



IMAGE: ZOEY GOTO

CITY LIFE

ATLANTA

With a new greenway cutting through the concrete jungle, and a creative museum dedicated to Southern rap music, Georgia's capital is becoming a leafy, lively cultural hub

WORDS: ZOEY GOTO. PHOTOGRAPHS: SHELL ROYSTER

"Atlanta is home to some incredible green spaces, but they just don't get the credit they deserve," says Kenya Jackson-Saulters as we stride along the Atlanta BeltLine. If it gets completed on schedule, in 2030, the greenway will link up 45 neighbourhoods along a 22-mile loop, mostly comprising disused railway tracks. Helping the city to shake off its reputation as a traffic-clogged capital — also one where 75 million passengers annually surge through one of the busiest airports in the world — the Atlanta BeltLine is bringing green shoots to this urban jungle. Although the snaking trail is still a work in progress, it's already found deep roots in the community.

We're venturing along the four miles of pathway that unfurls through the Eastside. Kids wobble past on bikes, and Kenya stops to chat with a volunteer team of local office workers, tending to the wildflower banks in their lunch break. "The Atlanta BeltLine is special as it connects so many different areas. And because we're in an urban setting, it's offering a whole new perspective on the concept of wild," Kenya enthuses.

I've joined Kenya and her partner Michelle Jackson-Saulters, co-founders of Outdoor Journal Tour, a Black female-owned hiking collective that's tapping into the healing and meditative nature of the great outdoors. The couple's company started life almost

accidentally, when some passersby stumbled across Kenya and Michelle in meditation atop a local mountain and asked, expectantly, when the next session was scheduled for. It's since blossomed into a network that spans the globe, including the UK.

"It's all about finding balance through getting out in nature, even if it's just a neighbourhood walk, like this, to regroup and reconnect," says Michelle, as we pass vibrant murals. The sweet smell of magnolia hangs heavy in the air as the pathway weaves its way over and under city streets. "And the group aspect certainly offers a level of comfort and safety to women who may not want to do these walks alone," she adds.

Setting up Outdoor Journal Tour in Atlanta made perfect sense. Despite its notoriety as a mass of concrete highways and high-rises, studies suggest that 48% of the city is actually covered with leafy canopy. "We have a lot of wilderness in and around the city," says Michelle. "One of my favourite hikes is Sweetwater Creek State Park. Climb to the highest point here, and it feels like being on the set of a movie."

The following morning, I do just that, gazing back at cinematic views of the 'city in a forest' (as it's also known). It's a blockbuster sight, and one that's undeniably worth leaving the hustle of the airport for.



Hollywood of the South Georgia ranks third among US states in terms of the number of films and TV shows it produces, with much of the filming taking place in Atlanta. Blockbusters made here include *Black Panther*, one of the latest Spider-Man titles and two Avengers films



Clockwise from top left: Skyline Park, occupying the roof of Ponce City Market, offers views across Atlanta; the King of Pops cart outside Ponce City Market; a grape tart, part of a four-course tasting menu at Bacchanalia restaurant; The Sideshow rooftop bar at Skyline Park. Previous pages: Skyline Park

SEE & DO

LITTLE FIVE POINTS: Delve into the city's hippy 'hood, Little Five Points, whose mural-clad streets are home to vinyl dens, boutiques selling pre-loved cowboy boots, window displays glinting with New Age crystals and indie coffee houses opening onto patios that are perfect for watching the alternative fashion parade pass by. Out on the street, the theatre continues with buskers and a stall where a resident mystic will 'read' your face in return for a small fee. littlefivepoints.net

TRAP MUSIC MUSEUM: Atlanta is the birthplace of trap: the gritty, pulsating yet unhurried strand of hip hop prevalent in the Southern states. Deep dive into the subgenre made famous by local rappers including T.I. and 21 Savage at this former warehouse, where stage sets capture unflinching snapshots of their lives. There's also an exhibit celebrating female trap stars, a bar and a recording studio where visitors can lay down tracks. trapmusicmuseum.us

KING HISTORIC DISTRICT TOUR: The King Historic District Tour explores the life of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr, from his childhood home to his final resting place. Highlights of this 2.5-hour, small-group walking tour include stops at America's first Black-owned radio station and Ebenezer Baptist Church, where MLK was ordained. unexpectedatlanta.com

WORLD OF COCA-COLA: A staggering one million people a year pour through the doors of this shrine to the caffeinated fizzy drink, here in the city where it was invented in the late 19th century. Alongside galleries highlighting Coca-Cola's symbiotic relationship with pop culture, a sticky-floored tasting room offers samples of the weird and wonderful Coca-Cola varieties from across the globe, including Beverly, an aperitif sold in Italy from 1969 until 2009 whose bitterness comes as a shock to many visitors. worldofcoca-cola.com

NATIONAL CENTER FOR CIVIL AND HUMAN RIGHTS: This sleek and engaging museum uses three levels of interactive galleries to draw parallels between the US civil rights movement and human rights struggles across the world. Take a seat for a simulation of one of the 1960s lunch counter sit-ins, which uses audio to hauntingly powerful effect — recreating the atmosphere at one of the non-violent protests held at racially segregated restaurants and coffee shops. civilandhumanrights.org

SKYLINE PARK: The rooftop at Ponce City Market brings all the fun of the fair, with vintage amusement arcades, fairground rides and a nostalgic crazy golf course. The seats here also offer stunning views over the city, making it the perfect spot to soak up Atlanta's blazing sunsets. poncecityroof.com

**BUY**

THE VILLAGE RETAIL AT PONCE CITY MARKET: ‘Support is a verb’ reads the neon sign at the entrance to this incubator retail space that showcases around 25 local, Black-owned brands, covering everything from natural skincare products to zingy, Georgia peach-print shirts and stylish artworks. thevillageretail.com

THE JUNKMAN’S DAUGHTER: Opened by an actual junk dealer’s daughter in the 1980s, this left-field emporium in the centre of vibrant Little Five Points is a treasure trove of eccentricity. Rummage through rails of hipster and cosplay clothing, specialist music books and kitschy trinkets, including twinkling Beyoncé tree decorations and Elvis pillows, all housed under a sea of fluttering rainbow flags. thejunkmansdaughter.com

KING OF POPS: Having started life as a lonesome ice cream cart by the side of a road, this tasty local start-up now has colourful kiosks sprinkled across the city. The humble ice lolly is elevated to new levels here, with avant-garde flavours including key lime pie, Thai iced tea, plus chocolate coatings and frozen cocktails on sticks. kingofpops.com



“Atlanta can do crunk music, it can do snap music, it can do swag music. Atlanta has it all.”
Zaytoven, Atlanta-based trap music record producer

Clockwise from top left: Bartender at 9 Mile Station; Ponce City Market, a former 1920s department store distribution centre; Bacchanalia restaurant’s industrial-chic dining room; bánh mì and beef pho at Lee’s Bakery

EAT

LEE’S BAKERY: Don’t let first impressions deter you from visiting Buford Highway — masquerading as an unassuming retail stretch beside a busy road, it’s Atlanta’s finest multicultural food destination. Once there, make a beeline for Lee’s Bakery, a local institution serving up phenomenal Vietnamese cuisine on Formica tables. It’s must-try combo meal features both steaming bowls of fiery pho and crunchy bánh mì baguette sandwiches. leesbakeryatl.com

9 MILE STATION: This rooftop bar and kitchen at the top of Ponce City Market combines great views and brews, alongside a menu of US grill classics peppered with big-hitting flavours. A lively crowd can be found on the sun-dappled deck, tucking into sliders, salads and burgers, while admiring the unobstructed views stretching from Buckhead to Downtown. 9milestation.com

BACCHANALIA: Atlantans get misty-eyed at the mere mention of this celebrated fine-dining establishment, a jewel in the city’s culinary crown for over 20 years. Inside the industrial-chic dining room, guests sample the ever-changing four-course menu with such standouts as truffled Nantucket Bay scallops, and steak tartare with kimchi. Ingredients are organic and often plucked straight from the chef-owners’ farm. starprovisions.com

AFTER HOURS

NORTHSIDE TAVERN: Let the good times roll at this former petrol station turned legendary blues joint. Frequently used as a filming backdrop, the rootsy aesthetic includes peeling murals illuminated by flickering neon signs and bars on the windows. But you’re here for the music, which is played loud and proud every night, with no admission fee on a weeknight. northsidetavern.com

ARGOSY: Craft beer aficionados will feel like a kid in a candy store at this hip East Atlanta Village gastropub, which offers 30 specialist brews on tap. Switched-on bartenders share their knowledge and offer small-pour tastings, served in a breezy, open-plan setting. Ask to be directed towards the hidden retro arcade room, for a classic game of Skee-Ball. argosy-east.com

JOJO’S BELOVED COCKTAIL LOUNGE: Once you step through the speakeasy-style door of this disco-diva of a bar — lurking at the back of a food hall — the red carpet sweeps you into the recently opened lounge, which brings all the Studio 54 vibes. With a cocktail list paying nods to music icons including Dolly Parton, and an all-vinyl soundtrack filling the air, you’ll be transported back to a kaleidoscopic boogie wonderland. jojobeloved.com



A Polaroid photo booth at Hotel Clermont Atlanta, by Oliver



GETTING THERE & AROUND

British Airways and Virgin Atlantic fly nonstop from Heathrow and Manchester to Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, while Delta Air Lines flies direct from Heathrow. ba.com

virginatlantic.com delta.com

Average flight time: 9h30m.

The 38-station MARTA rail system takes passengers from the airport to Buckhead and beyond, while the Atlanta Streetcar operates on a 2.7-mile loop from the Atlanta Convention and Entertainment District to the Sweet Auburn area. discoveratlanta.com/explore

Explore the city's scenic Eastside BeltLine Eastside Trail on a bicycle (\$10/£8.80 an hour) or an e-bike (\$20/£17.65) from Atlanta Bicycle Barn. atlbikebarn.com

Hiring a car or booking an Uber is recommended for any exploration beyond the city.

WHEN TO GO

Spring and autumn in Atlanta offer a mild climate and plenty of sunshine. The summer months can be muggy and scorching hot, averaging well over 30C, while temperatures can dip to below freezing in January, with winter bringing rain and the occasional dusting of snow.

MORE INFORMATION

Explore Georgia. exploregeorgia.org

HOW TO DO IT

Purely Southern USA offers four nights in Atlanta from £1,189 per person, including flights and four nights at Hotel Clermont Atlanta, by Oliver, room only, based on two adults sharing. purelysouthernusa.co.uk

LIKE A LOCAL

FREEDOM FARMERS' MARKET: Make like a local and feast on produce from the surrounding Georgia countryside at one of the wholesome food markets sprouting up across the city. On Saturday mornings, Atlantans congregate outside the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, where the Freedom Farmers' Market mixes artisan goods with hot food, live music and a kids' tent. freedomfarmersmkt.org

HIKE THE CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER: The East Palisades Trail delivers bamboo forests and sandy beaches, all within view of Atlanta's action. This most unexpected of hiking trails, which follows the city-skirting river, can be accessed from two car parks; follow the woodland path up to Poppi's Point for birdsong, the sound of rushing water and knock-out views of the city skyline. atlantatrails.com

SEEK OUT STREET ART: Atlanta's streets are a canvas for artists of Latin descent. Spot murals celebrating love and positivity from Arrrtaddict along the BeltLine, and works by artist-activist Yehimi Cambrón, the first undocumented artist to exhibit in Atlanta High Museum of Art. discoveratlanta.com

SLEEP

ARTMORE HOTEL: Set in the beating heart of Midtown's Cultural Arts District, this no-frills boutique hotel is a favourite with creative types on a budget, with museums and theatres within an easy jaunt. A tranquil riad courtyard, strung with lights and fringed with palms, offers respite from the metropolis. artmorehotel.com

HOTEL CLERMONT ATLANTA, BY OLIVER: Once a louche motel selling rooms by the hour, a snazzy refurb in recent years has led to a spectacular resurrection. You'll still find the iconic radio tower soaring above this century-old building and a dive bar in the basement, but now they're joined by upscale interiors that add a '70s spin, and a rooftop with one of Atlanta's buzziest bars. hotelclermont.com

THOMPSON BUCKHEAD: Atlanta loves a splash of luxury, so the opening of this design-savvy, 201-roomed hotel in the preppy Buckhead district has gone down a storm. Chef Todd Ginsberg keeps guests well fed at Italian-American restaurant Dirty Rascal, while the decadence reaches all the way up to the cabana-lined rooftop pool. A five-star experience with a four-star price tag. hyatt.com