

• • • STRANGERS IN • • •
SAVANNAH



The Starland House, located in the Starland Art District in Savannah, is a fully-restored home that the owners turned into an Airbnb. The house has six Airbnb guest rooms and three shared bathrooms, and is within walking distance of many restaurants and coffee shops. It is about a mile outside of the Savannah Historic District. This room (above) in the Starland House is called "Belle's Boudoir" and is fully furnished with victorian furniture, including a vintage sewing machine and a French movie poster for Beauty and the Beast.

How we toured the streets of Savannah while staying in a stranger's home.

By KAYLA LOKEINSKY | Photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY and KATRINA POGGIO

When we pictured ourselves on our girls weekend getaway, we never imagined we would be staying in a stranger's house, sleeping in their bed and eating their bagels for breakfast. Or that we would be sharing that house with people we had never met. But, that's exactly the experience we had while staying at an Airbnb rental in Savannah.

It felt like we were breaking into someone's home. We were using their towels and eating their food, but we never saw the people who actually owned the house. The homeowners were not there, but we were most certainly not alone.

In the four-bedroom, two-bathroom, 1920s Victorian house, only one room was ours. The other rooms were occupied by strangers. The thought of sharing a house with other people didn't phase us when we booked the Airbnb. After all, who cares about that when you're saving hundreds of dollars by not staying in a hotel. We didn't know what we had gotten ourselves into until we got to the house, walked up the stairs, and realized we would be having to share a bathroom and very thin walls with others.

The obvious questions rolled through our minds. Would running into them be awkward? What if we had to go to the bathroom and they were using it? What if we could hear what was going on in the next room? What were we thinking?

Airbnb Newbies

Savannah is one of the most beautiful cities in the country. With its rich history, beautiful greenery and abundance of things to do, places to eat, it's no wonder it's such a travel hot-spot.

But trying to stay at a hotel in the middle of the famed Historic District of Savannah is, to say the least, costly. One night at any given hotel could cost between \$200 to \$350 dollars. If you stay too far out of the downtown center, it's a pain to get back into the city every day.

However, Katrina and I were determined to see Savannah. But, as two young working girls, we wanted to travel to this famed city without breaking the bank. So, we decided to use Airbnb, an online marketplace where hosts can offer up their homes, apartments or vacation

rentals to travelers.

We booked Belle's Boudoir in the Starland House, a fully-restored Victorian home in the Starland Arts District. Located just a mile from the Historic District, the booking came with free parking, wireless internet, free bikes to use and complimentary breakfast (score!). Plus two nights at the Airbnb cost less than one night in a hotel in the Historic District. We couldn't pass it up.

When we got to the Starland House, we were the only ones there. The uneasy feeling of being in someone else's home was there as we tiptoed around the house, checking out the furniture, what was in the fridge and peeking around the corners to see if someone would pop out.

The room looked just like the photos, with Victorian furniture, clean towels and even a complimentary bottle of wine. In there, we were safe. It was once we opened the door and ventured into the main part of the home that we felt nervous.

We weren't in the house long before we left to get food. We had arrived late and wanted to rest up before a full day of exploring. So we went to bed early, and once we laid down, that's when we heard footsteps. I tensed up, like they could hear me breathing, as I waited and listened to see what the people would do next.

The walls in older houses such as this one don't have insulation, so you could basically hear everything happening in the next room. Every word and sound came though loud and clear. Everything. Luckily our hosts had supplied each room with earplugs to get us through the commotion.

Airbnb Tips and Tricks

Searching for an Airbnb is similar to looking for a hotel on a travel deal site like Travelocity or Trip Advisor. You just type in your destination, the dates of your trip and the number of guests then voila! A list of places shows up, giving you lots of options to choose from.

You can rent an entire home or apartment or just a room in a home. If you're traveling with a large group, Airbnb is a far better option than a hotel because you can have a whole home to yourselves at a much cheaper price.

Make sure to read the descriptions of the Airbnbs very carefully. Sometimes you may think you're getting a whole house to yourself, but you might only be getting a room. Also, watch for hidden fees like cleaning or parking fees.

Just like hotels, Airbnb prices change depending on the time of year and day of the week you're booking. So, if you have time during the week to travel, the rentals will be cheaper.

Always read the reviews of the hosts! A room may look beautiful in the photos, but people who have stayed there might be able to shed more light on the real situation of the place.



Even though we shared a house with other people during our weekend getaway, we never actually saw them. We only heard them. Our goal was to interact with them as little as possible, and since we were only at the Airbnb to sleep and shower, we were successful.

In fact, we hardly noticed anyone else was there. Except when we had to use the bathroom and one of the other guests was hogging it for 40 minutes. Besides that, staying with strangers wasn't as annoying as we thought it might be.

Exploring Savannah

The goal for this trip was to see as much of Savannah as possible in the two-day span we had there. We decided to book a trolley tour to take us around the city. It was the best idea we had during the trip. The hop-on, hop-off trolley tour came with free parking. So, we drove to the first stop, parked our car and rode the trolley around the city. It was perfect because we had a guide telling us all the historical information about everything we passed, but we were able to get off at the stops we knew we wanted to explore ourselves.

Our first stop was Forsyth Park. Hopping off the trolley, we stumbled on a small Farmer's Market, where we were able to see some local vendors and sample about 20 different types of pecans. When in Georgia, am I right?

Forsyth Park was buzzing with activity as the Savannah College of Art and Design was setting up for its Sidewalk Arts Festival. SCAD students, alumni and high school students created colorful chalk masterpieces on the sidewalk of the park. While we got there before the festival started, it was fun to see the sidewalk lined with colorful lanterns and students mixing their chalks.

We spent more than an hour roaming the grounds of the 30-acre park. Then, when we had our fill, we walked back to the trolley stop and traveled around to see more of Savannah's historic sites.

We got off the trolley again at City Market, a four-block, open-air market in the Historic District. We wandered around for hours, popping in and out of different local shops, and taking full-advantage of all the free samples the cookie and candy stores were giving out.

First, we found our way to the Savannah Bee Company, a gourmet honey and beauty supply store. We didn't go there for the lotion and lipgloss; we went there for the mead. The shop offered a mead sampling, where you could try different types of the alcoholic beverage, which is created by fermenting honey with water. Every one we tried was better than the next, and the small samples allowed us to have a taste without getting tipsy.

After more shopping and eating lunch, we traveled down to River Street, where we did more shopping, sampled chocolates and enjoyed the gorgeous Savannah day watching the boats roll in.

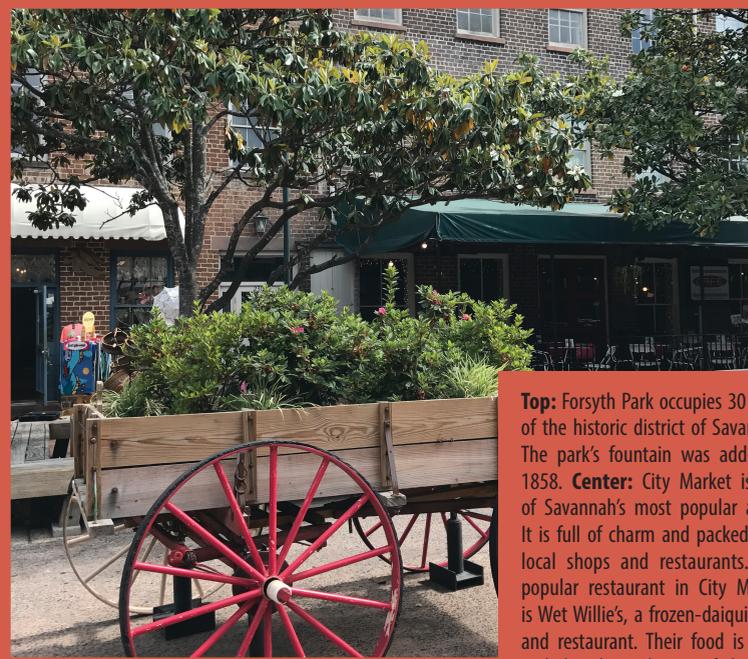
By this time, we had been wandering the streets of Savannah for six hours and needed a break. So, we rode the trolley back to where we parked our car and headed to our Airbnb to freshen up and rest before going back into the Historic District that night.

While we were resting, we heard our ambiguous fellow travelers come back to the house, and we of course hid in our room until we knew they were gone.

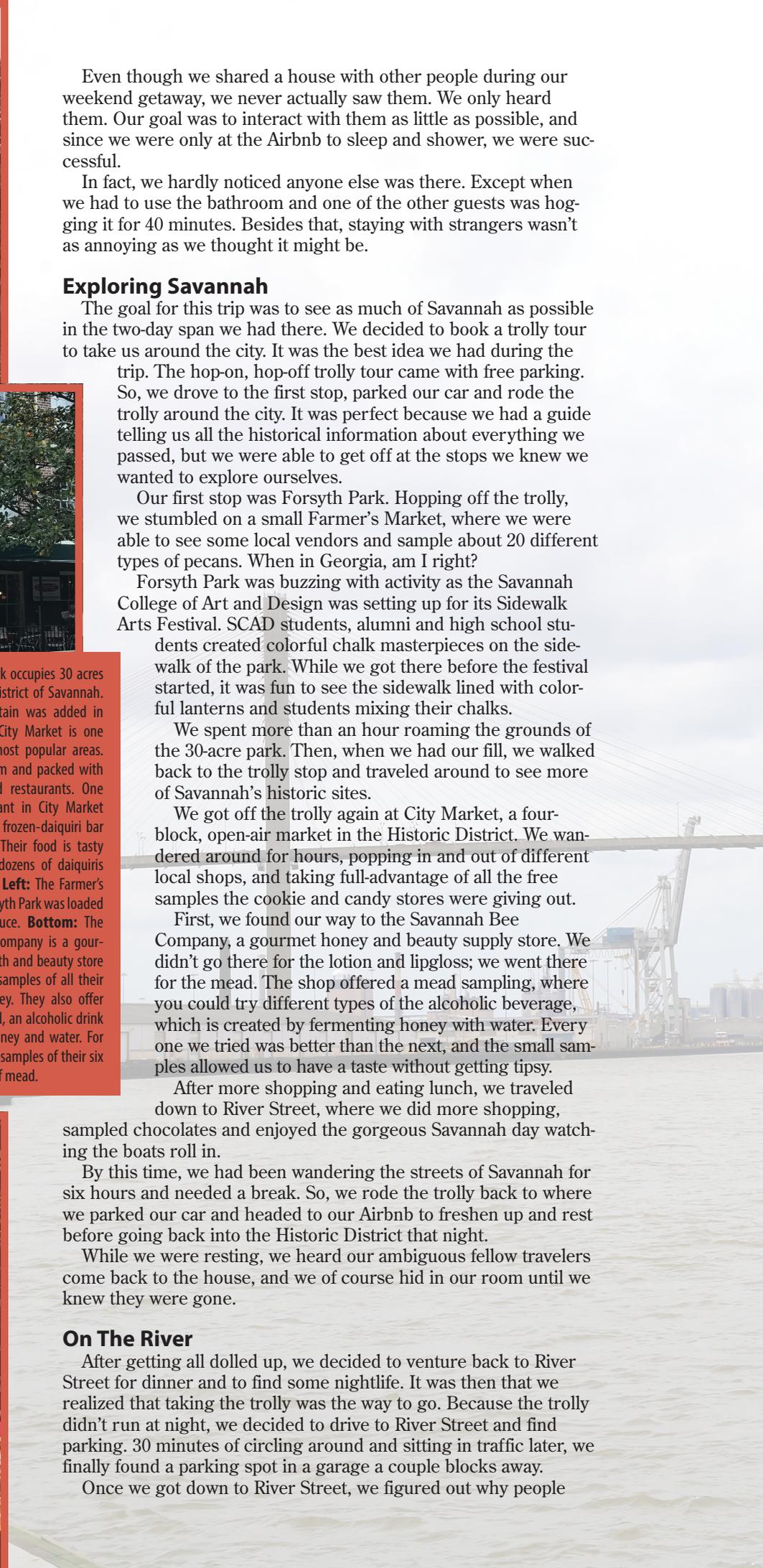
On The River

After getting all dolled up, we decided to venture back to River Street for dinner and to find some nightlife. It was then that we realized that taking the trolley was the way to go. Because the trolley didn't run at night, we decided to drive to River Street and find parking. 30 minutes of circling around and sitting in traffic later, we finally found a parking spot in a garage a couple blocks away.

Once we got down to River Street, we figured out why people



Top: Forsyth Park occupies 30 acres of the historic district of Savannah. The park's fountain was added in 1858. **Center:** City Market is one of Savannah's most popular areas. It is full of charm and packed with local shops and restaurants. One popular restaurant in City Market is Wet Willie's, a frozen-daiquiri bar and restaurant. Their food is tasty and they have dozens of daiquiris to choose from. **Left:** The Farmer's Market near Forsyth Park was loaded with local produce. **Bottom:** The Savannah Bee Company is a gourmet honey, health and beauty store that offers free samples of all their varieties of honey. They also offer samples of mead, an alcoholic drink of fermented honey and water. For \$7 you can have samples of their six different types of mead.



say to make a reservation everywhere you go in Savannah. Every single restaurant on River Street had at least a 45-minute wait. We walked up and down the street trying to find anywhere we could eat at right away. Finally we settled on Dockside Seafood, a local place with a classic menu that also served fried green tomatoes (Katrina refused to leave Savannah without eating them).

After that, we walked to Savannah Smiles Dueling Pianos. This late-night dueling piano saloon was full of hilarious comedians and piano players, who put on a stellar performance. The place was packed with all different kinds of people. From bachelorette parties to retirement parties to bridal parties; we even saw a bride and groom there right after their wedding. She was still wearing her wedding dress! The crowd was full of energy and everyone in the bar put their arms around each other while belting out Piano Man.

After a night out on the town, we went back to our Airbnb and called it a night. The next morning, we woke up and checked out of the room, meaning we just took all our stuff (including the free bottle of wine) and left the keys.

We decided to check out Jones Street, which is considered to be the prettiest street in Savannah and among the most appealing in the country. Its charm lies in the beautiful architecture of the homes and the overarching canopy of trees that lines the street. It was one of the most beautiful neighborhoods I had ever seen.

Afterwards we drove to The Ordinary Pub, a brunch spot that is anything but ordinary. From the street, all you can see is a door marked with their logo. It's easy to miss, in fact we walked right past it. But once we found it, we opened the door, walked downstairs and the space opened up into an eclectic underground restaurant. And the food was out of this world. Everything had a bacon

weave on it. It was bacon woven into a beautiful square. I never thought bacon could look like art until I went here.

The Ordinary Pub serves "Man Brunch" as I like to call it. The food was big and full of meat, with vegan and vegetarian options also available. I got a club sandwich, while Katrina got the "Bacon Brunch Bowl," which was tater tots covered in sausage gravy, sausage, eggs, peppers, cheddar cheese and was topped with a bacon weave.

We left Savannah with full hearts, and even fuller stomachs.

Our experience in Savannah is one we will never forget. By staying in an Airbnb, we were able to save money and use it towards activities we wanted to do rather than where we would be staying. It was the best decision we could've made, and we would do it again in a heartbeat.



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