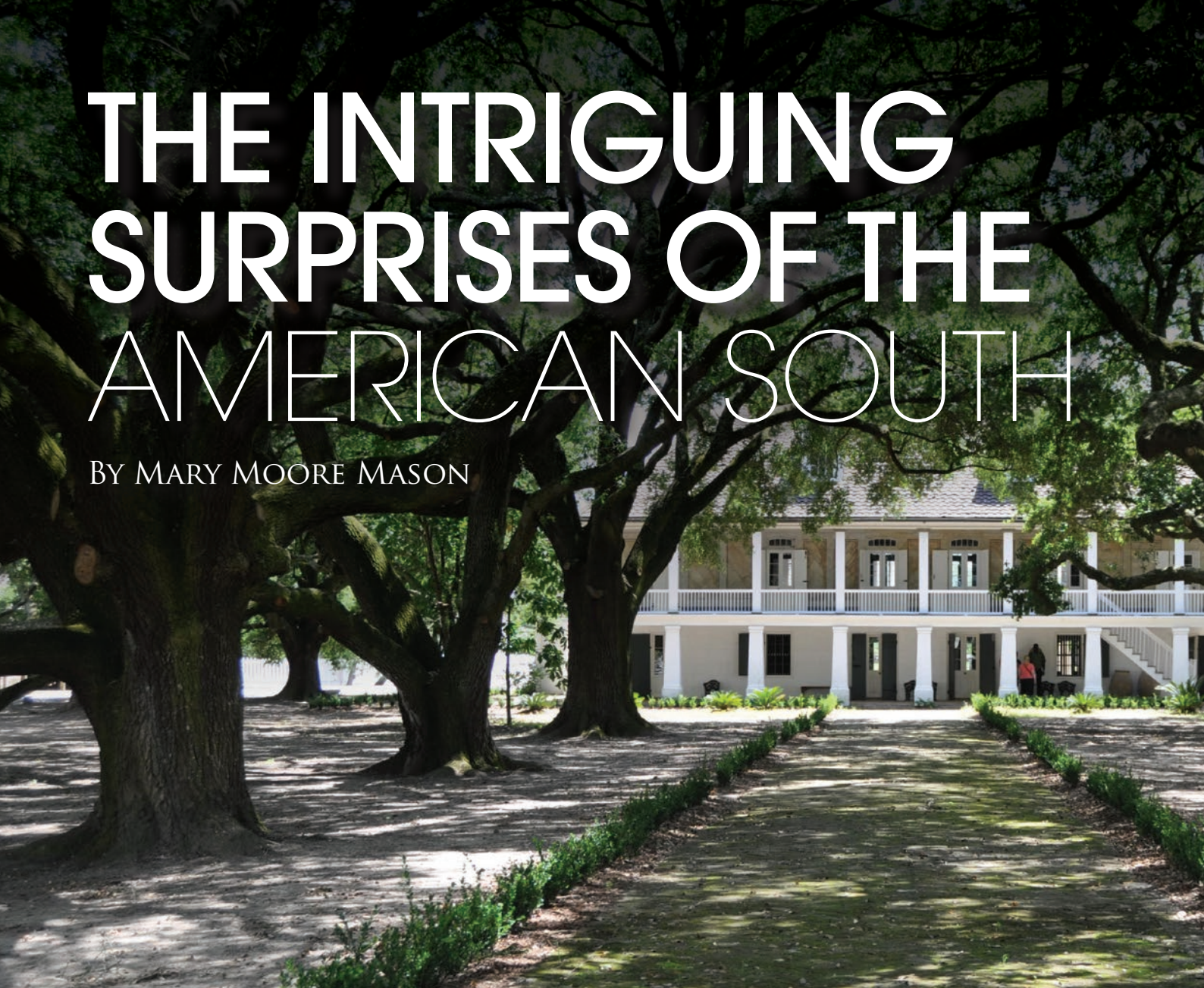


THE INTRIGUING SURPRISES OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH

BY MARY MOORE MASON



WHEN WE THINK OF AMERICA'S SOUTHERN STATES the chances are we immediately envision white-columned plantation homes, huge oak trees swathed in Spanish moss, Mississippi riverboats, charming old cities such as Charleston, Savannah and New Orleans and music ... lots of music – jazz, blues, rock 'n' roll, country, bluegrass. But the ten Travel South states are also full of intriguing surprises.

EARLY AMERICAN HERITAGE

Although New England gets the credit for being the birthplace of English-speaking America, Jamestown, Virginia, was in fact settled in 1607, 13 years before the Pilgrim Fathers set foot in Massachusetts. And, in 1585, an expedition funded by Sir Walter Raleigh established an even earlier colony on Roanoke Island in what is now North Carolina. Alas, it mysteriously disappeared, leaving no trace of the fate of its settlers, including the first English child, Virginia Dare, born in America. The ongoing search has recently yielded some fascinating archaeological clues;

ABOVE Louisiana's Whitney Plantation, which encompasses not only its grand house but also slave cabins (inset), is the first in the state to focus on the role of slavery in plantation life

BELOW Figures of Cherokee leader Sequoyah and his daughter Ayoka are on display at his birthplace museum in Tennessee

meanwhile, visitors can enjoy the island's summer performances of *The Lost Colony*, the oldest, continuous outdoor drama staged in America.

CHEROKEE CULTURE

Among the Native Americans who managed to evade the forcible early-19th-century removal of the 'Civilised Tribes' westward on the infamous Trail of Tears was the eastern band of the Cherokees. You can visit their reservation in Cherokee, North Carolina, where they stage their own annual outdoor drama, *Unto These Hills*. Also of note are the Sequoyah Birthplace Museum in Vonore, Tennessee, which is dedicated to the great Cherokee leader who developed their tribal alphabet. Among its attractions are figures of Sequoyah and his daughter, Ayoka, and a comic book translated into Cherokee. In Georgia, Calhoun's New Echota Cherokee Capital buildings include the shop where the 19th-century tribal newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*, was printed.



CIVIL RIGHTS SAGAS

The heritage of Civil Rights leader Dr Martin Luther King Jr has long been heralded by the sites in and around his home, tomb and museum in Atlanta, Georgia, now also the home of a new Center for Civil and Human Rights, as well as in Memphis, Tennessee's Civil Rights Museum, set within the grounds of the Lorraine Motel where Dr King was assassinated. The powerful film *Selma*, focusing on the heroic Alabama Civil Rights marches, has turned the spotlight on related destinations such as the Birmingham Civil Rights Institution, located next to the 16th Street Baptist Church where several young black girls were murdered by a Ku Klux Klan bomb attack (it has been nominated for a UNESCO World Heritage Site) and Montgomery, home of the Rosa Parks Museum and this year celebrating the 60th anniversary of its anti-segregation Montgomery Bus Boycott.

And when a small group of us visited the Metropolitan Hotel in Paducah, Kentucky, we were met at the door by the African American co-owner Betty Dobson, who abruptly announced that as 'white folks' we were not welcome – this was a hotel exclusively for black folks. Once it was established that she was playing the part of the hotel's pioneering pre-Civil Rights owner Miss Maggie Steed, we were shown around the premises, which had hosted such luminaries as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and Ike and Tina Turner. We were even introduced to 'Miss Billie Holiday', who sang us a couple of her poignant ballads, and then treated to a delicious soul-food meal.

UNUSUAL MUSEUMS

Part of New Orleans' exotic heritage is reflected in its Historic Voodoo Museum. The Roanoke Pinball Museum in my Virginia hometown, Roanoke, Virginia, invites you to interact with its vintage machines. The life and loves of screen goddess Ava Gardner are extolled in the namesake museum in her hometown of Smithfield, North Carolina, and the work of George Ohr, the 'Mad Potter of Biloxi' (Mississippi) are exhibited in the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art sited in an extraordinary metal structure designed by Frank Gehry.

Then, there's Kentucky, which seems to excel in unusual museums. The world's largest collection of fibre art is found in Paducah's Quilt Museum ...

and if you are lucky you may well meet up with appropriately garbed Quilt Man, *aka* Fowler Black, sales director for the Paducah Convention and Visitors' Bureau. Bowling Green's National Corvette Museum has a Sink Hole exhibition gallery dedicated to the massive cave, which, in 2014, swallowed up eight of its vintage Corvettes (six of which are now on display). And, in the northern part of the



THE OTHER SIDE OF PLANTATION LIFE

Until relatively recently, tours of the romantic Deep South plantations focused on the privileged lives of their cotton-baron owners and the impact upon it by the 1861-65 Civil War, sometimes referred to as the 'War of Northern Aggression' or, in semi-joking ancestral terms, 'The Late Unpleasantness'. But now reality has taken hold. In 2014, Whitney Plantation became the first Louisiana plantation museum to focus on slavery. Located near Wallace, it was originally run by German immigrants and has reopened for the first time in 262 years. Other plantations that include tours of their slave cabins include Louisiana's Laura, which can be visited by road or on an *American Queen* riverboat tour along with opulent nearby Oak Alley plantation, and Boone Hall in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, the state that also includes Mitchellville, the site of the first self-governed freedmen's town in America – it's located near the chic resort island of Hilton Head.

ABOVE Two young girls outside Birmingham, Alabama's 16th Street Baptist Church, now a key Civil Rights site

BELOW Interacting with some of the exhibits in Virginia's Roanoke Pinball Museum



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state, Petersburg's Creation Museum features humans and animals covered by the early portion of the Bible and nearby Ark Encounter, showcasing a full-scale replica of Noah's ark, is still a work in progress. Meanwhile, a gigantic recreation of another great ship, the *Titanic*, is berthed in the Pigeon Forge area of Tennessee's Great Smoky Mountains, also home to Dolly Parton's Dollywood theme park. It was developed by Branson, Missouri-based Cedar Bay Entertainment and owner John Joslyn, who located the original *Titanic* on the ocean floor and extracted hundreds of artefacts by robot.

MOUNTAINTOP EXPERIENCES

The scenic Skyline Drive and Blue Ridge Parkway running along the mountain tops of Virginia and North Carolina link up numerous attractive arts-and-crafts-rich towns and cities such as the latter state's Asheville and Blowing Rock, named for a local rock formation where dropped objects are blown back up rather than float down. All along the way there are opportunities to hike, mountain bike, white-water raft and enjoy waterfalls. There are also regional urban mountaintop experiences. In Birmingham, Alabama, you can visit a 56ft-tall statue of the god Vulcan on the top of Red Mountain. Reputedly the world's largest cast-iron statue, it pays tribute to the city's roots in the iron and steel industry.

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

In addition to its beach-fringed Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coastlines, the South is known for its wealth of huge bays, tranquil lakes and rivers, most notable among them the legendary Mississippi. What is lesser known is that you can canoe and paddle board through Virginia's capital city, Richmond, on the turbulent James River, and enjoy America's largest urban white-water stretch on the Chattahoochee River running past Phenix City, Alabama, and Columbus, Georgia.



TOP A gigantic recreation of the *Titanic* is berthed in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee

ABOVE Enjoying Sliding Rock in the mountains of North Carolina

BOTTOM Young visitors to Louisiana's Greenwood Gator Farm have a memorable experience

West Virginia's challenging New and Gauley rivers are particularly well-known to white-water enthusiasts; for an unusual thrill, propelled by the waterfall, you can soar down the Sliding Rock in Transylvania County, North Carolina, as did actor Owen Wilson when on film location in the area. And when near Chattanooga, Tennessee, you can tour the 'Lost Sea', America's largest underground lake, by glass-bottom boat.

ALLIGATOR ADVENTURES

These creepy, crawly creatures are so prevalent in the steamy Southern swamplands and waterways that they have become both a tourist attraction and an industry. You can zip-line over gators at Alligator Park and Exotic Zoo near Shreveport, Louisiana, and see them being bred at Covington's Insta-Gator Ranch and Hatchery Education Foundation or Gibson's Greenwood Gator Farm.

You may also see them, as I have, lounging beside golf course ponds at some of South Carolina's posh resorts. Reputedly, they have been known to snack on the golf balls and even have a go at the golfers! Another favourite meal for gators is the hound dogs that accompany raccoon hunters into the wetlands, thus depriving the Key Underwood Coon Dog Memorial Graveyard in Tusculumbia, Alabama – the world's only hunting dog cemetery – of more intact internees. Never mind, it already attracts 75,000 visitors a year!

ISLAND ODDITIES

The South's Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coasts are enhanced by numerous resort islands, among them South Carolina's Kiawah and Hilton Head, Georgia's Jekyll and St Simons and North Carolina's Outer Banks. But it always comes as a surprise to discover that Virginia's isolated Tangier Island, settled by the English in the late 1600s, is still inhabited by old-timers speaking with a quaint English accent; that South Carolina's delightfully laid-back Pawleys Island, settled in the 1700s, is one of America's oldest seaside resorts; and that North Carolina's Ocracoke Island is where infamous pirate Blackbeard met his



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bitter (headless) end. In fact, you can take a ghost tour led by an eighth-generation descendent of the pirate's quartermaster. While on the Outer Banks, also check out the wild horses, reputedly descendents of those shipwrecked centuries ago from a Spanish galleon,

SPECIAL SPAS

Not only have the historic Greenbrier resort in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, and the splendid Homestead at Hot Springs, Virginia, been popular with generations of Americans for their warm, mineral springs, opulent guest accommodation and wide range of sporting facilities, but they are also known to the children and grandchildren of German and Japanese diplomats who were interred there in some style during World War II. The Greenbrier also has on its grounds an underground bunker set up to shelter key members of the American government in case of a Cold War Russian attack.

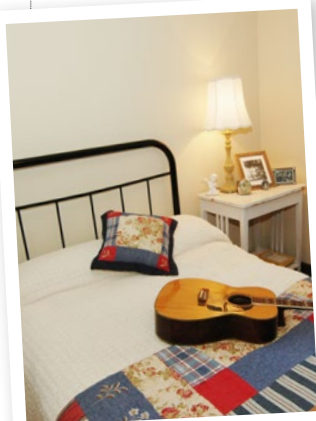
Although not in the same league in terms of accommodation and facilities, West Virginia's Berkeley Springs, founded as the village of Bath by George Washington in 1776 and known as 'America's first spa', is worth a visit. Among its attractions is 'George Washington's Bath Tub', carved from an outdoor stone slab and reputedly splashed in by the great man.



TOP Fun on a Sunday afternoon at Louisiana's Whiskey River Landing

ABOVE A George Washington look-alike samples the first US President's 'bath tub' in West Virginia

BELOW Elvis's teenage bedroom in Lauderdale Courts, Memphis



BELOW Elvis's teenage bedroom in Lauderdale Courts, Memphis



was Old Time Music being picked and strummed on fiddles, mandolins, lutes and other instruments by the Irish, Scottish and English settlers of the Appalachian Mountains. Now you can tap into that rich heritage by following West Virginia's Mountain Music Trail and Virginia's Heritage Music Trail: The Crooked Road as they meander through music-rich mountain and valley towns and villages, including Hiltons Virginia's Carter Family Fold, where musician June Carter and her husband, Johnny Cash, spent time and performed, and Bristol's new Birthplace of Country Music Museum. And incidentally, don't assume that Louisiana only has jazz and blues to offer – in the atmospheric swamplands west of New Orleans there's great French- and African-American influenced Cajun and Zydeco music. A great place to experience it is on a Sunday afternoon at Henderson's rip-roaring Whiskey River Landing.

THE OTHER SIDE OF ELVIS

Many British visitors have toured Elvis's opulent, if sometimes OTT, Gracelands mansion but relatively few have ventured into the family's modest flat at Lauderdale Courts, where you can view the superstar's teenage bedroom (and where many a visiting female fan has left her lipstick imprint on the wall). And that's not to forget Elvis's small, white-frame birthplace in Tupelo, Mississippi, where you can also visit the hardware store where he bought his first guitar and maybe even meet some of his elementary school classmates.

DIVINE DRINKS

Southerners are known for their ability to produce, mix and consume strong drinks, although you can still encounter a surprising number of 'dry' counties and towns (one of particular note – Lynchburg, Tennessee,

HIP HOTELS

Stay in Memphis, Tennessee's grand old Peabody Hotel and you can watch the daily ceremonial march of the ducks through the hotel lobby. Check into posh Middleburg, Virginia's newish Salamander Resort and select among such activities as yoga on horseback and zip-lining by moonlight. If driving through Mississippi's steamy Delta Country – famed as the birthplace of blues music – spend an atmospheric night or two in a cotton sharecropper's shack at Hopson Plantation's Shack Up Inn. Local versions of the unique 21C Museum Hotel chain, featuring contemporary art installations, are found in Durham, North Carolina, and Louisville and Lexington, Kentucky. And, if visiting attraction-filled Winston-Salem, North Carolina, later this year, consider bunking into the new Cardinal Hotel. Part of the Kimpton Hotel & Resorts group, it will inhabit the lower six floors of the historic Reynolds Building, designed by the same architects as the Empire State Building and reputedly the model for that Manhattan landmark.

OLD-TIME MUSIC

Long before Nashville's Grand Ole Opry and other county music attractions, there

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UNBRIDLED SPIRIT



ABOVE America's only tea plantation and garden are found on South's Carolina's Wadmalaw Island

LEFT John Irvin and Scott Newitt, owners of South Carolina's Firefly Distillery, sample some of their products

home of the Jack Daniel's distillery). New Orleans acknowledges this liquor-swilling legacy in its Museum of the American Cocktail; Kentucky's Bourbon Trail links up a number of world-renowned distilleries; and, still in the state, you can benefit from a Mint Julep-mixing tutorial in Bardstown's Bourbon House and – in Bowling Green's Corsair Artisan Distillery – from taste-testing such unique tipples as Pumpkin Spice Moonshine, Vanilla Bean Vodka and Triple Smoked Small Batch Bourbon.

Head for South Carolina's Wadmalaw Island to enjoy the world's only hand-crafted Sweet Tea Vodka produced by Firefly Distillery, which is conveniently located close to America's only tea plantation. The South is also increasingly known for its boutique breweries. In Virginia's Loudoun County, you can bike between them on the LoCo Ale Trail and in Asheville, North Carolina, and Lexington, Kentucky, you can cycle-propel a 12-seat mobile pub through the streets or countryside, sipping and slurping all along the way. As for wine lovers, all the Southern states now have vineyards and/or wineries; Virginia ranks fifth in the nation, perhaps only rivalled by Texas.

UNUSUAL ACTIVITIES

It might not be to everybody's taste but you can watch prison inmates take on bucking broncos and raging bulls at Saint Francisville, Louisiana's Angola Prison Rodeo. It's held one weekend in April and every Sunday in October; throughout the year you can visit the Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum, America's only such attraction within an active prison's walls. For something entirely different, head for Cleveland in the north-eastern mountains of Georgia, where you can watch a Cabbage Patch kid (they are never referred to as dolls!) born from, of course, a pseudo cabbage patch at the Babyland General Hospital. And if you are truly smitten, you can adopt a kid (never use the term 'buy', although money does pass hands). While there, I met two elderly adoptive fathers ... one had 5,262 kids living in his Baltimore, Maryland, house, compelling him and his wife to move into a caravan next door; another, a sheriff from California, and his wife had two homes – one for them and another for their 2,200 Cabbage Patch 'children'.



RIGHT An array of Cabbage Patch Kids in Georgia's Babyland General Hospital

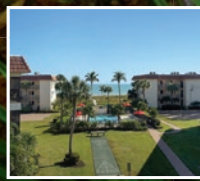
TRAVEL NOTES

GETTING THERE: The Travel South states are served from the UK by American Airlines flights (www.aa.com) to Raleigh/Durham and Charlotte, North Carolina; British Airways (www.britishairways.com) to Atlanta, Georgia, and Washington, DC/Dulles (based in northern Virginia); Delta Air Lines (www.delta.com) to Atlanta; United Airlines (www.united.com) and Virgin Atlantic Airways (www.virgin-atlantic.com), both to Washington DC/Dulles.

FURTHER INFORMATION: Alabama (www.alabama.travel, 020 8339 6122), Georgia (www.georgiatourismusa.co.uk, 01342 323656), Kentucky (www.kentuckytourism.com, 01462 440766), Louisiana (www.louisianatravel.com, 020 8460 7082), Mississippi (www.visitmississippi.org, 01462 440787), North Carolina (www.uk.visitnc.com, 020 8460 3582), South Carolina (www.discoversouthcarolina.com, 020 7593 1755); Tennessee (www.tnvacation.com, 01462 440784), Virginia (www.virginia.org, 01825 763636), West Virginia (www.wvtourism.com, 001 (304) 558 2200).



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