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Southern charmer

BY SUSAN TAYLOR MARTIN

Certain Southern cities have a special allure. New Orleans. Asheville. Charleston. Savannah. Greenville.

Greenville? Nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, this South Carolina city used to be known for its textile mills and not much more. But today it boasts an elegant downtown, beautiful parks, a scenic river walk and one of the South's most vibrant culinary scenes. On a recent trip to western North Carolina, my husband, Jim, and I stopped for a few days in Greenville and came away thoroughly charmed.



Sunset aerial of Falls Park on the Reedy.
Photos courtesy of VisitGreenvilleSC.



From trolley rides to tasty cuisine, be swept away by the Southern charms of Greenville, South Carolina.



From our hotel, a few steps took us to Main Street, a broad but pedestrian-friendly street lined with stately maple trees shading shops, restaurants, galleries and sculptures. What murals are to St. Petersburg, sidewalk sculptures are to Greenville - some whimsical, some honoring famous past residents. Among them: Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first U.S. minister to Mexico. He brought back his favorite flower, thus introducing the poinsettia to America.

Main Street also spotlights what a fine job Greenville has done of preserving its historic structures. A Beaux Arts-inspired building dating back to 1925 houses the Westin Poinsett hotel. The old courthouse has been transformed into an indie bookstore, M. Judson Booksellers, and the Camilla Kitchen, where we breakfasted on lattes, scones and blueberry muffins.

A five-minute walk in the other direction leads to Falls Park on the Reedy, one of the nation's great examples of positive urban renewal. For more than 40 years, a four-lane highway bridge almost totally blocked the view of the falls and the Reedy River.

"The water was so heavily polluted from the textile industry that when it was covered up, no one cared," said John Nolan, who conducts tours of Greenville. In the early 2000s, the city demolished the bridge, replacing it with a pedestrian bridge that provides unobstructed views of the falls and the hilly, woody park that is a rural oasis in the heart of town. A downpour while we were in Greenville swelled the falls; we watched while a fat beaver tried to make it across the temporarily raging river.

Just across from the park is River Center, with hotels, restaurants and artist studios

open to the public. From our riverfront table at The Lazy Goat, one of Greenville's more than 200 dining spots, we saw geese swimming under the Eugenia Duke Bridge, a foot bridge linking the mile-long river walk to Main Street. Another notable past resident, Duke parlayed making 10-cent sandwiches for World War I soldiers into the company that produces Duke's Mayonnaise, a staple in millions of American kitchens.

Among the highlights of our visit was Nolan's driving tour of Greenville's beautiful residential neighborhoods. Although most of the textile mills have long ceased operations, the mill presidents and other wealthy citizens built spectacular homes that remain today. Not only are they huge, but they are also meticulously landscaped with globe-sized hydrangeas and feature an impressive variety of architectural styles - Tudor, Queen Anne, Dutch colonial and

RiverPlace.



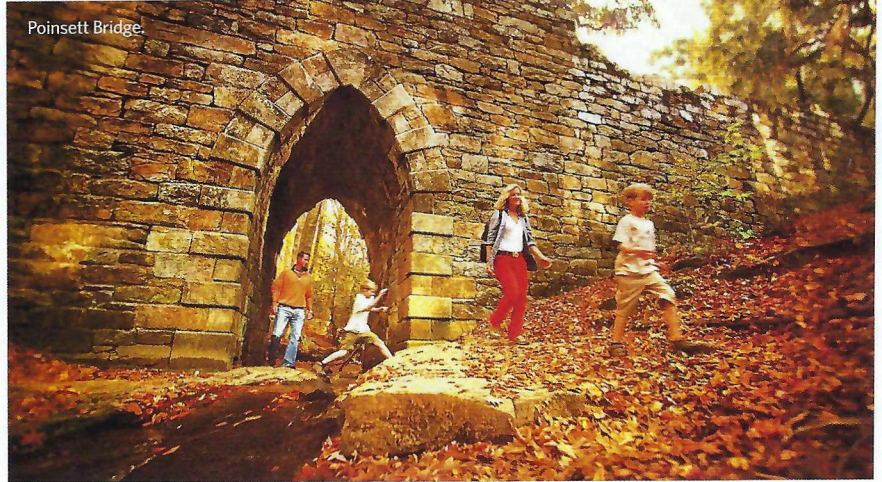
"Spindle" sculpture.



neoclassical, to name just a few.

Nolan, who moved to Greenville from Ohio 32 years ago, conducts several other walking and driving tours of a city whose transformation amazes him. "In the 1980s," he said, "downtown was as dead as a doornail."

A high point, too, was a tasting at Oil & Vinegar, one of Main Street's many attractive shops. Owner Veera Gaul periodically holds these events where patrons can taste olive oils paired with different types of vinegar – say, garlic oil



Poinsett Bridge.

and tomato pulp vinegar. The store has dozens of varieties of oil and vinegar on tap, and Gaul offers tips and recipes for using them at home for cooking and grilling.

A bonus: Included in the price of the tastings is what could make a full meal of dishes that Gaul and her staff prepare with that day's pairings. For the event we attended, that meant wild garlic meatballs in sweet peppa sauce, mango chili salmon salad, blue cheese crostinis with onion jam and grilled corn salad. Yummy.

Almost, but not quite sated, we moved on to Abanico Tapas Bar and Restaurant just off Main Street. We enjoyed sangrias and tapas that included yucca root fries and bread with Manchego cheese, honey and

toasted almonds. Later at night, Abanico becomes a popular music venue.

Another local favorite is Southernside Brewing Co. on the edge of the city's Unity Park. It's reachable from downtown via the endearingly named Swamp Rabbit Trail, whose canopy of trees provided welcome shade on a 20-minute walk. Southernside has a large menu of eats, craft beers and cocktails and an expansive outdoor area for yard games and live music.

On our visit to Greenville, it was easy to see why so many people from all over the country are moving here. It is growing, but the growth seems measured – how refreshing not to see a single orange barrel or towering construction crane!