

Go US

Spirited away

A combination of historic events, movie locations and ghostly happenings means there's not a minute to waste on a visit to Savannah, writes **Sean Hillen**

'GHOSTS AND Grave-stones." I notice the letters emblazoned large on the side of a bus that passes me as I take my first evening stroll through the darkened streets of old town Savannah.

Welcome to America's self-styled "most haunted city", whose maze of cobblestone streets lined with oaks shrouded in webs of Spanish moss impart the perfect otherworld ambience. They're everywhere, these never-say-die characters – they trouble diners partaking of shrimps and crab cakes at the venerable Olde Pink House and they toss beer bottles around nostalgically in the shadowy upstairs backroom of the 187-year-old Moon River Brewing Company on West Bay Street where operations manager Chris Lewis tells me staff whistle to make themselves feel safer.

"This is a beguiling, extremely mystical town," says Shannon Scott, whose second home is the Sentient Bean, a laid-back, bohemian cafe next door to Brighter Day, the city's oldest organic food store beside Forsyth Park. "I come from up north, from an anti-ghost tradition, but this is the ultimate occult playground. Since moving here poltergeists have woken me up. Vapour-like spectres have come out of walls like manatees. Sure, they're scary, but they're life affirming experiences."

And there's no shortage of touring companies to take you to the city's dark, forbidding places – including Scott's Sixth Sense Ghost Tours, Savannah Ghost Tours and Cobblestone Tours Inc. You may even meet Irish servant girl Alice Leak. She arrived here from Wexford and in a fit of rage killed her cruel master, a transgression for which she was duly hanged. She now walks the streets forever, wailing.

Aside from assorted ghostly happenings, Savannah's attractive old worldliness has not been lost on image-makers. Initially shocked when John Berendt's best-selling novel *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* aired some of Savannah's dirty linen with titillating tales of carnal sin and scandal, city fathers quickly overcame their reluctance when Hollywood completed the movie in 1997 and

Go there

Continental Airlines (continental.com/ie) flies from Dublin to Savannah via Newark. Aer Lingus (aerlingus.com) and United (united.com) fly to Savannah via Washington DC.

tourism boomed as never before.

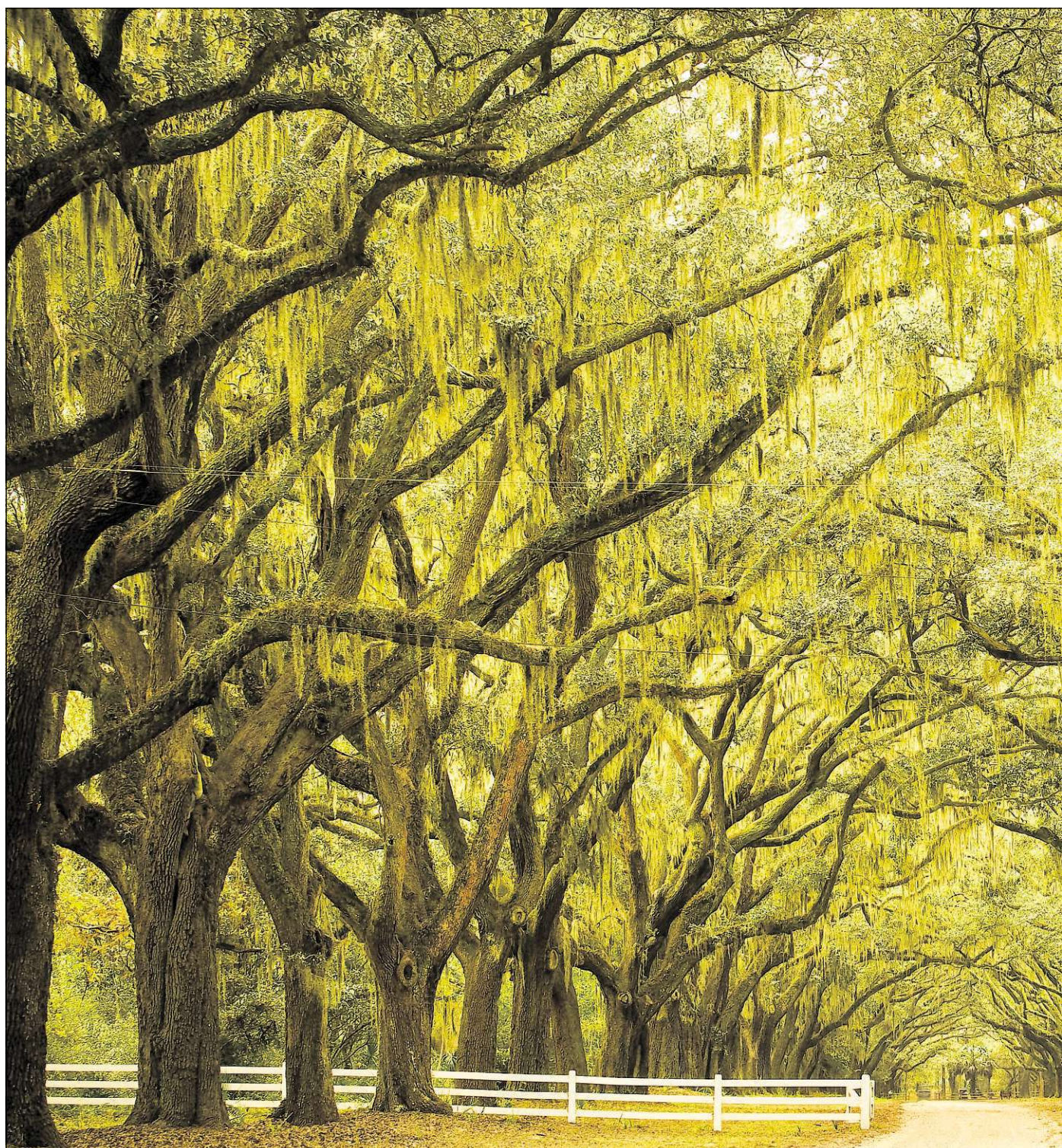
Since 1915, more than 80 films have featured the city's landmarks and attracted tens of thousands of visitors enthralled by the bright lights of screen stardom. They include *Steel Magnolias*, *Something To Talk About* and *Forrest Gump*.

There is no better place to get a real-life glimpse into the city's movie connections than Leopold's Ice Cream parlour, across from Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD).

"Will that be one scoop, or two?" The man asking the question is tall and lean with eyes that smile playfully. He's wearing a colourful apron and a funny paper hat sits askew on his head. Thinking I'm suffering double vision, I look up at the large framed photographs and posters lining the walls behind him. No hat or apron but there's no mistaking the eyes – and isn't that Tom Cruise leaning on him and Uma Thurman with her arms draped around him as if she has known him forever? And indeed, it turns out, she has. Since the age of 17 at least.

Stratton Leopold, now a youngish-looking early sixty-something, has been working

Visitors to Savannah can now sit on the bench where Tom Hanks uttered the immortal words, "My momma always said, 'Life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get'"



with Hollywood since the 1970s, mainly as a producer, with movies such as *Mission Impossible 3* and *Sum of All Fears* and John Huston's *Wise Blood* to his credits. There's little he doesn't know about the movie-making industry and certainly even less about those made in Savannah. And even less than that about the making of ice cream, a family operation since 1919.

"I came into the movie world by accident and have held almost every position possible from casting director to script reader to location manager," he says, jovially. "I've been lucky and so has Savannah. Movies have helped us both, but it can be a stressful way of life at times, so serving ice-cream is great therapy."

Not to miss an opportunity, creative guides have finalised their latest "memorable movie" tour schedules. Visitors to Savannah can now sit on the bench where Tom Hanks uttered the immortal words, "My momma always said, 'Life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get'", and study the study where Danny Hansford lay dead from a gunshot wound in the Mercer Williams House.

Tired and hungry ghost-busting stargazers can also enjoy Savannah's succulent slices of soul-food with its foremost ambassador being celebrity chef Paula Deen and her sons, Bobby and Jamie. While some may say

their fare is far from gourmet, Paula's fame from the national TV Food Network has launched the family firmly into the lime-light. They've reaped a harvest of millions of dollars over the last seven years from what one of the ebullient brothers described to me as "simple home cooking seasoned with a generous dollop of Southern hospitality".

But with a history dating back hundreds of years and having played pivotal roles in the slave trade and the civil war, Savannah is far from being simply

a ghost-ridden movie set. My feet were well aware of this. They were feeling the pinch (to avoid such minor irritations, you can take the Old Town Trolley bus) traipsing around much of the old city's 3.5 sq km and 22 historic squares – a legacy of colonial city planning.

My guide is Savannah native Harriett Meyerhoff, owner of Personalized Tours, a woman of dry wit who revels in revealing behind-the-scenes historical tidbits and anecdotes. These include the ill-fated love affair of a young minister that landed him

back in England, rejected and broken hearted. He was the abolitionist John Wesley and the rest is history.

Or the little-known fact that the world's most popular Christmas melody and one of the top 25 songs in the history of recorded music – *Jingle Bells* – is a Savannah product. Written by James Pierpoint sometime during the late 1840s or early 1850s, it was performed first for a Thanksgiving programme at the Georgia Unitarian Universalist Church in 1857 where Pierpoint was organist.

Where to stay and where to eat

Where to stay

■ The Gastonian Historic B&B. 220 East Gaston Street, 001-912-232-2869, gastonian.com. Luxurious venue which describes itself as "Savannah's most romantic inn". ■ Presidents' Quarters. 225 President Street, 001-912-233-1600, presidentsquarters.com. Mini-boutique hotel in the heart of Savannah's historic district.

■ Planters Inn. Reynolds Square, 29 Abercorn Street, 001-912-232-5678, plantersinn.com. Centrally located boutique hotel dating back two centuries.



Where to eat

■ The Olde Pink House. 23 Abercorn Street, 001-912-

232-4286. Elegant Georgian, two-storey mansion, built in 1771 by James Habersham Jr (who is said to still frequent the bar). Try the pecan-crusted chicken. ■ Sapphire Grill. 110 West Congress Street, 001-912-443-9962, sapphiregrill.com. Prides itself on "fresh market cuisine – fresh, local organic ingredients". Grilled scallops with sweet soy sauce and wasabi. Mmmmm. ■ Lady and Sons. 102 West Congress Street, 001-912-233-2600, ladyandsons.com. Southern-style cooking with a buffet and a-la-carte menu. Book early.



Explore the hidden parts of Ireland with some off-beat road trips: P20



WOODEN WAY The entrance to a plantation in Savannah. Photograph: Paul Giamou/Aurora

Another very different type of music features in the tour – that of Johnny Mercer, the composer and singer who wrote the lyrics for songs such as *Moon River* and *Autumn Leaves* and composed *That Old Black Magic* and *Fools Rush In*.

Outside the historic squares, Savannah also offers a contrasting walking alternative – the Historic River Street option near Emmet Park, named to commemorate the centennial of the death of Ireland's very own Robert, and the 19th-century Cotton Exchange.

Once the site of a bustling cotton industry, River Street now consists of nine blocks of renovated warehouses housing more than 90 restaurants, pubs, night-clubs, shops, galleries and boutiques. It's also where many of the city's annual major festivities are held, including St Patrick's Day and July 4th celebrations.

You know you've come to the end of it when you meet Florence Martus, also known as "The Waving Girl". Seemingly, Florence and her handkerchief earned her immortality in carved stone by bidding fond farewells to outgoing ships and sailors for several decades before she died – just one of the many colourful characters, dead and alive, that await you on a visit to one of America's oldest southern cities.

■ savannahvisit.com



Historic: the Savannah civil war headquarters of general WT Sherman. Photograph: Don Klumpp/Photographer's Choice

GO OVERNIGHT

KITTY HOLLAND STAYS AT HOSPES AMERIGO IN ALICANTE, SPAIN

APPROACHING the Hospes Amerigo hotel in Alicante, Spain, is an unprepossessing experience – particularly during siesta when the main streets around are deserted. This gorgeous boutique hotel, in a former Dominican convent in the old part of Alicante, is off Rambla de Mendez Nunez, a main street near the sea front, and hidden away down an alley on Calle Rafael Altamaria. Its exterior is understated elegance – white, bare stone and nicely lit by night.

Marble floors, cool dark teak-like wood and exotic orchids at the reception desk set the tone for the rest of the hotel, its decor reminiscent of the Morrison hotel in Dublin. High ceilings, exposed brickwork and the original arched windows allow it to retain the old grace of its convent days. Check-in was quick and friendly, and towels were offered for use at the roof-top pool, which naturally were taken.

Two lifts are available, or the stairs if preferred. We had a deluxe room – one grade up from the standard "dreamer room". Two junior suites and one suite are also available.

High ceilings, exposed brickwork and the original arched windows allow it to retain the old grace of its convent days

The deluxe room was one of the most stylish and spacious ones this reviewer has stayed in. Again, it was dominated by cream furnishings and dark wood furniture, with several exotic plants about the place, but there was interesting bright modern art-work, a huge arched window with a wrought-iron balcony overlooking the little street below, and bright orange and red cushions on both the enormous king-size bed and cream leather couch.

One aspect we expected to find disconcerting was the open plan way the bathroom was connected, without doors, into the bedroom. Having read about this on TripAdvisor I was curious to see if it worked. It did.

The bathroom is entirely open to the room but it is off the main bedroom and opens more into the hallway or entrance area, which can be cordoned off with a sliding opaque-glass and wooden screen. It gives a great sense of space.

The bathroom is big, and luxurious, with a large bath, walk-in shower with two shower heads, two basins and lots of lovely bathroom goodies. Two white fluffy robes and two pairs of soft white towelling slippers complete the set up.

Other notable extras are the large flat-screen television, the



DVD player, remote-control blinds, wireless phone as well as the mini-bar, wifi access and safety deposit box.

Having sussed out the room, we repaired to the pool and roof-top bar, which we had almost to ourselves. The pool is indoors, although walled in by floor-to-ceiling windows, so the feeling is outdoors, and it opens on to an outdoor bar and bathing area. It's not huge but big enough to swim lengths in and there are three high-powered water jets, like showers, which can be turned on for a head massage-type experience.

Perhaps because of how quiet it was, the bar was unmanned but a phone on the bar could be used to order a large, boozy glasses of sangria and lemonade, which were delivered to the poolside within about 10 minutes. Also available on this floor were a gym, spa centre and ample lounging-about areas.

Although the Senzone restaurant in the hotel is reputed to serve some of the best food in Alicante, I like to get out for dinner. Clueless as to where to look for good restaurants, advice was sought from reception and a helpful young woman circled three on a street map and gave a brief description of each. In the end we didn't go to any of them

but her directions pointed us towards a revelatory exploration of old Alicante.

I had been in this port city about three times before, but just for afternoons and had never ventured beyond the sea front and the main shopping street.

Our wanderings revealed a gorgeous, old traditional Spanish town of cobbled streets, charming squares, cafes and churches. After drinks in one square we had dinner in another, of huge gambas, fresh sea-bream and sea bass.

Bars were serving until about 2am, which was when we wandered happily home.

Wonderful things were expected of breakfast, and although good, it wasn't the stuff of dreams. An adequate cold buffet of fruit, cheese, cold meats, pastries and cereals was shored up with a brief menu of hot basics – eggs, ham, sausages.

It sufficed but one suspects an American visitor would expect a lot more of breakfast in a five-star hotel. Not a waffle, pancake or slice of smoked salmon in sight. One has to remember, though, that the Spanish are not big on breakfast – a cafe con leche and a churros is as much as most Spaniards seek. Lunch is the thing in Spain.



■ **Where** Hospes Amerigo, Calle Rafael Altamira 7, 03002 – Alicante; 0034-965-146570; hospes.com

■ **What** Five-star boutique hotel.

■ **Rooms** 81 rooms, two junior suites, one suite.

■ **Best room-only rates** €107 per "dreamers" room per night, up to €583 per suite per night.

■ **Breakfast** €18.19 each.

■ **Restaurants and bars**

60-seat Senzone restaurant offering gourmet regional food, 36-seat tapas bar – with skewers of duck, tiny foie gras sandwiches, a lounge bar and roof-top pool bar.

■ **Access** Wheelchair accessible entrance, lobby, lifts and rooms.

■ **Amenities** swimming-pool, gym, treatment rooms, wifi, luggage storage, covered parking, meeting rooms.