



YE OLDE TRAVEL GUIDE

# Savannah

## 1859

In the latest instalment of our historical holidays series, in which experts imagine they're writing a travel guide in the past, **Dan Cossins** invites visitors to Savannah, where abolitionist stirrings are threatening the city's serene veneer

ILLUSTRATION BY JONTY CLARK

**H**OME TO LEAFY PLAZAS, stately mansions and a craze for chilled champagne, Savannah is a delightful place to visit. But abolitionists take note: this is a city built on the dark trade of slave labour

### WHEN TO GO

Savannah enjoys a semitropical climate. Winters are mild, perfect for the busy social season, while summers are oppressively humid, particularly July and August when wealthy citizens escape to the mountains or New England. The best time to visit is spring, when it's warm and the air is filled with the scents of magnolia and jasmine.

### COSTS AND MONEY

It's US dollars here, but the currency can be confusing. Local and state banks print their own paper money, and even small businesses produce their own small denomination notes and coins.

A good rule of thumb is to accept only currency issued by local banks or businesses, as locals will likely accept them. Counterfeiting is commonplace, so keep your wits about you.

### DANGERS AND ANNOYANCES

Summer brings mosquitoes from the surrounding swamplands and tiny biting bugs called 'no-see-ums'.

As for safety, you'll be fine in central areas. However, be sure to tread carefully in the rough, ramshackle wards on the eastern and western fringes, where sailors and labourers – whites, free blacks and 'hired-out' slaves alike – drink, brawl and whore. Even here, though, the streets are gas-lit and patrolled by night watchmen. These days, so-called 'vigilance committees' weed out anti-slavery troublemakers. Indeed, it is best to keep any abolitionist sentiments you may hold to yourself: locals recently

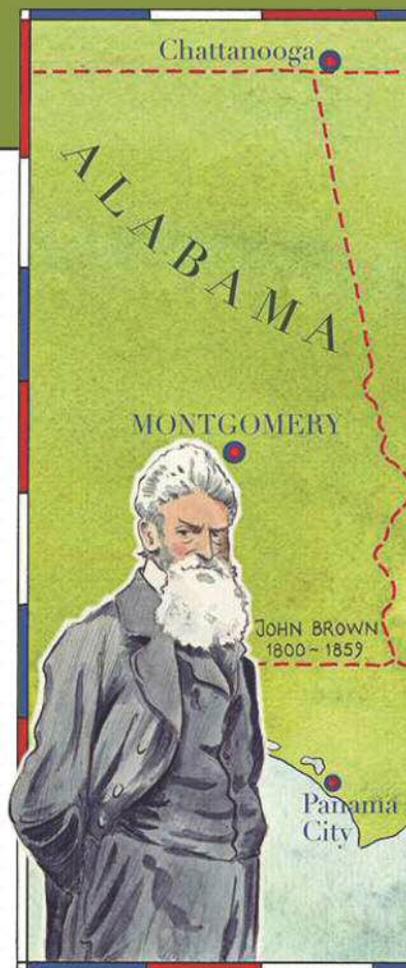
tarred and feathered a visitor from Massachusetts for making his feelings known on this divisive issue.

### SIGHTS AND ACTIVITIES

Visitors can't fail to be charmed by Savannah's 24 garden squares, shaded by magnificent, sprawling oak trees draped in Spanish moss, which hangs from branches like so many fraying white-grey scarves.

These leafy plazas, connected by an orderly grid of sandy streets and lined with grand mansions, are surely the most picturesque and tranquil in the US. Lately, however, they have played host to a rising chorus of anger over the conspiracies of northern abolitionists. Such deep-seated fears are exacerbated by John Brown's recent ill-fated attempt to incite an armed slave revolt in Virginia.

To understand the city's commercial boom, head down to bustling Bay Street and the docks, where the Savannah river is cluttered with ships, and

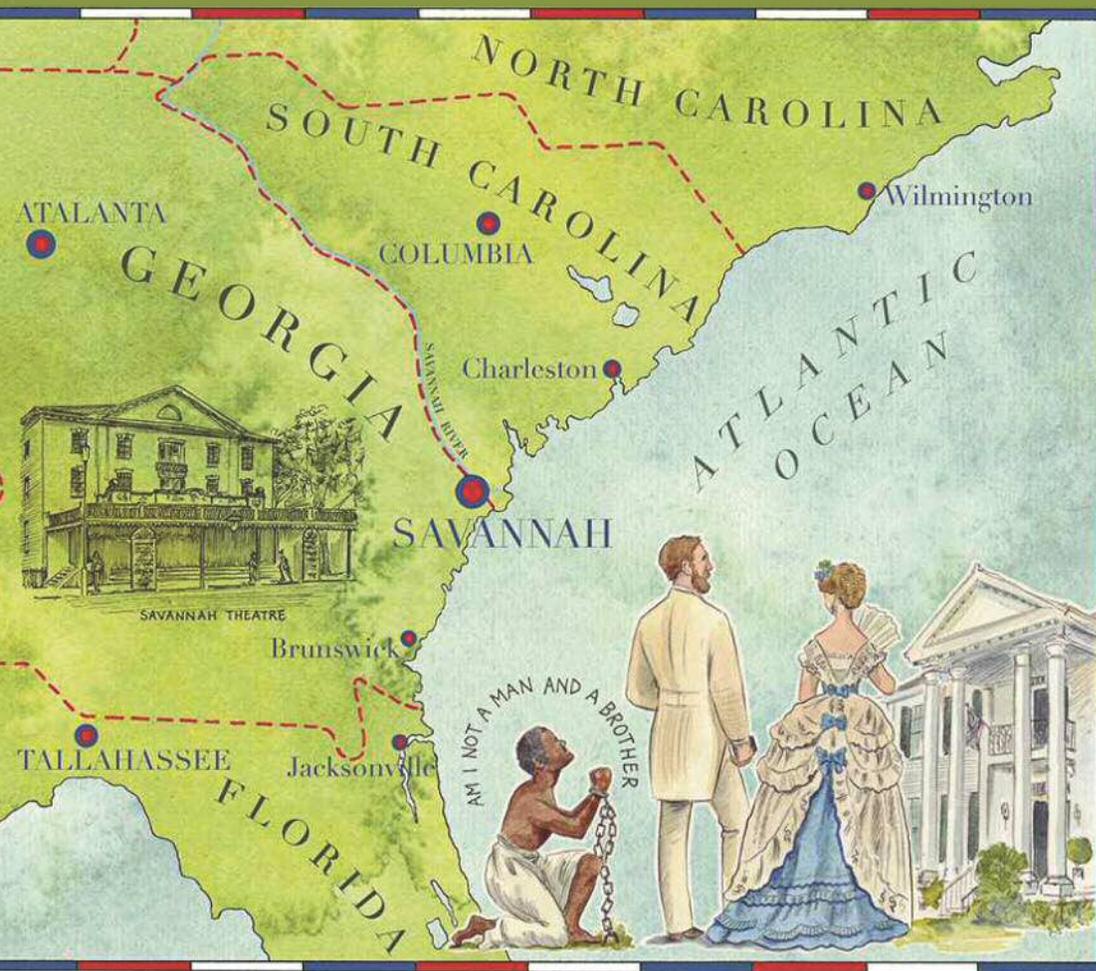


wharves teem with stevedores (dockworkers) loading and unloading cargo. Carts piled high with lumber, rice and bundles of snow-white cotton clatter along, as clerks and draysmen shout to be heard over the steam-powered cotton presses and sawmills that roar day and night.

Ethical travellers should bear in mind, however, that the whole spectacle – not to mention the great wealth it generates – relies on the brutal enslavement of thousands of Africans, who are regularly flogged bloody in the field. If you have the stomach, go see for yourself at one of the vast plantations that are a short carriage ride from the city.

For a more pleasant diversion, hire a boat and paddle out to Jekyll Island, where sandy beaches provide an idyllic swimming spot for those in the know.

**“LOCALS RECENTLY TARRED AND FEATHERED A VISITOR WHO AIRED HIS ABOLITIONIST SENTIMENTS”**



## SAVANNAH TODAY



Savannah's Forsyth Park is a popular tourist destination

With its beautiful colonial architecture and canopy of oak trees, Savannah is one of the crown jewels of the Old South. In recent decades, however, this sleepy beauty has revived herself into a vibrant city full of art-school kids from across the US and beyond.

The historic district is home to elegant 19th-century buildings, not to mention Forsyth Park, which occupies 30 acres and dates to the 1840s. The Savannah History Museum, housed in the restored Central of Georgia Railway train shed, provides an overview of the city's story. But nothing beats exploring it first-hand, admiring the antebellum houses built for wealthy cotton merchants – such as the Owens-Thomas House.

On the waterfront, River Street is cobbled with ballast from the ships that once docked there and is overlooked by five-storey cotton warehouses. It's now a touristy stretch lined with cafes, souvenir shops, seafood joints, and bars, but still worth a look.

Just beyond the city is the Wormsloe Historic Site, where the ruins of an 18th-century colonial estate are open to the public.

### IF YOU LIKE THIS...

If antebellum architecture and a glimpse of the Old South is what you are looking for, visit Charleston, South Carolina, or the rowdier New Orleans, Louisiana.

### SLEEPING AND ACCOMMODATION

Get your head down at more than half a dozen well-reputed hotels, not least Pulaski House and City Hotel – the latter boasting a lively bar and a grand staircase complete with ornate mahogany banisters. Expect to pay around \$10 a week for board and lodging. For the less well-heeled, the city boasts scores of basic boarding houses.

### EATING AND DRINKING

Saloons serve stiff drinks and solid meals. In the more salubrious hotels, you might sample green turtle stew cooked with spices, Madeira and claret. These days, the city boasts two icehouses, and chilled champagne is all the rage. If you're self-catering, pick up groceries at City Market, where white butchers rub shoulders with slave women, who chew sugarcane as they tend

## "HEAD DOWN TO BUSTLING BAY STREET WHERE THE SAVANNAH RIVER IS CLUTTERED WITH SHIPS"

seafood and vegetable stalls for their masters.

### ENTERTAINMENT

The recently renovated Savannah Theatre on Chippewa Square accommodates 1,200 for plays, musicals and occasional lectures. You might just as well find merriment on the streets, however, where fiddlers, clairvoyants and jugglers wander. And on parade days, of which there are many, the city swarms with spectators gathered to watch various splendidly uniformed militia groups march to the beat of their own bands.

The annual Coloured Fire Companies Parade is intriguing: free black men sing loud and proud as they march with their

engines, before competing to see whose hose can throw the longest jet of water. After such an uplifting display, the grim procession of shackled slaves shuffling from holding pens to auction house is a sobering sight indeed.

### GETTING AROUND

Savannah's network of shady avenues is a haven for walkers. Watch where you step, though, for the streets are strewn with excrement from the dogs, cows, pigs and horses that share them. If and when you tire, horse-drawn carriages are available for hire. **■**

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