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FROM ATLANTA TO...GREENVILLE, S.C.

One-tank trip: Greenville, S.C.

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For The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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In less than 25 years, downtown Greenville has gone from decidedly derelict to tasteful and tasty. Nationally recognized revitalization efforts brought Main Street and environs back from the dead, with world-class culture, varied activities, superb shopping and a flavorful dining scene unmatched by many much larger downtown areas across the country. Downtown's diminutive size means visitors can park their car at their accommodations of choice and not need it again until it's time to head back to the Atlanta area (just walk or take the frequent Downtown Trolley running on Main Street).

City makeover

The transformation of downtown from generally empty buildings and streets to one with people day and night, busy hotels, shops, restaurants, urban living spaces and even a perpetually packed minor league baseball stadium is one that has both locals and past visitors raving.

Falls Park on the Reedy has been the centerpiece of development at the southern end of Main Street, with 32 acres of green space flanking the banks of the Reedy River. A stunning curved pedestrian bridge called Liberty Bridge provides great views of the park and falls, with two amphitheatres making for pretty event spaces.

In addition, a sparkling new downtown baseball stadium opened in 2006, incorporating adjacent West End warehouses and even including a miniature "green monster," patterned after the left field wall at Boston's Fenway Park, for a "Single A" affiliate of the Boston Red Sox. The Greenville Drive (an ode to local driving-oriented companies like BMW and Michelin) play from early April to late August.

Along with hotels, event venues and restaurants, the shopping scene has also exploded.

Unique shopping

Locally owned and operated shops like Plaza Suite (ask about locally designed Beija Flor jeans), Talloni (look for handbags by local designer Brianna Krebsbach) and The Cook's Station all make it easy to

“shop local.”

There’s also a sprawling version of the regional Mast General Store “chain” right on Main (think upscale mountain-lifestyle clothes and accessories — this is South Carolina’s “Upcountry” after all). Weekend visitors will also want to check out Main Street’s bustling Saturday Market for fresh snacks, produce and tasty souvenirs to take back to home kitchens.

Special dishes

For both locals and visitors, one of the most obvious differences in downtown is the dining scene. There’s been a complete shift from fast food fixes to a large number of diverse restaurants and chefs that rival anything found in Atlanta.

In many ways, this tasty transformation can be traced to the opening of Soby’s New South Cuisine in 1997. In a century-old building on Main, founding partners Carl Sobocinski, Culinary Institute of America grad David Williams and others saw the possibilities of turning downtown into a dining destination.

Now part of the Table 301 group of food-oriented ventures, Soby’s was hugely successful from the start. Carl and company’s offerings now include: Soby’s on the Side (a deli-bakery next door to Soby’s, with fresh breakfast and lunch options); Devereaux’s (where up-and-coming star chef Steven Devereaux Greene is a stickler for perfection on the plate); Restaurant O (think upscale comfort food); and The Lazy Goat (contemporary Mediterranean fare).

After Soby’s success, many other renowned restaurants were soon on the downtown menu. Notable options include: High Cotton Maverick Bar & Grill (a hip Greenville version of the longtime favorite from Charleston); Larkin’s on the River (“aged steaks, fresh fish, old wine”); and Pomegranate on Main (Persian-style kebabs and atmosphere that’s perfect for lunch).

Also highly recommended is American Grocery on Main Street’s “West End,” where four friends obsessed with fresh food and wine have taken farm-to-table dining to another level.

IF YOU GO

Where to stay

- Westin Poinsett. Built in 1925, this historic hotel often has a BMW parked out front that will take guests to the varied programs of the nearby BMW Performance Driving Center (BMW will also pick up at other hotels). Doubles from \$139, 120 S. Main St., 864-421-9700, 1-800-368-7764, www.westin.com.
- Pettigru Place Bed and Breakfast. Doubles from \$99, 302 Pettigru St., 864-242-4529 or 1-877-362-4644, www.pettigruplace.com.

Where to eat

- Table 301 restaurant group. This group of restaurants features an array of delectable downtown options, with varying atmospheres, menus and prices. www.table301.com.
- High Cotton Maverick Bar & Grill. Entrees \$21-\$38, 550 S. Main St., www.mavericksouthernkitchens.com.
- Larkin’s on the River. Entrees \$22-\$38, 318 S. Main St., www.larkinsontheriver.com.
- Pomegranate on Main. Lunch entrees \$9-\$15, 618 S. Main St., www.pomegranateonmain.com.
- American Grocery. Entrees \$25-\$32, 732 S. Main St., www.americangr.com.

More information

• Greenville Convention & Visitors Bureau: www.2hourstogreenville.com, www.greenvillevb.com, 1-800-717-0023, 864-233-0461. • Visitors Center. In City Hall at 206 S. Main St.

How to get there

From Atlanta, take I-85 north to downtown Greenville. The drive is about 2 1/2 hours.

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