

## **Christmas in Atlanta**

**Dec. 4-8, 2023**

**By Kathy Varner**

When we departed Pensacola for our Atlanta excursion, we knew the details of the itinerary, but not the true wonder and delight of what was awaiting us.

The Marietta, GA Drury Inn was well-appointed and maintained and oozed Southern hospitality and was our landing spot in Atlanta. We took advantage of the included, abundant, and homemade breakfasts and the kick-back buffet for dinner, different every evening but including soup, salad, BBQ pulled pork with coleslaw, mac and cheese, meatballs, vegetables, and more, plus a ticket for a glass of cheer.

Our initial event on Monday, after we arrived and settled in at the Drury Inn, was an awesome light display, choreographed to symphonic music, in the Atlanta Botanical Gardens. Bundled against the crisp air, we meandered down paths and wooded boardwalks mesmerized by the strains that echoed throughout the thirty-acre garden and forest of twinkling, dripping, and bursting lights. (This largest display in the U.S. will be featured on ABC's Great Christmas Light Fight 12/12/23).

Tuesday found us in the city of Roswell, GA, a hidden historical gem. We toured three Antebellum homes of the city's founders: Barrington Hall, home to Roswell Barrington, situated on the highest point overlooking the town; then Smith Plantation, an 1845-built home on 30 acres, furnished with the largest collection of original furniture; and Bulloch Hall, home of Mittie Bulloch, who married into the Roosevelt family and was the mother of President Theodore Roosevelt.

Wednesday morning was devoted to the Georgia Aquarium, home to 500 species and 61 habitats from around the world. We giggled at the otters playing, stood transfixed at the suspended sea dragons, gasped as the whale shark glided overhead and the Moray eel slithered its five-foot self out of a pipe only to be followed by another who was tucked in behind! Countless varieties of fish (including Nemo, the penguins, dolphins, alligators) impressed and entertained us. Our second stop that day was the World of Coca-Cola where we wandered through the history of the soda and then enjoyed a tasting experience (with probably 70-middle school students who had already consumed copious amounts of sugar and caffeine!). In my opinion, one should avoid the Italian version of Coke, called Beverly. One more delight before dinner at the iconic

Varsity, known for its short menu of hot dogs and burgers, fries and onion rings and its loud and exuberant greeting “What’ll ya have?” The Center for Puppetry Arts displayed one collection of the global history of puppetry, and another, the Jim Henson Gallery, highlighting the evolution of the Muppets, Sesame Street characters, and Fraggle Rock puppets—a magical and memory-invoking experience. Our day ended with a production of Annie at the world-renowned Fox Theater. The performance ended in a long-standing ovation and then thunderous applause for “Georgie”, the dog who played Sandy.

Thursday, our last day, began with a visit to the beautiful thirty-acre Jimmy Carter Library and Museum (one of the 13 presidential libraries administered by the National Archives). Here we traced the life that led of the 39th President of the U.S. We stepped into his re-created Oval Office, daughter Amy’s Victorian Christmas, and other exhibits. We watched video interviews of his remembrance of events during his presidency, particularly the Iran hostage situation and the Middle East Accord, perusing his many authored books and the hundreds of accolades and gifts bestowed upon him. We spent a moment at Rosalyn’s memorial and took our group photo outside the museum. We lunched on superb Southern cooking at another Atlanta institution, Mary Mac’s Tea Room where I discovered the tastiest collard greens this side of the Mississippi! Our final adventure, an immersive sensory experience, The Wild, took us on an African safari. The animals, life-sized and up close, were experienced by all senses; the floor shook; the skies screeched and howled and thundered; smells wafted through the air; water bubbled and rippled. Night fell and morning dawned as we relaxed and quietly observed this technological natural wonder.

On Friday we bid farewell to Atlanta with a final stop at Centennial Olympic Park for one last photo. On we traveled to Buford, GA and the remarkable hospitality of the Legacy Lodge at the Lanier Islands. Here we enjoyed a warm fire in the lobby, a rustic dinner and a delicious breakfast buffet. What a breathtaking sunset over the lake and, I’m told, a glorious sunrise as we readied to board the bus one final time— homeward bound. But on these five days, we’d been educated and awed, created hundreds of memories and made dozens of friends. What a fantastic PST adventure!