



## Atlanta Journal Constitution



Caption

# Alabama: Whether you visit Birmingham or Gulf Coast, where to start

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By Blake Guthrie, For the AJC



If you're not from Alabama or haven't traveled extensively in the Yellowhammer State, you're in for some surprises. From its biggest cities to its more remote natural wonders, there's plenty to discover.

### **Downtown Birmingham's renaissance**

Modern downtown Birmingham has neighborhoods with names like the Loft District and the Theatre District,

each containing renovated early-20th-century buildings housing trendy shops, bars, restaurants and entertainment venues. These monikers didn't exist when I was growing up in the Magic City; downtown was a ghost town after business hours back then. The vacant department store I remember driving by in my youth is now **Pizitz Food Hall** (think Ponce City Market).



The rooftop bar at the Elyton Hotel in downtown Birmingham, Ala., provides panoramic skyline views from atop a historic circa-1909 skyscraper. CONTRIBUTED BY BLAKE GUTHRIE (For the AJC)

The best new hotel in the city resides in one of its most historic and beautiful buildings. The Elyton Hotel is part of Marriott's Autograph Collection. The luxury hotel takes up the entire circa-1909 Empire Building, a stone, iron and marble beauty that has been restored to its former glory. Even if you don't stay there, you'll want to check out the architectural motifs and visit the rooftop bar for the panoramic skyline views. The hotel sits within easy walking or biking distance to the best of new and old downtown Birmingham. Grab a bicycle from one of the many **Zyp BikeShare** stations scattered about town. (See **zypbikeshare.com** to find locations.)

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From the hotel, head under the neon-lit, tunnel-like 20th Street viaduct to the south side of the railroad tracks and **Railroad Park ([railroadpark.org](http://railroadpark.org))**. This 19-acre park and surrounding neighborhood was once an eyesore of abandoned warehouses and weed-grown vacant lots. A concerted effort in the aughts brought the urban green space with its rolling lawns, babbling streams and ponds to fruition. A new baseball stadium, **Regions Field**, home to the minor league Birmingham Barons, was built afterward. Then came businesses like **Good People Brewing Co.**, one of five craft breweries within a few miles of one another in the Southside neighborhood (the others being **Trim Tab Brewing Co.**, **Cahaba Brewing Co.**, **Avondale Brewing Co.** and **Ghost Train Brewing Co.**). Nowadays, Railroad Park is filled with people day and night, plays host to many special events throughout the year, and even sports an ice skating rink in winter.

Elyton Hotel (rates start at \$170). 1928 First Ave. N., Birmingham. 205-731-3600, [elytonhotel.com](http://elytonhotel.com).



At age 98, Gip Gipson still performs at his backyard juke joint in Bessemer, Ala. CONTRIBUTED BY BLAKE GUTHRIE (For the AJC)

## A glorious backyard: Gip's Place

This backyard juke joint in a backwater neighborhood in the historic steel town of Bessemer has been in operation since the 1950s. In those early days before integration, Gip's Place was certainly on one side of the color line. Nowadays (Saturday nights, specifically), Gip's sees a mixed crowd, not only of black and white but also young and old. Gip Gipson, at 98 years old, still shows up to pray and play the blues before the evening's featured act takes the stage housed in a giant, lean-to-style shack, its walls covered in decades-worth of memorabilia, autographed photos and show posters. Keith Richards, Jimmy Page and Robert Plant have paid homage here.

Unlike most music clubs where it's de rigueur to show up late, you'll want to get here early (by 8 p.m.) to partake in the opening festivities of words and blues from Gip, a prayer, and the traditional singing of "Amazing Grace" before the party gets started. No booze is sold, but you can bring your own in a cooler. The cover charge is usually 10 bucks. And it's an experience unlike any other in the entire state. Go see Gip and the entertainment on his stage before it's too late. He is a link in the chain to the great bluesmen and women of the past.

Gip's Place. 3101 Avenue C, Bessemer. 205-919-8142, [facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com/gipsplace) (search for Gip's Place).



DeSoto Falls on the Lookout Mountain plateau in northeast Alabama plunges 107 feet into a basin along the course of the Little River. CONTRIBUTED BY BLAKE GUTHRIE (For the AJC)

## Waterfall hunting

Head over the Georgia line into northeast Alabama to see an array of magnificent waterfalls. One of the most impressive is 107-foot DeSoto Falls inside DeSoto State Park, a crown jewel of the Alabama state park system. DeSoto Falls plunges into a deep stone-face bowl in the middle of the Lookout Mountain plateau. It's one of the more scenic spots in the state. Little River that feeds DeSoto Falls runs down the middle of the wide plateau and leads into the Little River Canyon National Preserve a few miles south of DeSoto. Little River Canyon, one of the deepest gorges east of the Mississippi, contains numerous falls, the most spectacular being 45-foot Little River Falls stretching all the way across the river and looking like a smaller version of Niagara Falls after heavy rainfall. In Gadsden, 90-foot Noccalula Falls is named after a Native American princess who, according to legend, leaped to her death here. It's one of the state's most-visited natural attractions. [northalabama.org/trails/waterfalls](http://northalabama.org/trails/waterfalls).



There's more to coastal Alabama than the beach. A bike excursion in Gulf State Park and its miles of connected backcountry trails will yield many scenic treasures. CONTRIBUTED BY CHRIS GRANGER / ALABAMA TOURISM DEPARTMENT (For the AJC)

## Beyond the beach on the coast

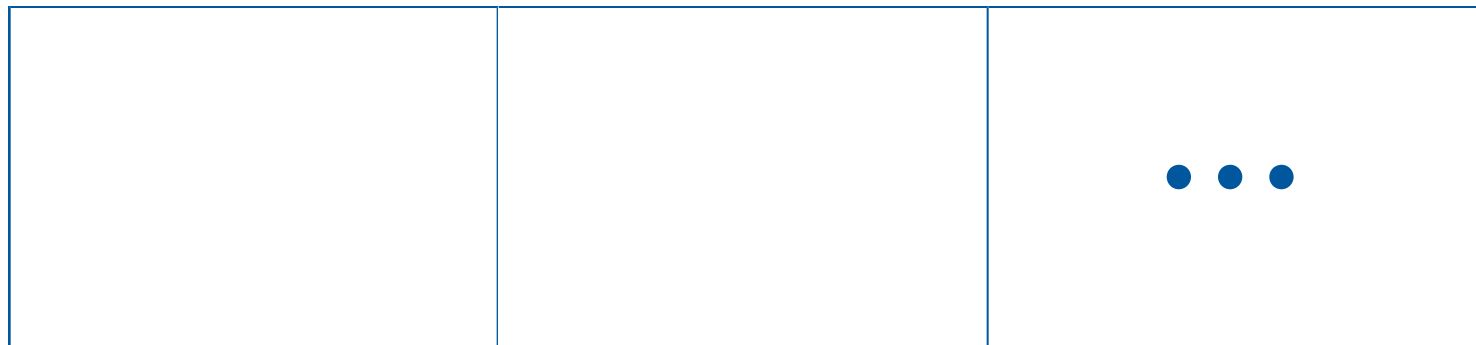
The Alabama Gulf Coast makes a great spot for a beach vacation, but you'd be doing yourself a disservice if all you did was stay on the beach. Gulf Shores and Orange Beach have an abundance of other activities and attractions beyond the beach. Chief among them is the Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail, actually seven trails running for over 15 miles through secondary dune systems and maritime forests past lakes and wetlands. The trails, which connect Orange Beach and Gulf State Park, are open to walkers, runners, leashed pets, and bicycles. It's an easy-to-navigate system offering an abundance of wildlife viewing and sightseeing opportunities. The area also has a lot of back bays and bayous worth exploring. These calm waters are home to a large dolphin population. There are a few eco-cruise operators offering dolphin watching excursions. Hotel Indigo Orange Beach — Gulf Shores is a new, pet-friendly hotel that sits adjacent to a backcountry trailhead and directly across from the beach.

Hotel Indigo Orange Beach — Gulf Shores (rates start at \$115). 22843 Perdido Beach Blvd., Orange Beach. 251-981-1737, [ihg.com/hotelindigo/hotels/us/en/orange-beach/orbit/hoteldetail](https://www.ihg.com/hotelindigo/hotels/us/en/orange-beach/orbit/hoteldetail).

### Best bar in the state

A good bar is defined by three things: good atmosphere, good people and good music. In the historic Oakleigh Garden Historic District of Mobile, Callaghan's Irish Social Club serves up all three in fine fashion, with some good grub to boot. In operation since the 1940s, Callaghan's sits on a neighborhood corner with no competition in sight. Southern Living magazine has deemed it the "the South's best bar." As a tiny stage-on-the-floor-in-the-corner music venue, it's become a bit of a bellwether venue to catch up-and-coming acts. Alabama Shakes and Jason Isbell, among others, performed here on their way up the music food chain.

Callaghan's Irish Social Club. 916 Charleston St., Mobile. 251-433-9374, [callaghansirishsocialclub.com](http://callaghansirishsocialclub.com).



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