

Macon

By Suzanne Wright

I didn't expect to be impressed with Macon.

Just a over an hour from my Midtown home, I had only a vague awareness of Macon as the “cherry blossom capital of the world,” thanks to more than 275,000 Yoshino cherry trees that burst forth in pink splendor every March. I also knew the Allman Brothers hailed from the small Georgia city. But I had no idea that Macon was home to such impressive museums and historic landmarks—and a few great eateries.

First timers should not miss the dynamic duo: The Georgia Music Hall of Fame and the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame. The Georgia Music Hall of Fame, the state's official music museum, pays homage to its native sons and daughters, artists like Little Richard, James Brown, Otis Redding and the Allman Brothers. The 43,000 square foot facility features music, videos, instruments and costumes of more than 450 artists in permanent and changing exhibits; there's also a terrific gift shop. The Music Factory Children's Wing—the only dedicated children's museum in the nation—encourages kids to explore the world of music through interactive exhibits and hands-on activities.

Created in 1956 as the Georgia Prep Sports Hall of Fame, the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame has expanded to include prep, college, amateur and professional sports. The museum resembles a turn-of-the-century ballpark with a red brick exterior and green roof and currently houses more than 7,000 artifacts from Georgia sports stars such as Ty Cobb, Jackie Robinson, Hank Aaron, Evander Holyfield, Bobby Jones and Bill Elliot. In addition to exhibits, visitors can shoot hoops and drive a NASCAR simulator in the country's largest sports hall of fame.

The Tubman African American Museum would be impressive in any city and its commitment to preserving the turbulent but triumphant experience of blacks in America is reflected in the depth and breadth of its collection. Opened in 1985, its 14 galleries include the world-class Noel Collection of African Art with 2,000-year-old Nok figures, beaded Yoruba wall panels and Benin bronzes, as well as separate galleries devoted to cuisine and military leadership. A new building under construction (you can take a hard hat tour) will boost the museum's exhibition space so it can continue to attract important traveling exhibitions.

Children will be especially entranced with The Museum of Arts & Sciences, whose mission is to evoke wonder, stimulate curiosity and open minds to new worlds. The Discovery House features three floors of interactive exhibits exploring art, science and humanities. The Back Yard contains forest, aquatic and desert habitats, and the 40-foot domed Mark Smith Planetarium presents five new shows annually, as well as a program on the current night sky that is updated weekly. There is also a mini zoo with monkeys, alligators, exotic birds and snakes.

The birthplace of the great Southern poet Sidney Lanier, has been converted into a museum that displays Lanier memorabilia, including items from his Confederate Army service. Other landmark homes that can be visited in Macon include The Hay House, Cannonball House and the Woodruff House; most are under the auspices of the Georgia Trust.

Natural history buffs will appreciate the Ocmulgee National Monument, which preserves a continuous record of human life in the Southeast from the earliest times to the present—from Ice-Age hunters to the Muscogee (Creek) people of historic times. Onsite is one of the earliest public buildings in North America, a ceremonial earth lodge dating back 1,000 years.

If it's entertainment you seek, Macon has its own Symphony and several theatres, along with numerous parks to relax in. Worked up an appetite? This is one little town that can, culinarily speaking. Nu-Way Wieners, one of America's oldest hotdog stands, draws lots of hungry visitors. Len Berg's Restaurant, Luigi's Bistro and Michael's on Mulberry have good reputations. But if you only eat one meal, the Tic Toc Room, is the place to go. Little Richard got his start in this downtown brickfront and James Brown played here, but now you'll enjoy sipping a selection from the extensive wine list while nibbling on continental specialties as a lesser known musician tickle the ivories. You could be in Atlanta, save for the deep draws of the servers and the patrons discussing their generational lineage.

If You Go

Macon makes a great weekend getaway: it's close, there's no traffic to speak of (there are less than 100,000 residents) and many of the attractions are clustered downtown, so walking is easy. The city of Macon's website has links to all the city's sights, lists upcoming festivals and provides general information: www.cityofmacon.net.

Stay smack in the heart of downtown at the comfortable Crowne Plaza, which offers guests a sleep amenity pack (including earplugs, eye mask, pillow mist and a CD-Rom with sleep tips). 108 First Street, 31201; www.ichotelsgroup.com.

More Information: The Georgia Music Hall of Fame, 200 Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd, 31201; 478-750-8555 or 888-GA-ROCKS; www.Gamusichall.com. The Georgia Sports Hall of Fame: 301 Cherry Street, 31201; 478-752-1585; www.gshf.org. The Lanier House: 935 High Street, 31201; 478-743-3851. Ocmulgee National Monument, 1207 Emery Highway, 31217; 478-752-8257. The Museum Arts and Sciences, 4182 Forsyth Rd., 31210; 478-477-3232. Tic Toc Room: 408 MLK Jr. Blvd, 31201; 478-744-0123.