

The Land of Moonlight and Magnolias

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Outside, eager tourists from France, West Germany, Britain and all over America wait in the autumn sunshine for the front door of the elegant, columned mansion to open. Inside, hostess Dorothy Stone smooths her silk hoop skirt, straightens her pearl necklace and ensures that the fragile porcelain tea set that dates from the time of Queen Marie Antoinette of France is in its correct place. It is time for the afternoon tour. "Welcome to Montaigne, built in 1855 by Confederate General William Martin," she drawls with a soft southern accent as she opens the door. "We are just so pleased to have you here in Natchez!"

I had come to this historic Mississippi town by driving along the Natchez Trace Parkway, following the ancient roadway that winds through the heart of America's Old South some 800 kilometres between Natchez and Nashville, Tennessee. I knew from books and friends that hundreds of magnificent mansions in Mississippi and Louisiana had survived the enormous changes of the 150 years since they were built. But I wanted to see whether the gracious traditions, courtly manners, warm hospitality and leisurely pace that characterized the South before the Civil War of 1861-65 still existed as well. Did the Old South "still live," as the travel brochures promised?

The special culture of the Old South had its roots in the same rich soil that produced the region's great cash crop: cotton. Most Southerners in the 1840s and 1850s made their living by growing or trading it. The most successful of them, made fabulously wealthy by the millions of tonnes of "King Cotton" cultivated by their black slaves, owned large homes and grand plantations. Henry Chotard of Natchez, for example, built stables for his horses with hand-carved mahogany stalls and marble troughs, and commissioned a silver nameplate for each horse.

Echoes of those affluent days are still evident in Natchez, a town of over 22,000 people, high on a bluff overlooking the mighty Mississippi River. One of the oldest cities in North America, Natchez was founded in 1716 by the French, but in the course of its history the flags of France, England, Spain, the Confederate States of America and the United States have flown over the city.

Until the start of the Civil War, Natchez epitomized the South's golden age. As one of the cotton ports on the Mississippi between the mouth of the Ohio River in the north and New Orleans, Louisiana, in the south, it was an active trading centre moving goods northwards, to America's fast-growing West and to Europe. A large percentage of the millionaires in America at that time lived in Natchez, and scores of their elegant mansions - featuring porticoes that grace the winding stairways and soaring columns - stood proudly in and around the centre of the town.

That way of life came to an end with the South's defeat in the Civil War and the emancipation of its slaves, which destroyed the basis of its economy. The stagnation that ensued lasted for decades, and was made even worse by the post-1929 Depression.

It was during one of those dark Depression days in 1932 that Katherine Miller, a Natchez society lady, had the idea of organizing tours of some of the town's antebellum mansions to attract visitors and fill municipal coffers. A one-woman marketing marvel clad in a hoop skirt, she toured the United States with a slide show, inviting people to come to Natchez and visit the stately homes they

had read about in their history books. Her sales pitch worked. Lured by the nostalgia and romance of the Old South, visitors began arriving from all over the country. They are still coming—close to 100,000 in 1989—boosting the town's economy by more than \$64 million annually.

Friendliness intact. I visited Natchez in October 1989 during the Fall Pilgrimage Tour, one of the twice-yearly festivals during which some 30 antebellum homes are open to the public. Sitting in a horse carriage as the guide drove me around old streets lined with massive oaks and crape myrtles, I found it easy to pretend that it was the mid-1800s again.

My guide waved easily to townsfolk he knew as we meandered around old Natchez. Residents nodded at me when I got off the carriage, although no one knew me. After each encounter or purchase, I was urged to "come back and see us again, hear?" The legendary easy friendliness of the South, I found, was intact indeed.

One of the first and most striking antebellum homes I visited was Linden, an eighteenth-century house famous for its exquisite fanlight front doorway, reputedly used in the filming of *Gone With the Wind*. It has belonged to the Conner-Feltus family since 1849, and oil portraits of six generations hang on the walls. Jeanette Sanders Feltus, who took me around, proudly showed me her outstanding collection of polished and gleaming eighteenth- and nineteenth-century furniture, magnificent silver candelabras and a cypress "punkah," a long wooden fan suspended over the dining room table to keep the flies away.

Next I went to Monmouth, which stands at the end of a long circular driveway on a lawn dotted with oaks, magnolias and crape myrtles. Built in 1818 and sumptuously restored, it is furnished with some original pieces and others acquired in Europe and the United States. Two parlours even have Waterford crystal gasoliers still lit by natural gas. It is one of over two dozen antebellum homes in the Natchez area that operate as historical inns. Spending a night there is like a trip back to a charmed and vanished era. I luxuriated in a massive mahogany four-poster bed canopied with gold velvet, and in the morning lingered over a Southern breakfast elegantly served by waiters in the dining room. It was my introduction to such local specialties as steaming grits made of coarsely ground corn bathed in butter, egg and cheese casserole, poppy-seed bread and hot, flaky homemade biscuits.

On my last day in Natchez, I visited Stanton Hall, Longwood, Rosalie, Dunleith and Green Leaves—all beautiful mansions. Why, I asked my guide, did some homes in the South have curving double staircases leading to the front doors? "A nineteenth-century lady was not supposed to let a man see her ankles," he explained. But you can't go up the stairs in a hoop skirt without lifting your skirt. So, the story goes, builders constructed a staircase on each side of the front door. Men ascended on one side, women on the other."

Each mansion has its own fascinating history and special memories. Virginia Morrison welcomed me at Green Leaves, which has been in her family since the mid-nineteenth century. In the rear courtyard a 400-year-old live oak unfurled canopy of branches, and the garden was full of camellia and azalea bushes. She was married at Green Leaves, and so were her grandmother and her daughter. "I love living here because I don't like things to change," she says, "and everything in this house has stayed very much the same for several generations."

Like many other Natchez ladies, Virginia Morrison began "receiving"—dressing in period costumes

and greeting visitors in the historic homes—at the age of five. So did Ann Lanneau, who with her husband, Bazile, owns the lovely Fair Oaks Plantation. "It's simply part of growing up in Natchez," she says. "We enjoy sharing our heritage with others."

After I left Natchez and headed south down the Great River Road that snakes along the Mississippi River to New Orleans, I could feel the influence of the early French settlers of neighbouring Louisiana. Tucked along the road were more splendid antebellum homes and gardens, but with a Gallic flavour. Rosedown Plantation in St. Francisville, for example, has a spectacular 11-hectare formal garden inspired by those of Versailles. From the veranda, visitors can look out on the grand avenue of moss-laden oak trees, the Carrara marble statues, the angled hedges and flowering bushes and trees.

Next to Rosedown is Greenwood Plantation, an 1830s Greek Revival mansion reconstructed to its original grandeur. Originally a 4855-hectare cotton and sugar estate worked by several hundred slaves, Greenwood today remains a working farm producing cattle, hay and pecans.

South of Baton Rouge, the River Road winds in serpentine fashion, allowing the traveller to cross the Mississippi by bridge or ferry to see the antebellum homes on both sides of the river. Not far from Houmas House Plantation, one of Hollywood's 5 favourite mansions for filming movies, is Oak Alley Plantation, mainly famed for its spectacular avenue of oaks stretching all the way to the Mississippi, believed to have been planted sometime in the early 1700s by an unknown French settler. Today, the trees form a living canopy 400 metres long, and when I climbed the levee in front of the plantation and looked back, it took my breath away.

There are half a dozen other Louisiana mansions I could have explored, but it was time to leave this land of charm and romance, chivalry and courtesy, of huge live oaks festooned with moss, flowering dogwood trees, moonlight and magnolias. Another hour's drive, and I was in New Orleans, a saucy, jazzy city that is definitely in the twentieth century. But the tourist brochures were right: the Old South still lives.