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GEORGIA ON OUR MINDS

ALLOW US TO REINTRODUCE YOU TO THE CAPITAL OF THE SOUTH: ATLANTA, WITH ITS SURROUNDING CITIES, HAS TRANSFORMED INTO A CULTURAL EPICENTER

BY CHARREAH K. JACKSON



ATLWOOD

Been to Georgia lately? If not, you missed your chance to snap a selfie with Anthony Mackie, who was filming Marvel's new *Captain America* movie in Atlanta this past spring, or watch *Magic Mike XXL* star Channing Tatum undress in the flesh in nearby Tybee Island, where 300 lucky local ladies saw the cast perform last fall. With a boom in entertainment and business development, as well as experiences commemorating the city's history, Atlanta and its surrounding areas are enjoying a cultural renaissance. "We have the most construction happening in Atlanta since the Olympics [in 1996]," says LaRonda Sutton, director of the Mayor's Office of Entertainment. Sutton was selected by Mayor Kasim Reed, who served as an entertainment lawyer before his election. She says the administration's mission is to expand the city as an entertainment hub: "We're trying for world domination." In 2016, Tyler Perry Studios—whose shows on OWN, the Oprah Winfrey Network, bring in strong ratings—will celebrate ten years based in Atlanta.

LINE

LIFE: ATLANTA ATTRACTIONS

CENTENNIAL PARK

Perry was one of the first to make movies in the southern capital. Now other producers have followed in his footsteps—at least 30 major projects are in the works. The Georgia Entertainment Industry Investment Act, passed in 2008, provides a huge tax incentive. Television favorites like *Being Mary Jane*, *Single Ladies*, *The Walking Dead* and *Vampire Diaries* have all filmed around the city and neighboring towns, along with big-screen productions such as *The Hunger Games* sequels and *Selma*. But you don't have to work in the industry to enjoy the scene: Companies like Atlanta Movie Tours allow folks to revisit their favorite movies.

After leaving the fantasy world, you can transport to the realities of the past at The National Center for Civil and Human Rights, which opened downtown last year. "Only 25 percent of people today remember the March on Washington," notes Judith Service Montier, vice-president of marketing at the center. "If we don't know our history, we are destined to repeat it. We can use history to help us handle what's happening today and build for the future."

In the center's *Rolls Down Like Water: The American Civil Rights Movement* gallery, director George C. Wolfe has created an interactive exhibit. It opens with images of the everyday for White and Black Americans in the 1950's and 1960's mounted on adjacent walls. At first the lives appear to be similar, with scenes from pageants and church and of good times. But when you look up, pictures of the KKK and other dangers to Blacks light up the ceiling, underscoring the stark difference between the races.

The museum's most talked-about exhibit is a sit-in lunch counter simulation that brings the plight of protestors to life. Guests sit at the counter, put on headphones, place their hands on the table and go back in time as they listen to angry patrons yell insults and threats while the counter moves. A clock tells you how long you lasted through the assault. During our tour, about 20 Freedom Riders, including activist Hank Thomas, were there taking photos beside their mug shots plastered on the wall.

A few miles away from the museum sit the childhood home, church, grave site and historical center of civil rights icon and Nobel Peace Prize recipient the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In many of our communities, streets named for King and other leaders are dilapidated, as Erykah Badu croons in "A.D. 2000," but Atlanta is working to reverse the trend. "Our Martin Luther King Boulevard is going to be the best in the world," says Sutton. "It's the legacy of the mayor and city to make sure of that. This is where he's from." After hitting the King Center and historic places near Auburn Avenue, visitors can now hop on the Atlanta Streetcar, a \$70 million project, to explore other parts of the city.

Just off Joseph E. Lowery Boulevard, in Atlanta's West End and Atlanta University Center area, is the studio for *Being*



Visitors relive a sit-in at The National Center for Civil and Human Rights.

“We have the most construction happening in Atlanta since the Olympics.” —LARONDA SUTTON

Buckhead Atlanta offers luxury shopping options. (Below) Tourists can take the city's new streetcar to visit historic sites.



Mary Jane. In a city already heralded for its luxury offerings, the presence of stars like Gabrielle Union has likely helped in the expansion of high-end retail. Buckhead Atlanta opened last fall with new locations for Hermès, Christian Louboutin and Jimmy Choo. Whether shopping or star watching, folks can waltz on granite. On the music front, the Centennial Olympic Park offers the Wednesday Wind-Down outdoor concert series, and the trendsetting Brooklyn festival Afropunk is slated to add an Atlanta date this year.

The influx of culture and celebrity has boosted the state's bottom line. "There were 150 productions filmed in 2014—the economic impact for the state was \$5.1 billion," Sutton shares. The city is already looking ahead, as 2016 is the year of music for Georgia. We see why the Peach State is singing.