



AUGUSTA SPRINGS INTO SPRING WITH MASTERS GOLF

By Dan Schlossberg

Atlanta and Augusta are only 150 miles apart, though visitors to both swear the distance is considerably greater. Spiritually, they are right.

While Atlanta has big-league sports and big-city problems, Augusta remains a river town that revels in peace and quiet – with the notable exception of Masters week in April.

The tournament attracts all-star celebrities not only from the golf world but also from Hollywood, plus hordes of spectators lucky enough to land tickets sold only by lottery (or by brokers demanding more money for a day at the Masters than a night at a Barbra Streisand concert).

This year's tournament, scheduled for April 2-8, will be the 66th in a string started by golf legend Bobby Jones, an Atlanta native who picked Augusta because of its mild winter climate. Jack Nicklaus has won the coveted green jacket, given to every Masters champion, six times and was also the oldest man to win it.

Eleven years after Nicklaus' last victory, at age 46 in 1986, Tiger Woods became the youngest winner at age 21.

The Augusta National course, designed by Jones and partner Clifford Roberts, is often described as the world's most beautiful. Spring comes early to Augusta, which sits on the Georgia/South Carolina line, with blooming flowers and shrubbery surrounding the lush greens of the course.

The layout is not only stimulating but challenging: there are three bridges, a fountain where course records are posted, a Founders Circle that honors Jones and Roberts, and a row of stately magnolias reaching from the entrance gate to the clubhouse. Those trees, plus an oak on the golf course side of the clubhouse, were there before the Civil War.

Virtually every golf legend has played there, from Sammy Snead and Arnold Palmer to Nicklaus and Woods. But only Palmer, Nicklaus, and Senior PGA Tour player John Harris are actually members of the invitation-only Augusta National Golf Club.

The club's most famous member was Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, president of the United States from 1952-60. After his election, the club actually built him a cabin meeting all the security requirements of a presidential retreat. It even had accommodations for Secret Service agents on the ground floor.

Eisenhower, who also had an office built over the club's golf pro shop, played the course five times before his election, 29 times while in office, and 11 times thereafter.

The wood in the pro shop's Eisenhower Cracker Barrel came from the White House roof. Remnants of the Eisenhower days remain: Ike's Pond, a three-acre water hazard with its own dam, is visible from the cabin, which still has a presidential seal (no, make that an eagle) over the front porch. Ike's Tree, a pine in the left-center of the 17th fairway, also bears the president's nickname – though he lost his battle to have it removed in 1956.

As Eisenhower learned, the locals take their flora and fauna seriously. Except for persistent April showers that often hold up Masters play, Augusta always blooms in the spring.

That's especially evident along Riverwalk, a downtown park lined by museums, galleries, cafes, and picnic groves. Along the meandering route are the Morris Museum of Art, National Science Center, Springfield Village Park, Jessye Norman Amphitheater, and the Georgia Golf Hall of Fame's Botanical Gardens. "Augusta's Story," at the Museum of History, traces the town's origins from its 1735 founding by James Oglethorpe, who staked a claim to nearby Savannah two years earlier.

Another slice of the Savannah River is occupied by the Augusta Canal, where Petersburg boats still make the slow-motion journey of the original 1845 mule barges. Built to power industrial mills, the canal lures canoes, kayaks, and picnickers.

Sightseeing options range from the Summerville Historic District, a hilltop neighborhood of summer homes for city residents, to Meadow Garden, original home of George Walton, youngest signer of the Declaration of Independence.

The Ezekiel Harris house was built by an 18th century tobacco merchant, while the boyhood home of future president Woodrow Wilson has been restored to its original Civil War elegance.

Augusta has also given the world rock star James Brown, gospel singer Amy Grant, football star Emerson Boozer, actor Laurence Fishburne, Gone With the Wind actress Butterfly McQueen, and the setting for Erskine Caldwell's Tobacco Road.

The city managed to evade General Sherman's torch and survive civil rights upheavals a century later, though Ray Charles once cancelled a planned concert as a protest against seating plans for black fans. A pair of British invasions that had nothing to do with the Beatles are also part of Augusta's history.

The Confederate Powderworks, built to aid the Civil War effort, still stands as a symbol of less-peaceful times in Georgia's second-largest city (pop. 200,000).

Augusta is doing its best to accommodate its annual influx of 1.5 million tourists: the airport will have a new, \$30 million passenger terminal by year's end and plans are in the works to bring an interstate highway downtown.

Beyond the Masters, there's a myriad of options for both spectator and participation sports: golf, tennis, and boating are popular pursuits, along with rooting for the GreenJackets (baseball), Spartans (arena football), FireBall (soccer), and Lynx (hockey). They may not be major-league caliber but tickets are cheaper and the young-and-hungry players try harder.

With tickets to the Masters tougher than tickets to the Oscars, golf fans hoping to glimpse their favorites might try for cheaper practice-round ducats, also sold by lottery. Write Masters Tournament, Practice Rounds, P.O. Box 247, Augusta, GA 30903-2047.