

By Rose Muenker • Photography by David Muenker

Legendary Savannah, Georgia soon soothed me with its charm. Measuring one square mile, the historic district is easily walkable. We explored the 22 historic squares on foot, knowing we could catch the free bus if we got tired. A bubbling fountain or commemorative statue anchors each of the squares. By reading the historic markers, we learned fascinating tidbits about Savannah's people and events. The exquisite architectural features of the squares' stately old houses created a feast for the eyes.

Down on the riverfront, trendy restaurants, shops and galleries occupy former cotton warehouses, and "The Waving Girl" sculpture continues to welcome ships. To see Savannah from the water, we jumped aboard the free ferry and rode to the other side and back. Dolphins swam down the river, adding magic to the view.

SOUTHERN HOLIDAYS

Continuing south to northeast Florida, we arrived in Jacksonville in time to enjoy holiday festivities on the St. Johns River. Held under the soaring canopy of the Fuller Warren Bridge, the Riverside Arts Market showcased local art and crafts. Musicians, jugglers, clowns and other performers kept shoppers entertained as we browsed for holiday gifts.

Before leaving South Carolina, we took a final walk on the beach. Neither dolphins nor pelicans made an appearance. Maybe they hate good-byes as much as we do. When we merged into the roaring, manic traffic on Interstate 95, my peace of mind leaped out the window.

CITY SIGHTS



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- 1 Our dog Sonya (white with brown head) steps onto shore after retrieving a ball from the ocean at Venice Dog Beach in Venice, Florida. The dogs' freedom to romp untethered delights both the pooches and their human companions.
- 2 Pelicans bob on the clear waters at Ana Maria Island's city pier. Fish are so plentiful that all they need to do for lunch is dip their beaks into the water and snatch one.
- 3 A sightseeing trolley drives around New Orleans Square in Savannah, Georgia. Each of the downtown square has distinctive landscaping, surrounded by historic buildings.
- 4 Greg Arnett of EcoMotion Tours gives tips on how to ride Segways on dirt trails through the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve near Jacksonville, Florida.



Trees draped with Spanish moss extend their branches over the clear, warm waters of Blue Spring, a cold weather refuge for Florida manatees.

AND WILDLIFE

On a chilly evening, we joined enthusiastic spectators on Jacksonville Landing for the Jacksonville Light Parade. Boats decorated as fanciful floats plied the river. The crowd cheered with delight as colorful angels, sleighs, snowmen, dragons and Nativity scenes cruised by. Fireworks topped off the event. Launched from three spots along the river, they set the sky afire with brilliant color while the city's signature waterfall fireworks cascaded from two of the bridges.

After strolling city streets and driving scenic byways, we were ready for a new way of exploring. We found it on nearby Fort George Island where EcoMotion Tours takes nature enthusiasts through the Timucuan Preserve on two-wheel, battery-powered vehicles called Segways.

WILDLIFE WORLDS

For the next two hours, we rode on sandy trails under a canopy of pines, oaks and palms. The guide entertained us with stories about the area's history, gopher tortoises and natural sights—all easily heard through headphones. Midway we toured the Kingsley Plantation, a former sea-island cotton plantation, watched a bald eagle and osprey in flight, and saw dozens of pelicans and ibises roosting in trees.

"The greatest moment for us, though, was revisiting the site of our beach wedding on Ana Maria Island."

On the way to the Gulf Coast's Sarasota area, we spent several magical days in Blue Spring State Park observing Florida manatees. When temperatures start dropping, the endangered creatures seek the warm waters of Blue Spring, a manatee refuge from mid-November to March.

These aquatic mammals are far from beautiful. They have gray, torpedo-shaped bodies with snub noses, rounded flat tails and tiny front flippers. As long as 10 feet and weighing between 800 and 1200 pounds, they aren't remarkably large or small. And they aren't swift and acrobatic. But they're downright endearing. Spellbound, I spent hours watching them play, sleep and glide through the crystalline water. I even learned how to identify Amy, Amber and several other manatees by the pattern of propeller gouges on their bodies.

Florida's deep freeze last January caused the deaths of at least 77 manatees, hundreds of sea turtles and thousands of fish. After seeing what wildlife had to deal with, I quit complaining about Florida's winter chill. Only one day of our two weeks on the Gulf Coast was warm enough to brave sunbathing in a swimsuit. But we piled on layers of clothes and enjoyed the beaches anyway.

Whether the skies were sunny or overcast, sandpipers skittered in and out of the waves, pelicans dove for fish, sea gulls squawked



1 The Waving Girl statue on River Street in Savannah, Georgia, honors Florence Martus who in the late 1800s waved a cloth to greet ships as they entered the Savannah Port.

2 A manatee baby and youngster stick close to their mother as she glides through the 73-degree waters of blue Spring. Feeder fish hitchhike on their backs.



overhead and the tide deposited new shells to discover. At Venice Dog Beach, our pooch got to romp in the sand and surf sans leash. And several afternoons, we spotted dolphins leaping through the waters.

The greatest moment for us, though, was revisiting the site of our beach wedding on Ana Maria Island. The place has changed over the last 22 years, as have we. But its beautiful essence is still intact.

When the arrival of snowbirds caused costs to soar, our budget dictated we turn north and explore Old Florida. To our delight, memorable experiences awaited us.

Rose and David Muenker, a travel writer-photographer team based in Denver, are traveling the roads of North America by motor home. Read about their adventures in every issue of Out of Denver and on their blog davidandrose.com. Email them at DavidandRose.OTR@gmail.com.