saying, ‘You’re providing something we’re interested in. It’s worth a drive.’”

When the Mars Theatre originally opened in 1945, it provided a popular post-war diversion. But with the advent of television – and home air-conditioning – the venue closed in 1957 and was eventually converted into office space.

The narrow beige building on Laurel Street had languished empty for years when it was put up for sale. Residents fearing it would be torn down formed a nonprofit, the Springfield Revitalization Corp., and purchased the Mars in 2007. After the economic downturn, the city took the reins.

“The city council decided that they had a choice of continuing to see their downtown dry up and go away with all the big-box commercial retail businesses that were happening on the south end of the county, or they could do some things to their downtown,” Deadwyler says.

The first step was improving the streetscape. The next was resurrecting the Mars, bringing a cultural component back to the Effingham County seat, which was already known for its beautiful old homes, Southern charm and historical sites.

A grant from the Fox Theatre Institute in Atlanta was the catalyst, Deadwyler says, and the city has poured nearly \$1 million into the Mars.

“It really was just the shell of a building,” he says. Following the installation of a new roof, seats, a proscenium to frame the refurbished stage and exceptional lighting and sound systems, a red neon marquee that closely resembles the original was the finishing touch.

Springfield’s investment paid off quickly with more than 6,000 tickets sold in the first seven months – including 150 for one of five showings of *Gone With the Wind*. Four new businesses,

including a coffeehouse and a clothing store, have taken over some of the empty storefronts nearby. Now they're considering hosting a film, food and wine fest at the theater.

"You have this great city government with open arms trying to welcome new business," says Deadwyler. "It's a good place to be for an entrepreneur." – KR

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