



A River Runs Through It

Surprises await at every turn when you go with the flow in Greenville, South Carolina

by Libby Boren McMillan

Sometimes, a city gets it so right, being there is like finding a place you've been looking for your whole life, without even knowing you were looking. Greenville, South Carolina, is just such a destination, steeped in Southern charm and tendering an intoxicating fusion of natural beauty and urban élan. The meandering Reedy River defines this progressive city, its waterfalls tumbling right in the heart of an extremely hip downtown. Visit once, and forever feel its tug.

The beating heart of the region known as "Upstate," Greenville lies about two hours east of Atlanta, just below the North

Carolina border and Asheville. As a gateway to the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Greenville area offers unlimited outdoor recreation, while also providing a lively metro experience equivalent to that of a large city but without any of the hassle.

Greenville is now starting to appear on all sorts of "best" lists after a thoughtful process of reinvention. The city cultivates its cultural assets and champions innovative spirit, commitments propelling this heart-warming burg into prominence and toward its own bright future.

It's also not lacking in surprises. Greenville sidewalks are inlaid with inspir-

ing quotes, while even manhole covers bear the city's clever logo, in which the letter "G" evokes the river flowing through town. Randomly placed bronze mice, inspired by the book *Goodnight Moon* and proposed by a local student, provide children with their own downtown scavenger hunt. Condos are built right into the downtown baseball stadium, artists have working studios within prime commercial real estate, and everywhere you look, there's fantastic architecture.

Mountain hiking, zip-lining, and white-water rafting are less than an hour away from the bustling downtown. North



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The waterfalls on the Reedy River are now a focal point of downtown Greenville; get a great view of them from the Liberty Bridge in Falls Park (opposite page, bottom).



Bronze mice can be found around the city in tribute to the book *Goodnight Moon*.



America's only BMW plant is in the metro area, and new BMW buyers fly in to learn why their car is "the ultimate driving machine" on the BMW test track. There's even a Red Sox connection between Greenville and Southwest Florida.

Greenville would earn a prize for friendliness, but the city is also a stunning example of a thriving, revitalized urban area, a must-see for anyone interested in the reinvention of his or her own hometown. Its Main Street has been recognized by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and, last year, the American Planning Association dubbed it one of the Top 10 Green Streets in America. The beautiful pairing of downtown's stately historic buildings with provocative new mixed-use developments underscores this magnetic city's ability to adapt and evolve.

The Reedy River is why Greenville was born and is also the catalyst behind the city's successful rebirth. Its banks are lined with what were once textile factories. But by the 1960s, the area was forlorn, toxic, overgrown with kudzu, bereft of industry, and dangerous after dark. The suburbs were luring businesses away, and downtown had begun to die, a not-uncommon scenario in modern American history.

Yet in that pivotal moment, a visionary group of city officials and like-minded citizens decided *not* to accept the kiss of death for their downtown. They developed a shared vision of their central business district as a thriving, state-of-the-art community with numerous opportunities to live, work, and play. And then they rolled their sleeves up and got busy.

After humanizing Main Street from a nondescript four-lane thoroughfare to a more approachable two-lane street, Greenville added streetlamps and planted a profusion of what would become shade trees. In its very first phase of urban planning, the city set a precedent for being

ahead of its time. "Streetscaping wasn't really done back then," says the city's current mayor, Knox White. "Ours was designed by a group out of California."

In the 1980s, Main Street was launched with what was, in those days, a rare public-private initiative. A large Hyatt Hotel and Conference Center was built, and the city retained ownership of the grounds and the lobby, envisioning a gathering place for locals as well as tourists. As both began to filter into downtown, the addition of a fifteen-thousand-seat arena gave them even more impetus to visit. A push to increase occupancy in the upper floors of downtown buildings began to create a sense of community.

A few blocks to the west, the decrepit textile mills and factories along the Reedy River still had great architectural bones. After the 1990s saw a major cleanup of both river and riverbanks, attention was turned to these abandoned industrial build-

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ings. With an enormous amount of attention to detail, many were lovingly transformed into the Peace Center for the Performing Arts.

Fans of great design can't help but be taken with the outcome of the Peace Center project. Greenville is now blessed with an acoustically perfect performing arts hall (which attracts world-class performers), an intimate theater, and an outdoor amphitheater, as well as several stunning historic spaces for private functions. The center's pièce de résistance—the Wyche Pavilion—lures passersby inside its open-air brick shell, to contemplate the adjacent river from arched window openings.

Shortly after this project, the state of South Carolina voted to expand a popular summer arts program into a year-round residential arts school for gifted students, offering millions as incentive to a host city. Seeing opportunity once again, Greenville

thoughtfully donated a Reedy River site (the former Furman University men's campus) and raised matching funds to lure the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities, which further added to both the diversity and arts focus of downtown Greenville.

"The river area didn't really come alive until 2000 or 2001, though," says the city's congenial mayor, whose Southern drawl belies his ability to move mountains. Mayor White oversaw the controversial razing of a four-lane overpass that completely hid the prettiest part of the river from view. The rushing waterfalls for which Greenville is now known had been all but forgotten, shadowed beneath several tons of steel and concrete. "When we took down the bridge," says White, "that was the project that uncorked the bottle."

The bridge's removal revealed the city's greatest natural asset, and the ensuing creation of the stunning, multilevel Falls Park

on the Reedy gave Greenville its calling card. The focal point of the thirty-acre park is a spectacular, 355-foot, curving suspension bridge that hangs just above the waterfalls. The award-winning Liberty Bridge design incorporates subtle lighting in its handrails as well as underneath, giving it a welcoming glow at night. When taking in the jaw-dropping water view from this pedestrian-only span,

it's nearly impossible to imagine the overpass that once hid all this beauty.

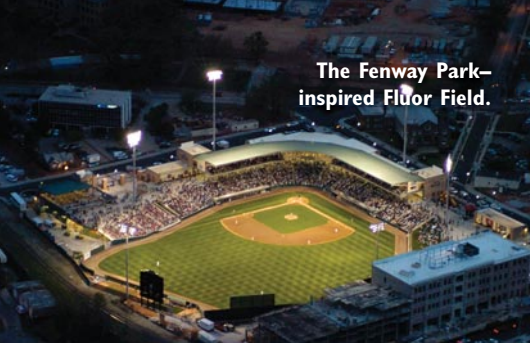
Lifelong resident Joe Henson now visits downtown regularly and vividly remembers when the bridge was razed. "The local reaction was, 'Hopefully this will work out,'" he recalls. "But I don't think that many people thought it would work; they perceived it as 'trying to bring back the past.'"

At downtown's worst point, Henson recalls that "Woolworth's was about the only thing still remaining. There was nothing going on here." Today, he easily ticks off the many special events that draw his family downtown: Shakespeare productions; concerts; outdoor movies; and the Fourth of July's annual Red, White, and Blue festival, which culminates with fireworks shot over the top of the bridge.

Festivals and markets happen throughout the year. The Greenville Convention and Visitors Bureau maintains a nearly

City meets country in the Greenville area, where there are opportunities for both urban pursuits and outdoor exploration.





The Fenway Park-inspired Fluor Field.

mind-boggling calendar of choices around which to plan a visit. Events slated for fall 2010 include the fifth annual USA Cycling

site to behold in the spring.

It's also here that one can hop onto the thirteen-and-a-half-mile Swamp Rabbit Trail, a paved path that runs from downtown to the north, past Furman University and on to Traveler's Rest, a town in the foothills leading to the Blue Ridge Mountains. While Greenville encourages walking and biking downtown, a free trolley also runs a circle route around the entire area. During

references Greenville's strong alliance with the automotive industry and big community players like BMW and Michelin.) Seventy home games keep hot-dog vendors busy as the Drive battles teams from other classic Southern cities, including Savannah, Georgia; Lexington, Kentucky; and Charleston, South Carolina. From the grandstands, it's hard not to envy friends of the owners whose condo balconies overlook left

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Professional Championships on September 18 and 19; Euphoria, an upscale food and wine event September 24 through 26; and Fall for Greenville, a popular free festival, on October 8 through 10.

Friends and families gravitate toward Falls Park for special events like these and to simply enjoy being outside and running into one another. Much of the Reedy River has a paved trail running alongside it, and handsome footbridges connect one bank of the river to the other. One oft-used bridge links the performing arts center with several dazzling buildings on the other side: a beautiful Hampton Inn, art studios, fine-dining restaurants, cool shops, and sleek condos. This area, like many others in the city, is alive with Japanese dogwoods, a

Catch a ride from Greenville's free trolley service, or take a hike at one of many nearby scenic spots.

baseball season, however, it has an even more important mission—taking fans to Fluor Field.

Members of Red Sox Nation, take note: Greenville's minor-league baseball team, the Greenville Drive, is the Class A affiliate of the Boston Red Sox. The Drive plays in beautiful new Fluor Field, which was modeled after Fenway Park. It even has its own "Green Monster," a thirty-foot-high wall in left field, replete with manual scoreboard. (The ballpark's dimensions around the outfield wall are identical to Fenway's, including "Pesky's Pole" in right field.)

Minor-league ball actually draws more fans than the NBA or the NFL—who knew?—and the Drive has been packing the house ever since its ball park was built to anchor the west end of downtown. (The team's name

field and the stretch from third to home.

Greenville's West End has really started to come into its own, with loads of unique restaurants, small boutiques, and a few outstanding mixed-use developments. A state-of-the-art recreation center funded by the Kroc family (of McDonald's fame) is nearly complete.

Southwest Florida-based architect and urban-planning advocate Joyce Owens visits Greenville regularly and finds it inspiring in every way. "What's so important is the street life that's been created," she says. "The downtown is very cosmopolitan, very vibrant. I commend Greenville for its considered planning."

The latest downtown project includes a Courtyard by Marriott, the city's first green hotel. A renowned electric-bus manufacturer has also chosen Greenville as its new home base, breaking ground at



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GREENVILLE CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

the city's high-tech ICAR campus for cutting-edge and alternative-energy automotive engineers. Without beating people over the head, Greenville walks the walk on sustainability, with its Trails and Greenways Master Plan, its trolley and pedestrian-friendly downtown, relevant university programs, and an active Slow Food organization, which advocates for local growers.

Two of Greenville's more tantalizing downtown restaurants are Slow Food members, taking full advantage of locally grown and produced foods. The West End's American Grocery Restaurant showcases organic ingredients and proteins from the Upstate area; its delicious seasonal menus keep patrons vying for tables. Ristorante Bergamo wows with Northern Italian delicacies built around components from nearby farms. The pleasure of a leisurely meal is truly encouraged here, and a table by the window makes the evening all the more enjoyable.

Live music is easy to find in the evenings, and bistro tables fill the sidewalks under Main Street's now-mature trees, hung with inviting Christmas lights year-round. Beer connoisseurs should head for Blue Ridge Brewing Company, a locals' favorite that offers quality malted beverages crafted on-site. Owner Bob Hiller is a humble, hard-working community player, one of almost ninety restaurateurs whose cooperative spirit bolsters downtown. His popular Cazbah wine and tapas eatery is also thriving, having just expanded into a second location.

Overall, Greenville has not felt the same pinch much of the country has. Mayor White can also add the arrival of Southwest Airlines to the growing list of Greenville coups, after months of wooing resulted in a successful bid for the low-cost carrier. "And we've got a number of projects underway on Main Street," he explains. "Clemson University is moving its MBA program to Greenville, next to the waterfall. Having an academic presence downtown was on our list. Business schools need to be in urban places; you get grads looking to start careers."

Reedy Square, a new interactive visitors' center, will be housed in an iconic building on the river. The facility will highlight nearby attractions like glorious Caesar's Head State Park, where hiking trails lead to cool surprises like 420-foot waterfalls and photographers set up camp at high-elevation points for Blue Ridge landscapes—all just thirty-one miles from Main Street.

Whether you're inspired by the thought of mountain vistas, hopping off a trolley to study future Red Sox pitchers, or simply enjoying a waterfall in the middle of a city, you'll find something to like in Greenville, South Carolina. Don't be surprised when delightful strangers offer melodic advice on their favorite things to do in the Upstate area. It's just the nature of this welcoming place. 🍷

Libby Boren McMillan is a frequent contributor to Times of the Islands, RSW Living, Bonita Living, and Gulf & Main.

IF YOU GO

American Grocery Restaurant
864-232-7665, www.americangr.com

Blue Ridge Brewing Company
864-232-4677, www.blueridgebrewing.com

BMW Zentrum
888-868-7269, www.bmwusfactory.com

Caesar's Head State Park
864-836-6115, www.southcarolinaparks.com

The Cazbah
864-877-9311 (Trade Street location)
or 864-241-9909 (West McBee Avenue location), www.thecazbah.com

Courtyard by Marriott Greenville Downtown
864-451-5700, www.marriottcourtyardgreenville.com

Falls Park
864-467-4350, www.fallspark.com

Fluor Field
864-240-4500

Greenville Convention and Visitors Bureau
800-717-0023, www.greenvillevcb.com

Hampton Inn & Suites Greenville Hotel
864-271-8700, www.hamptoninnandsuitesgreenville.com

Hyatt Regency Greenville
864-235-1234, <http://greenville.hyatt.com>

Peace Center for the Performing Arts
800-888-7768, www.peacecenter.org

Ristorante Bergamo
864-271-8667, www.ristorantebergamo.com

Swamp Rabbit Trail
864-288-6470, <http://greenvillerec.com/parks/swamp-rabbit>

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Architectural diversity is one of the city's strong points, as are the many special events held throughout the year, like the USA Cycling Professional Championships.

