

Travel

MoonPie A La Mode In Mobile, And More

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Much like Chattanooga's renaissance that began more than two decades ago, Mobile is revitalizing its downtown with new attractions and a focus on the area's history, culture and ecology. The port city on Mobile Bay thrives on its coastal heritage and multicultural roots, reflected in a blend of historic traditions, architecture and cuisine.

A lively culinary scene in Mobile's downtown offers eclectic menus and local favorites – from oysters, crawfish and Creole dishes to Irish burgers and West Indies Salad.

But I was surprised to learn on my first visit to the city that one of the most celebrated foods is Chattanooga Bakery's MoonPie, featured a la mode and in fancied-up recipes from banana pudding to cake balls. What's more, a giant replica of the chocolate marshmallow treat suspends like a work of art from one of the city's tallest buildings!

Why such fascination with the famous lunchbox dessert? Mobile is home to the first Mardi Gras celebration in the New World, documented in 1703, and the annual pagentry continues

with more fervor every year. The MoonPie, replacing Cracker Jacks, became the favored throw from parade floats when it was first flung to revelers in 1952. Since then, the city fell in love, not just with the original chocolate, but each new flavor that emerged seemed to take the city by storm.

In 2008, Mobile's famous New Year's celebration, "MoonPie Over Mobile," began when city leaders teamed up with Chattanooga Bakery to create a giant MoonPie to drop from a high-rise building as an entertaining feat to ring in the new year. In fairytale fashion, MoonPie Over Mobile gained national notoriety from the start, and the MoonPie became an informal emblem of the city.

Though Mobile consumes more than four million of the packaged treats annually, MoonPie didn't exactly put Mobile on the map. The 300-year old city has a colorful history reflected in its diverse architectural styles, including Spanish, French Colonial, Victorian and Greek revival influences.

A variety of cultural attractions depict the area history – from colonial days to the Civil War Battle of Mobile Bay. The WWII battleship, USS Alabama, is docked at the fabulous Battleship Memorial Park, and the new shining star along Mobile's riverfront is GulfQuest, a national maritime museum in the shape of a container ship. Spotlighting the heritage and economic importance of the Gulf of Mexico, the museum has an educational focus on Gulf Coast activities including fishing, shipping and commerce. About 90 interactive exhibits and simulators engage visitors in all kinds of seafaring ventures – from tying nautical knots and charting a course to navigating ships in realistic simulations.

Visitors looking to enjoy the outdoors will find beach activities at Dauphin Island and fishing and boating throughout the River Delta area. Just south of the city, a longstanding attraction is the magnificent Bellingrath Gardens and Home, built by philanthropists, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Bellingrath. The historic 65-acre estate was originally the fishing camp and riverside retreat of Mr. Bellingrath, owner of the first Coca Cola Bottling franchise in Mobile. The couple first opened their gardens to the public in 1932 and expanded to include many features – from a formal Rose Garden in the design of a Rotary pin to the colorful Camellia Parterre and natural habitat of the Bayou Boardwalk.

The Bellingrath home is also part of their legacy and open for tours, showcasing the couple's extensive collection of antiques and Coca-Cola keepsakes. Visitors will see the framed document of Walter Bellingrath's purchase of the new Coca-Cola Bottling franchise in 1903, as well as his sales awards and brand collectibles.

Mobile Carnival Museum makes it possible to experience Mardi Gras season year-round, though festival enthusiasts may want to head to Mobile during carnival season, which begins shortly after MoonPie Over Mobile and spans several weeks leading up to Fat Tuesday. The 10-year old museum in a restored mansion tells the history of the carnival through a fabulous collection of Mardi Gras memorabilia. Visitors can get a bird's-eye perspective from atop a float replica, as well as a look at the collection of jeweled crowns, lavish gowns, and robes worn by past Mardi Gras kings and queens. For the uninformed, exhibits explain the mystic societies, dens, beads and masks associated with the historic pageantry.

Regardless of the season, Mobile's variety of attractions for all ages makes it one of the South's great urban destinations. There is much to discover in a weekend trip, and while you're there, why not enjoy a MoonPie and bottle of Coke!

If you go: Mobile offers a choice of hotels within easy walking distance to city attractions. Among the four-star retreats, the landmark Battle House Renaissance Hotel and Spa is a member of Historic Hotels of America. www.mobile.org

Ann Yungmeyer is a freelance writer in Kingsport, Tn.