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Richmond's Old South Roots Are Never Far Away

By LINDSAY MORAN

YOU don't have to go that far south to find the South. [Richmond](#), a mere two hours from [Washington](#), has a magnolia-and-veranda-swing appeal that is worlds apart from anything even a little farther north. And notwithstanding its ties and testimonies to Robert E. Lee and other heroes of a long-lost world, Richmond today competes with Washington, its near neighbor, in up-to-date cultural sophistication.

At restaurants staffed by adventurous chefs, the fried green tomatoes may come with leek coulis, and the okra pancakes with blue cheese and wild mushrooms. [Shopping](#) choices run from original artwork and designer purses to vintage ball gowns. Landmark theaters draw off-Broadway shows, comedians like [Jerry Seinfeld](#) and Dave Chappelle and sundry musicians. Richmond has ballet and opera companies, a symphony and the [Virginia Museum of Fine Arts](#), with the largest public collection of Fabergé eggs outside [Russia](#). And what other city would have a company called Gentleman Taxi, which provides not male escorts but dependable and courteous chauffeurs?

Like many a Northerner nurtured on novels and movies of the cavalry-and-crinoline genre, I've always had a penchant for the fabled South: its expansive lawns, heavy perfume of jasmine, and sparkling mint juleps (sipped from a straw, I always imagined, while you perched daintily upon a creaking porch swing awaiting potential suitors). I once tried to create such an aura at a B & B in the [Berkshires](#). I ordered a mint julep and then waited close to an hour as consultations were made among a much put-upon bar staff, one of whom ultimately handed me a parfait goblet of bourbon, straight up. In Richmond, it all could have worked.

The quest for Southern culture in Richmond might start at Sally Bell's Kitchen, a red-brick place with noontime lines out the door that has been selling box lunches since 1924. Yours will come in a white cardboard box, bow-tied with butcher string and lined with checkerboard tissue and will consist of Southern comfort fare. One medley is chicken salad on a soft roll, half a deviled egg wrapped in wax paper, spicy potato salad and an upside-down cupcake with chocolate icing drizzled down its sides.

It's the perfect picnic to take to nearby Belle Isle, an island park accessible by footbridge from the banks of the James River, crisscrossed with cycling trails and offering views of Richmond's natural urban rapids. It was the site of a Civil War prison camp that held 8,000 captured Union soldiers.

In Richmond, one quickly realizes that the Civil War was a fairly big deal. The [Museum of the Confederacy](#) says it has the country's largest collection of Confederacy-related artifacts, including Jeb Stuart's plumed hat and Lee's first headquarters flag. The adjacent White House of the Confederacy, where Jefferson Davis and his wife lived from 1861 to 1865, has been meticulously restored.

Far more illuminating than either of these two Richmond relics, however, is the newly opened American Civil

War Center, a handsome interactive museum housed within an artifact in and of itself, the Tredegar Gun Foundry, where Confederate munitions were made. The center offers candid glimpses into the past using artifacts ranging from an 1854 slave receipt for a mother and her son (the price was \$650) to a vintage Dukes of Hazzard General Lee toy car.

At the adjacent Richmond National Battlefield Park, recorded voices read written wartime accounts by local witnesses, amplified against a backdrop of larger-than-life period photographs. One particularly compelling speech is that of Garland H. White, a member of the 28th [United States](#) Colored Troops, who tells of entering defeated Richmond and being reunited with his mother, "an aged woman," from whom he had been sold as a small boy.

For a glimpse of a more graceful past, take a drive in the Fan District, so named because its wisteria- and tree-lined streets spread out like a fan. Park the car and walk along Monument Avenue, one of the loveliest places anywhere for an urban stroll. The monuments are statues — of Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Jeb Stuart, Jefferson Davis and Matthew Fontaine Maury — sharing space somewhat incongruously with a more recent favorite son, [Arthur Ashe Jr.](#), the tennis champion. The stately houses lining most of the street are Queen Anne, Victorian, Tudor, Colonial, Italianate, Greek Revival, and it's easy to imagine oneself as a guest, sipping refreshing libations on one of their gracious verandas.

For actual accommodations, the prestige address is the [Jefferson Hotel](#), opened in grand style in 1895, down on its luck in the mid-20th century (it was closed when, in the early 80s, Louis Malle shot "My Dinner with Andre" in its otherwise abandoned ballroom) and then restored and reopened in 1986. If the room rates seem intimidating, get your taste of the Jefferson at afternoon tea. One Friday in April, the experience included finger sandwiches and scones nibbled at small tables set with white linen and fine china while a harpsichordist played in the corner. A polished marble staircase — very "Gone With the Wind" — emerged nearby from the lavish rotunda below.

Near the Jefferson, at the aptly named Comfort, on West Broad Street, the dinner menu offers upscale regional cuisine: shrimp and grits or crawfish cake appetizers, fried catfish, pulled pork barbecue and sweet potato purée. Scanning the menu, I pondered Vivian Leigh's corset-tightening scene.

HIP Richmond is in Carytown, the city's oldest shopping district. Browse the shops selling a variety of wares: estate antiques, beads and rocks, dolls and bears, designer cookies, and hats that only Southern women can get away with wearing. To the east, Shockoe Slip, so named because of the canal slips where goods were once loaded and unloaded, is active by day and hopping by night, especially around an abandoned tobacco warehouse converted to a popular restaurant and nightclub called the [Tobacco Company](#). On a single city block, you'll find a culinary medley: tapas, seafood, Mexican, Asian and, of course, the requisite Irish pub.

Shockoe Bottom is a district of nightclubs and restaurants. Nearby is the starting point of Canal Walk, a one-and-a-quarter-mile riverfront path blissfully free of commerce and congestion. And on East Franklin Street, a few blocks away, is Julep's, which raises Southern cuisine to another level and serves a mean mint julep.

A good way to wrap up a visit to Richmond is with a flat-bottom boat tour along the city's canals, an extensive system once used to ferry tobacco, wheat and passengers. A covered bateau provides striking views of centuries-old tobacco warehouses now converted into spacious lofts and swank office spaces.

On an early evening last spring, one “captain,” who called himself Cotton because of his shocking white hair, wore knickers, a three-corner hat and a puffy-sleeved white blouse and carried a 1770s-style canvas man's purse. (Having observed several other locals dressed in period costume at various tourist sites, I couldn't help wondering what a weekday happy hour in Shockoe Slip would look like if they all hit the bars after work.)

As Cotton expertly navigated our vessel through a narrow passageway, he marshaled impressive volume and a convincing Colonial-sounding accent to launch into the famous speech given by Patrick Henry in [St. John's Church](#) in Richmond in 1775. “Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God!” Cotton declaimed, his voice reverberating across the still water.

Despite the inevitable modern sense of incongruity (Henry, while decrying “enslavement” by the English king, was himself a true slaveholder), shivers coursed down my spine when Cotton reached a crescendo, practically shouting into the dusk settling upon the city, “I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!”

It isn't all about magnolias. To find passion and pride in this country, you can always head south.

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