

DREAMSCAPES

TRAVEL AND LIFESTYLE

FALL/WINTER 2016

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The Road to RICHES

IN THE THICK OF THE MOBILE-TENSAW DELTA ONLY 15 MINUTES OUTSIDE MOBILE, ALABAMA, THE BRACKISH WATERS ARE SHALLOW AND THE LORE RUNS DEEP.

EDITORIAL & PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ILONA KAUREMSZKY

Chris Wiber from WildNative Delta Safaris pilots his boat, *The Osprey*, over the flooded prairie wetland into this maze of Alabama jungle edged by sinewy cattails and alive with osprey, turtles and carnivorous pitcher plants. Along the way, the naturalist's wife Jami, his trusty deck hand, reveals the preventative uses of wax myrtle to thwart mosquitoes as Chris cuts the engine to search for alligator nests.

TEEMING WITH WILDLIFE

Before you know it we leave behind the thick weedy alleys of coastal Alabama and hit the wide open waters of Mobile Bay passing under the longest bridge in the state. It's not every day you get to explore the second largest river delta in America with a local.

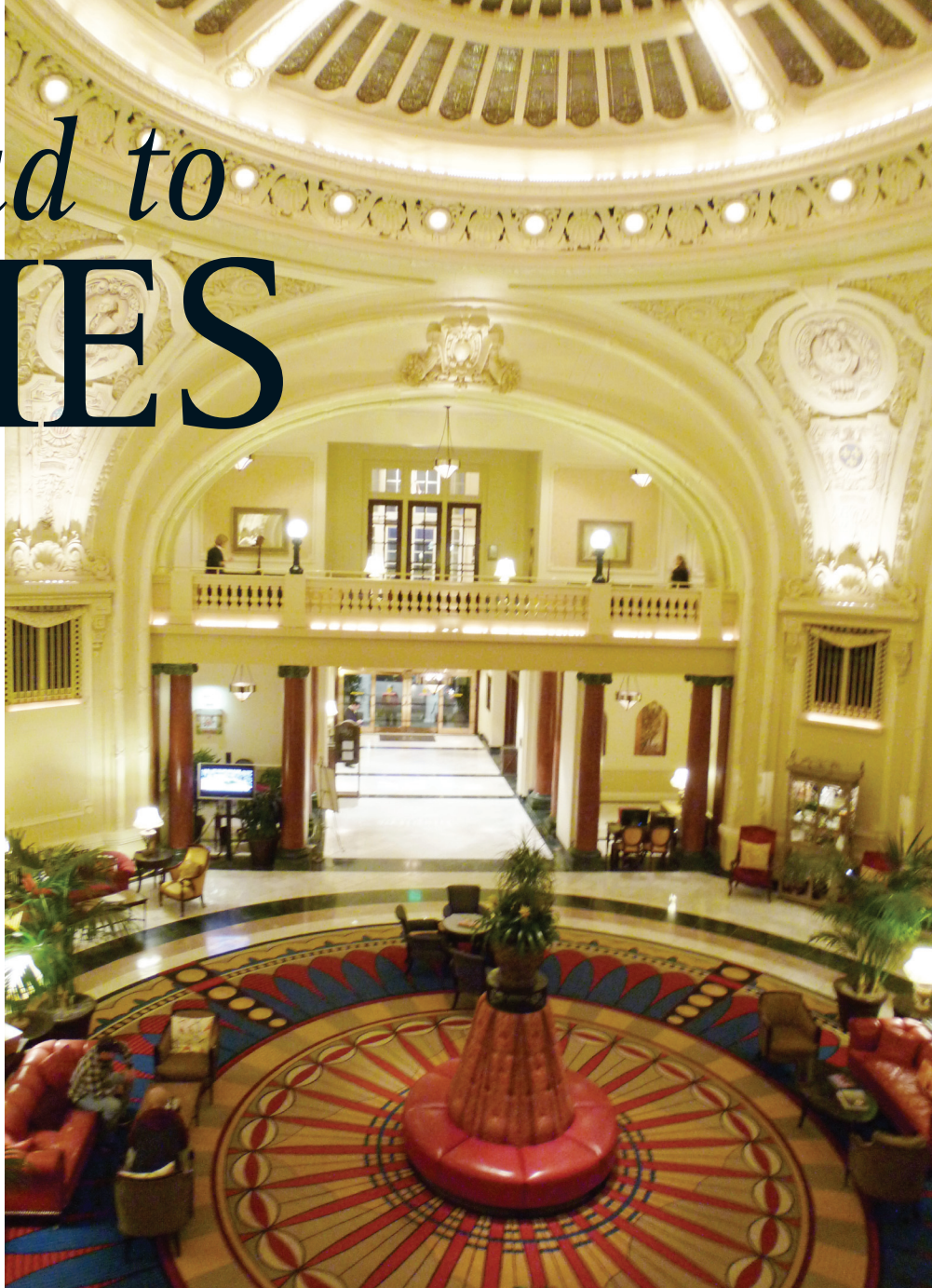
"The Alabama Gulf coast is the lifeblood of this country," says Captain Chris about the mostly undiscovered area teeming in

wildlife. The Mobile-Tensaw Delta spills into the Gulf of Mexico at breakneck speeds, leaving behind a seabed of riches that boasts one of North America's most biologically diverse habitats.

"We break all kinds of species records. One of my personal favourites: Alabama has the largest amount of freshwater fish of anywhere in the nation," he says in that warm southern twang describing the roughly 350 fish species, including a list of more critter superlatives living in America's Amazon. "This one is tough to measure but it's super

exciting. Alabama's new motto can be, 'Alabama, we grow on you,'" he snickers and adds Alabama might just have the most fungi varieties on the planet.

Welcome to Mobile, a world unto its own, affectionately dubbed "The Promised Land." Clay-rich, a happy accident where five rivers flow into Mobile Bay, the setting is blessed by patches of white powder beaches, an abundance of critter life, historic landmarks, and a culinary scene that basks in good old-fashioned Southern-cooking traditions.



A SOUTHERN SHOWPLACE

Nestled off the Gulf of Mexico, Mobile is home to nearly 200,000 residents and makes a fabulous launching pad for day trips and city sightseeing. History runs deep here. The birthplace of America's oldest Mardi Gras, Mobile got its colonial start when two brothers from today's Montréal, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville and Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, created Mobile in 1702 briefly hailing the trading post as the capital of the Louisiana Territory. Mobile also has weathered turbulent times throughout its shaky past. Six flags once claimed the seaport powerhouse as their own while hurricanes have ravaged the area, the most recent one being Katrina in 2005.

Now post-Katrina, the city and surrounds are in the midst of a renaissance. "We are a blank canvas ready for an experience and an update," explains the mayor on Mobile's rebirth. With young artists and restaurateurs opening unique venues in heritage landmarks and outdoor adventurers offering sightseers thrilling safari rides in the Delta, Mobile's attractions deserve a closer look.

Across Alabama discover championship golf courses in line with the best PGA-approved ones as the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail entices golfers to hit the links and save on the pocketbook. As one insider revealed, local golf courses are a real bargain, more affordable compared to similar courses elsewhere in America. "Golfers can play a week on the RTJ Golf Trail for the price of one round at Pebble Beach," says Bill Lang, the public relations director of RTJ Golf Trail and Resort Collection at the tony downtown Battle House Hotel located near two golf courses—the Magnolia Grove (25 minutes away) and the Lakewood Golf Club (a 35-minute drive).

I sussed out the old and new and took ample strolls through a compact, walkable

downtown that is a New Orleans shoe-in but without the Bourbon Street revellers, except, of course, during Mobile's Mardi Gras. Come February, the city morphs into a glitzy parade of bead-wielding celebrants who traipse down Dauphin Street past ornate wrought-iron-laced balconies and storefronts from yesteryear. There's Three Georges, a chocolate shop from 1917 with big-haired Liz behind the milkshake counter, and the city's crown jewel, the Saenger Theatre. Once hailed as "Alabama's Greatest Showplace" and "the most beautiful playhouse in all of Dixie," this exquisite vaudeville throwback (c. 1927) has been transformed into the city's finely restored concert hall where patrons can snag affordable tickets (US\$20-75) for class acts.

On my quest for the Old South in this changing landscape, it was evident how Southern hospitality remains front and centre. You hear, "Yes ma'am," as you hunker down at Panini Pete's for his "Famous Muffaletta Panino," pegged in a statewide list as among the "100 dishes to eat in Alabama before you die." It's no surprise slow and easy definitely reigns.

ARTS WALKS

The Mobile Museum of Art is situated by Langan Park. Built with private donations, the largest gallery along the Gulf coast is devoted to international, contemporary and American art with 10,000 objects in the permanent collection, many representing the Deep South. On a gallery tour of contemporary ceramics at the American Master Crafts 1945–Present exhibition, I spotted a Dale Chihuly and a Peter Voulkos piece stacked in luminescent wood-fired stoneware entitled *Chubbs*, with other art displays from Robert Indiana to Norman Rockwell.

At the Alabama Contemporary Art Center in the heart of the city's historic downtown by Cathedral Square, gallery goers can

OPPOSITE: The tony downtown Battle House Hotel is located near two golf courses.

TOP: The Alabama Contemporary Art Center is in the heart of the city's historic downtown by Cathedral Square.

CENTRE: The Old City Hall is now the History Museum of Mobile.

BOTTOM: The Mobile Museum of Art is devoted to international, contemporary and American art.





contemplate sculptures and provocative folk art by local artists, some of whom, such as the late Thornton Dial, have rightfully gained prominence at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

From there, I popped into the Mobile Arts Council, a free gallery and cultural hub where organizations like ArtWalk, a popular downtown gallery event held on the second Friday of each month, and Alabama's Mobile Fashion Week are headquartered.

AMERICANA

The Old City Hall houses the History Museum of Mobile where you can experience 300 years of Mobile history from the area's very first inhabitants to the present. The permanent exhibition has poignant topics devoted to Native American history, the Civil War, the slave trade and the Civil Rights Movement.

Then there were whispers of the early Canadian connection heard at Fort Conde across the street. The recreated French colony built to exact plans from 1723 shows

the attention to detail of Mobile's founder, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville. "In a late-sixties dig to create the I-10 tunnel, artifacts relating to colonial life were discovered," says Scott Corcoran, a museum guide who adds that one-third of the site was rebuilt using original plans stored in Paris.

MARITIME BASTION

With its fanciful ship façade appearing to sail into the busy Port of Mobile, the new GulfQuest National Maritime Museum is the first maritime museum dedicated to the Gulf of Mexico. A large waterfront complex, the size of nearly two football fields, it

showcases marine science and deep-sea exploration at its best.

There's a vast treasure trove of artifacts and plenty of interactive exhibits. I was fascinated by real-time shipping routes propelled on a spinning globe at the Ocean Planet Theatre and stood inside a hurricane simulator to experience wind gusts.

As the crowds dispersed inside the multi-levelled exhibits, I veered to the outdoor observation deck to see a lively scene of barges and tug boats. There, by the Mobile River's edge, stooped on wooden stumps, a flock of seagulls stood on patrol, waiting for the next big catch. Mobile is indeed a road to all kinds of riches. **DS**

TRAVEL PLANNER

The average high temperature in winter hovers around a pleasant 17 C.

For more information on Mobile, Alabama, visit:

Alabama Tourism Department: alabama.travel

Mobile Bay Convention and Visitors Bureau: mobile.org

Alabama Contemporary Art Center: alabamacontemporary.com

History Museum of Mobile: museumofmobile.com

Mobile Arts Council: mobilearts.org

Mobile Fashion Week: mobfashionweek.com

Mobile Museum of Art: mobilemuseumofart.com

Mobile Saenger Theatre: mobilesaenger.com

Panini Pete's: paninipetes.com

The Battle House Renaissance Mobile Hotel & Spa: marriott.com

Three Georges: 3georges.com

WildNative Delta Safaris: 5rds.com

TOP LEFT: WildNative Delta Safaris offers tours of Mobile's flooded prairie wetland alive with osprey, turtles and carnivorous pitcher plants.

TOP RIGHT: Enjoy a Muffaletta Panino at the popular Panini Pete's.