

DID YOU KNOW? Nell Carter, the sassy star of the 1980s sitcom *Gimme a Break*, is originally from Birmingham.



Birmingham, Al

Come for The Magic City's history, stay for the food and indie charm. By **Gretchen Kalwinski**



"Indie culture" probably isn't the first thing you think of when picturing Alabama's largest city. You're more likely to conjure images of the 1960s civil-rights movement—in which Birmingham received international attention for its protests, marches and eventual desegregation of public accommodations—or its industrial past. (Birmingham is known as "the Magic City" due to its speedy turn-of-the-century industrial growth, quickly becoming the South's primary industrial center for iron and steel.) But in recent years, B'ham, as locals affectionately call it, has experienced a rebirth. The city has poured money into the attractive dogwood-and-ginkgo-tree-heavy downtown, converting it into a mixed-use district with retail shops and condos and successfully sparking a resurgence of culture and dining while retaining good old-fashioned Southern hospitality along with those charmingly thick accents (the word *down* can, remarkably, be stretched into four syllables).

The proof is in the (Southern) pudding: Hip music venue? Check. **Bottletree** (3719 3rd Ave S, 205-533-6288, thebottletree.com) is a cafe/bar/live-music venue that books bands like the Donnas, Animal Collective, the Slits and hipster harpist Joanna Newsom. It also serves vegan food like blackened tofu tacos and black beans and rice.

The city also plays host to a cool literary scene. Stop in downtown's **Greencup Books** (105 Richard Arrington Jr. Blvd S, greencupbooks.org), a used bookstore and punk-rock venue, which multitasks by offering outreach programs like music and writing classes, a food co-op and even a publishing wing. *The 2ND HAND* (the2ndhand.com), a Chicago-born literary magazine, has a Birmingham outpost and often hosts raucous lit events at venues like **Bare Hands Art Gallery** (109 Richard Arrington Jr Blvd S) and Bottletree.

The thriving downtown is where you'll want to stay. **Hotel Highland** (pictured bottom right, 1023 20th St S, 205-933-9555, thehotelhighland.com) is a new boutique hotel in downtown's historic south side. Housed in a restored Medical Arts building, it boasts a

martini bar, high-thread-count Brazilian linens and modern decor.

The city is flanked by mountain ridges. Just south of downtown is Red Mountain, where **Vulcan Park and Museum** (1701 Valley View Dr, 205-933-1409, visitvulcan.com) offers a beautiful vista and a looming statue of Vulcan—the Roman god of fire and forge (pictured top left). Of note: Almost every cultural outpost is closed on Sunday (the city might be indie-fied, but church in the South is still a big deal), so hit your must-see spots on other days.

Shopping's a safe bet any day of the week, though. For quirky, upscale shops, hit the downtown Homewood district. In addition to hip stores like **Theodora** (2821 18th Street, 205-879-0335), which carries Anna Sui and Betsy Johnson, Homewood has women's boutiques, toy stores and cafés.

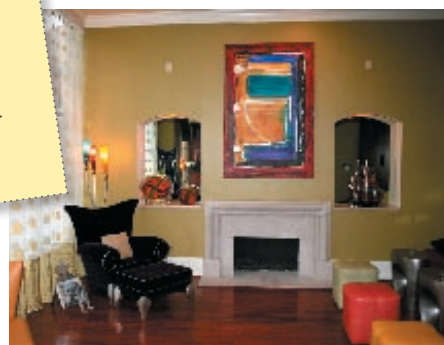
When it's time to eat, the city offers tasty high-end budget dining. Foodies flock to the James Beard Award-winning Frank Stitt's restaurants: The casual, French-inflected **Chez Fonfon** (2007 11th Ave S, 205-939-3221) offers standouts like chicken paillard, escargot and steak frites. Stitt's other restaurant, the elegant **Bottega** (2240 Highland Ave S, 205-939-1000, bottegestaurant.com), offers delicious fried green tomatoes with squash blossom and potato gnocchi with local beets. For breakfast, grub on grits, egg sandwiches and cappuccinos at **Urban Standard** (2320 Second Ave N, 205-250-8200), a downtown café/gallery that also houses an antique/craft shop. To up the elegance ante, head to the chichi English Village neighborhood for buttery croissants, scones and artisan breads at **Continental Bakery** (1909 and 1911 Cahaba Road, 205-870-5584, birminghammenues.com). Afterward, cruise the 'hood to gape at the gracious, sprawling homes. For down-home food, go barbecue. **Dreamland** (1427 14th Ave S, 205-933-2133, dreamlandbbq.com) has, in our host's words, "absolutely astounding



THE TAB

Three nights, two people

| | |
|---|----------------|
| Flight | \$436 |
| Car rental | \$107 |
| Hotel | \$240 |
| + Meals | \$241 |
| TOTAL | \$1,024 |
| United and Southwest offer nonstop flights. | |
| Travel time 2 hrs 10 mins | |



ribs" and is the best joint for the "bread-and-barbecue" style of BBQ joint that sprang from Birmingham's African-American culture. Another option is **Golden Rule** (744 29th St S, 205-327-5414, goldenrulebbq.com), which has a sports-bar vibe and tasty pulled-pork and brisket sandwiches.

For a sense of B'ham's history, visit the **Birmingham Civil Rights Institute** (520 16th St N, 205-328-9696; bciri.org). In addition to special exhibits, there's a permanent collection with information and objects detailing the city's racial riots and 1963's Project C, a massive effort by civil-rights groups to dismantle the Jim Crow system, which resulted in Martin Luther King Jr.'s imprisonment and famous treatise, "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

No Birmingham trip is complete without visiting **Sloss Furnaces** (pictured top right, 20 32nd St N, 205-324-1911, slossfurnaces.com), a now-defunct iron furnace and plant. It might seem a bizarre destination, but there's a rough, industrial beauty that remains, and the structure has been creatively reclaimed, now functioning as a concert and performance venue (the White Stripes played here once).

After all that Southern history, hospitality and better-than-you-expected eats, you might just find yourself under the Magic City's spell. ■