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Land of the free

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THERE can't be many cities in the world that are best known for having burned to the ground, but Atlanta is unquestionably one of them. It's not an ideal claim to fame, which is probably why, more than 150 years on from America's Civil War - and nearly seven decades since *Gone with the Wind* - it's a notion that the city is doing its best to lose. The other popular perception of the South's unofficial capital, is that it's a corporate - and therefore dull - HQ for big companies such as Coca-Cola.

But neither image does the city justice, and in just under a week in Atlanta I found myself pleasantly surprised at how entertaining and diverse it is - something that Elton John and Jane Fonda, who have homes in the city, no doubt discovered long ago.

It's an unusual place, with an often unnerving mix of urban and rural, the gleamingly new and the regenerated old, side by side in an incongruous but engaging mix - as if Donald Trump and Scarlett O'Hara had sat down to lunch and drawn up the city plans. Yes, there is modern, corporate America here (the stratospherically high Bank of America tower looms above the city like an indelible exclamation mark). But instead of Manhattan-style huddles of skyscrapers, the sleek towers of commerce are clustered amid great swathes of woodland, with vast freeways sinewing around them.

Alongside, you'll also find culture, history and a wealth of spectacular architecture - from the grandeur of America's industrial past to the ornate, turreted villas of the Inman Park area and the traditional wooden-porched bungalows of Virginia Highland. Driving up to this last area from downtown, the landscape suddenly changes: the roads narrow and veer upwards at a steep incline and the architecture mutates from *Bladerunner* to *Little Women*.

At the top of the hill, hip but pricey designer boutiques, shoe shops and vintage furniture stores line the leafy streets, alongside chic eateries. Blind Willie's is the kind of neighbourhood bar where you're likely to end up clapping along to a live band and dancing with strangers well into the night.

For a leisurely brunch, not to mention a hangover cure, the peculiarly American, classy but laid-back atmosphere of Murphy's will hit the spot. All exposed brick walls, wrought-iron furniture and tasteful dried flowers - think *Sex and the City* meets Woody Allen - it is a great place to fill up on delicious pancakes with a side-order of grits (the Deep South's traditional poor man's porridge-meets-semolina grain dish), washed down with a mimosa (champagne and freshly squeezed orange juice) and piping hot coffee.

Just a ten-minute drive up the road (and you will want to drive, because there is no European-style city centre to walk around), at the intersection of three leafy streets, is Little Five Points, the city's 'alternative' enclave and Virginia Highland's grungier sibling. Here, hippies, goths and neo-punks hang out in coffee bars, set amid crystal shops and Native American emporia selling dreamcatchers. There are designer boutiques here too, but the styles are edgier, the prices lower and instead of chichi homeware stores there are body-piercing parlours, smart vintage clothes shops, sushi bars and record stores selling vinyl.

For a more mainstream shopping experience, seek out Atlanta's vast multi-tiered malls (complete

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with department stores such as Bloomingdales and Macy's). With all this and an endless array of international brands, the city has gained a reputation as a shopping destination to rival New York.

But Atlanta hasn't completely turned its back on its heritage. There's the Cyclorama and Civil War Museum, where the 1864 battle for the city is recreated around the world's largest oil painting. At the Margaret Mitchell House and Museum, partly housed in the Gone with the Wind author's former apartment, you can stand in front of the life-size portrait of Scarlett used in the film. If you look closely, you can see the deep dents in the canvas made by Clark Gable as he threw a brandy glass at it for the umpteenth take. There's also a permanent display of movie memorabilia, including the costume drawings for the film and some wonderfully acerbic letters from Mitchell to MGM, complaining about the inaccuracy of their recreation of Tara. You can also watch newsreels from the film's première in 1939, and see crowds of Atlantans filling the streets to welcome Gable, Vivien Leigh and Olivia de Havilland.

Mitchell's basement apartment itself is notable mainly for its shoebox-like dimensions, but the obligatory tour tells how the writer was a wealthy Southern belle, and a considerable amount of her own family life provided inspiration for both the Scarlett and Rhett characters.

For a further taste of the real Old South, Mary Mac's Tea Room serves up mouthwatering traditional fare. Try the fried green tomatoes, fried chicken, collard greens and black-eyed peas. Visitors to the pantry-style tearooms, with their bright gingham tablecloths, have included James Brown, Richard Gere and the Dalai Lama.

The Southerners are a friendly bunch and, compared with the frenetic pace of New York, Atlanta is immensely laid-back. This comes in handy if you're trying to find your way around because, unlike the grid systems of many American cities, the streets often meander along the route of Native American trails and change name several times along the way. The higgledy-piggledy layout also reflects the city's origins. Instead of evolving around a river or port, Atlanta only really began to spring up in 1837, when a small cluster of buildings mushroomed around what was then a major railway terminus.

Like much of the States, Atlanta now readily acknowledges its Native American past - something that surely owes more than a little to the city's most famous son, Martin Luther King. He and the civil-rights movement were born in Atlanta, and both are celebrated at the King Center. The great man's tomb and a museum commemorating the evolution of the movement are here. Exhibits include the mule cart that carried King's coffin at his funeral, and it is impossible not to be moved by the details of lynchings and hangings and the original footage of the various freedom marches.

Similarly affecting is the ongoing visitors' book, which contains contributions from adults and children of all ages. "Dear Dr Martin Luther King," reads one, "Thank you for everything you did for my country. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have my best friend, who is white!" signed, Brittany Scott, aged 12.

For signs of King's legacy, you need look no further than Atlanta's mayor, Shirley Franklin, an African-American and openly gay woman. She is a figurehead for the fact that Atlanta not only has one of the largest gay populations in the United States, but is also the buppie capital of the country, with more than 60% of its population being African-American.

The career of Atlanta's other famous son, former President Jimmy Carter, is also celebrated. High on an expansive hilltop above the city, the Jimmy Carter Museum houses exhibits from his campaigns and a life-size replica of the Oval Office. This is also the hill from which General Sherman watched Atlanta burn. But gazing down from here today, you'll see a city looking firmly towards its future.

Fact file: Atlanta

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