

March 23, 2007

AMERICAN JOURNEYS

You Can Call It the Little Easy

By JOHN MOTYKA

WHEN thousands of athletes from around the world pull on their running shoes in [Mobile, Ala.](#), tomorrow and set out through the streets in the 10-kilometer Azalea Trail Run, they will race past antebellum mansions, ornate old commercial buildings, majestic churches and storefronts topped by lacy cast-iron balconies and grillwork. The run, now in its 30th year, is timed for late March to coincide with the bloom of azaleas and dogwood, one of the prettiest seasons in Mobile, an easygoing port town spread along the banks of the Mobile River and bell-shaped Mobile Bay. The race attracts runners from as far away as [Kenya](#) and [New Zealand](#), happy to test themselves amid the scent of wisteria. But they are far from the first outsiders to be attracted to Mobile.

The city's strategic setting — where [Alabama](#) thrusts its stubby southwestern thumb toward the Gulf — and the fecundity of its natural estuarine environment first drew American Indians and then attracted and concentrated the energies of European exploration like few other places in [North America](#). Euphonious street and place names evoke the intermingling of cultures — French, British, Spanish, American and Confederate flags have all flown over Mobile.

Locals like to point out that in 2005, the city absorbed a glancing blow from Hurricane Katrina with relatively little damage, taking the temporary closing of some downtown buildings in stride. Soon afterward, Katrina swept in a new wave of residents — 30,000 or more who had been uprooted from elsewhere on the Gulf Coast — many from [New Orleans](#), a two-hour drive west on Interstate 10.

“I grew up in New Orleans and lived in Marigny, near the French Quarter,” a waitress who would give her name only as Claudia said on a late January day as she tended to the lunch buffet at Janino's, an Italian restaurant on Dauphin Street, within blocks of two of the city's eight historic districts. After Katrina, she moved to Mobile.

“The [architecture](#) is similar,” she said, gesturing toward the imposing stone cathedral across the street. “Just look at the iron fence over there. Plus there are lots of Catholics, Mardi Gras, and it's close enough to home. The coolest thing is, you have the beach here.”

To a new visitor, Mobile does look a bit like New Orleans with a beach. Both cities are saltwater ports founded on river deltas by the French early in the 18th century, with a similar cultural and architectural legacy, right down to the ornamental iron curling into arabesques, leaf clusters and lyres.

But Mobile sits on slightly more secure ground, puts on a more sedate Mardi Gras, and exudes an understated prosperity — its regional amenities include expensive beach houses at the south end of Mobile Bay (half an hour's drive out of town) and five Robert Trent Jones Sr. [golf](#) courses, three at Magnolia Grove

and two at Lakewood Golf Club.

Janino's looks out on Cathedral Square — a good place to begin a search for Mobile's soul. At the west side of the square sits the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, which embodies the sweep of the city's past in microcosm. Its parish has its roots in 1703; the core of the current structure was completed in 1850. The classical portico, towers and steeples — and the intricate cast-iron fence — were added after the Civil War. Inside, the vaulted ceiling is decorated with both fleurs-de-lis and shamrocks.

Within a few walkable blocks are carefully preserved Greek Revival and Italianate buildings, an attractive city park called Bienville Square; the Carnival Museum, stocked with Mardi Gras memorabilia; and a terminal for [cruise](#) ships.

The Battle House Hotel on Royal Street, known to long-time residents as “Mobile's living room,” is in the final stages of restoration and is scheduled to reopen in May. In the lobby, a meticulously restored stained-glass dome crowns a rotunda that is surrounded by ornate columns, three balconies and “whispering” arches, which seem to magnify voices.

“We're so looking forward to its reopening,” said Anne Layfield, a longtime Mobile resident. “As young Mobilians we went to so many functions there — sorority dances, wedding receptions, even teas.”

Ms. Layfield is curator of another preserved building, the Conde-Charlotte Museum House, which was originally built around 1710 as a munitions magazine.

The Museum of Mobile, in an 1857 building that is one of the best local examples of Italianate architecture, peels back the layers of local history. Among the engaging artifacts is a hoary wooden dugout [canoe](#) found in the river delta north of the city on a [fishing](#) trip by a local father and son in 1976. Modern dating techniques show it to have been fashioned for use in local waters by Indians about 1320, 200 years before the first Spaniard identified Mobile Bay.

Beyond downtown, Mobile sprawls out — its genteel, easygoing reputation is almost belied by the dashing around you can do to take in its attractions.

Oakleigh, about a mile west of the cluster of historic sites downtown, is a mansion open for tours and furnished in period style, reflecting the cosmopolitan opulence of the city when it was a thriving seaport in the mid-1800s. Step through the back-to-back parlors with 16-foot ceilings and note the rich appointments chosen by the owners, a cotton broker and his wife: silver-plated hardware on the doors; piano keys covered with mother-of-pearl; a pier or “petticoat” table with a mirror underneath; and crystal gaskoliers, a reminder that Mobile was one of the first Southern cities to use natural gas when it became available in the early 1800s.

RUNNERS (or spectators) who don't get enough of azaleas at the Trail Run will find 250,000 of them about a half-hour out of downtown at Bellingrath [Gardens](#) in suburban Theodore. Camellias, cyclamen with variegated leaves of white, red or hot and pale pink, and a variety of other flowers also bloom in Bellingrath's 68 acres, but the azaleas rule.

The gardens are on the grounds of the Bellingrath mansion, which sits on a rise above the brackish Fowl

River and is also a tourist spot. Built in 1935, it borrows elements of many traditions and eras — a Georgian staircase reminiscent of an English country house, French doors, a Mediterranean courtyard.

To understand the elemental natural setting that underpins Mobile's history, drive down the bay to Dauphin Island, a barrier island at the gateway to the Gulf of Mexico where Civil War history, end-of-the-road geography and marine ecology overlap. Cross the bridge from the mainland and soak up the view: a vast, open seascape of sky and lowland marsh, daubed with the white specks of oyster and shrimp boats.

At the end of Route 193, make a left turn onto Bienville Boulevard and stop at Cadillac Square, a picnic area shaded by huge pines and live oaks. In the early 1700s, this outpost was the home of the governor of the territory of [Louisiana](#), a link in an ambitious plan by French explorers based in [Canada](#) to control southern North America.

A couple of miles away, at the eastern tip of the island, is Fort Gaines, which together with Fort Morgan, situated on a coastal spit across a three-mile stretch of water, was the focal point in the Battle of Mobile Bay in 1864. In an important victory, the Union Navy captured the forts, which had guarded the mouth of the bay. The battle is best remembered for Admiral David Farragut's supposed cry, "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!"

Follow the fort's self-guided tour through brick tunnels, buildings and bastions.

Across the street from the fort is the Dauphin Island Estuarium, the public aquarium of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, Alabama's marine research and education center. If your timing is right, and aided by informative signs that drive home the ephemeral nature of barrier island existence, you may see rangy pelicans or a great blue heron along a boardwalk that skirts a marsh outside the building.

Inside, tanks illustrate the four habitats of the Mobile bay ecosystem: river delta, bay, barrier islands and gulf. The area drained by the watershed makes the bay the fourth largest estuary system in the [United States](#), according to the estuarium.

The local sea life presents a resplendent, almost voluptuous diversity: there are submerged grass beds in the delta, 15 species of shrimp, literally dozens of species of crabs in the bay, and oysters that release 70 million to 170 million eggs at once and filter five gallons of water an hour through their gills.

Mobile Bay's shallowness — averaging about 10 feet deep — hampers its ability to absorb agricultural runoff, contributing to a local phenomenon well known to scientists and bayside residents, though rarely seen. In certain conditions, with an easterly wind, crabs, flounder and other bottom-dwelling creatures, starved for oxygen, flop up like manna on the bay's eastern shore — unexpected offerings of seafood that were called the Jubilee by surprised settlers. Jubilees have been recorded since the mid-1800s — sometimes several in a single summer — but no one can predict when they will happen.

For better odds of viewing wildlife, cross the street to the Audubon [Bird](#) Sanctuary. Though it may not be as extraordinary as a Jubilee, the sanctuary's panoply of bird life quickens the hearts of birders, who consider it one of the top spots in North America to see migratory species. In its pine forest, freshwater lake and swamp or on its beach, you may spot a cormorant cavorting in the dunes or a brilliant-blue indigo bunting touching down, glad to be back in Alabama after the long flight from [South America](#).

VISITOR INFORMATION

AMERICAN, Continental, Delta, Northwest and US Airways serve the [Mobile](#) Regional Airport, but there are no direct flights from New York. A Web search this week found round trips from New York in mid-April starting at \$305.

The Renaissance Riverview Plaza (64 South Water Street, 251-438-4000; www.marriott.com) is under renovation until June, but there was little evidence of disruption this winter in its beautiful and busy lobby. Rooms start at \$169.

The Berney/Fly Bed and Breakfast (1118 Government Street, 251-405-0949; www.berneyflybedandbreakfast.com) is in a Victorian mansion with period antiques, a courtyard and a pool. It has five rooms, \$69 to \$159.

At Janino's (350 Dauphin Street, 251-433-0500) the lunch buffet of Italian dishes costs \$6.99.

The elegant Spot of Tea Cafe (310 Dauphin Street, 251-433-9009) draws a breakfast crowd with dishes like pecan waffles (\$5.99) and eggs cathedral, made with crab cakes and a sauce of blackened grouper and crawfish (\$9.95).

Felix's Fish Camp (1530 Battleship Parkway, Spanish Fort; 251-626-6710), a five-minute drive from downtown, is a local favorite for oysters, prepared in many ways. Broiled crab cakes and shrimp and grits are both \$16.95.

The Museum of Mobile (111 South Royal Street, 251-208-7569; www.museumofmobile.com), is \$5 to enter.

Oakleigh (350 Oakleigh Place, 251-432-1281; www.historicmobile.org) is part of a complex of three historic houses. A tour of one is \$5, of all three \$7.

At Bellingrath [Gardens](#) (12401 Bellingrath Gardens Road, Theodore; 251-973-2217; www.bellingrath.org) admission is \$10, and a house tour is \$8.

On Dauphin Island, entry to the Estuarium (101 Bienville Boulevard, 251-861-7500; estuarium.disl.org) is \$7; to Fort Gaines (51 Bienville Boulevard; 251-861-6992; www.dauphinisland.org) \$5.

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)