

Montgomery, Alabama

www.allwaystraveller.com

State capital is once again the centre of attraction

Alabama lies at the heart of the American Deep South and is bordered by Tennessee to the north, Georgia to the east, Florida and the Gulf of Mexico to the south and Mississippi to the west.

It is a state rich in the heritage of the American Civil War and civil rights, while today offers a welcome for travellers based on the friendliest of folk, fine food and foot stomping music.

While the cities of Montgomery and Birmingham are a 2.5-hour drive from Atlanta, the coastal area of Mobile and the Gulf Shore beaches are the same distance from New Orleans.

The rural northern part of the state, which takes in the small cities of Florence/Muscle Shoals the larger Huntsville and the DeSoto State Park are under two hours drive from Nashville and Chattanooga, Tennessee.

This *AllWays traveller*, one of five in the Alabama series, takes a look at Montgomery, the state capital and a city that is enjoying a renaissance and, once again, becoming a thriving traveller destination.

Ashley Gibbins

Managing editor
AllWays traveller



A personal view of Montgomery, Alabama

A mistake to miss out on Montgomery



By Ashley Gibbins

We were hurtling along I85 and the oh-so helpful lady in my GPS was telling me we were just three minutes from our hotel in downtown Montgomery.

Three minutes to get to the centre of the Alabama state capital from the interstate exit?

Sure thing.

But that's one of the challenges facing Montgomery - persuading people it's worth making that detour off the interstate.

Too many travellers see Montgomery as just a name on a traffic sign while heading for Alabama's Gulf Coast or on to New Orleans.

But at the back of the mind a bell should be ringing.

Montgomery? Is the city not linked to the Civil War and civil rights?

It certainly is.

So if you are planning a trip to - or indeed through - this part of the Deep South, you should plan to spend a couple of days in Montgomery.

A past not to be proud of

Montgomery, which is located on the Alabama river, became state capital in 1846.

Montgomery prospered, in no small measure, from the trade in African slaves, who would be offloaded from boats or railway trucks and marched up Commerce Street to be sold at what is now Court Square.

The South's refusal to abandon this abhorrent, yet highly lucrative practice, led Alabama to cede from the Union, with Montgomery becoming the first capital of the Confederate States of America.

The signing of the *Declaration of Cessation* was made, by Confederate President Jefferson Davis, from the steps of the state capitol building in February 1861.

The Jefferson family also established the first White House of the Confederacy, which still stands at Washington Avenue and is open to the public.

Montgomery was replaced by Richmond as Confederate capital three months later and, to this day it is argued by some that this was a crucial error in that Richmond failed to bind the Southern States.

While in Montgomery

The Alabama State Capitol



Alabama State Capitol

The Alabama State Capitol is surrounded by landscaped grounds, which includes a Civil War Monument and a circle of flags representing the 50 US States.

Each flag is placed on a slab of indigenous rock with the state's name engraved on each one.

The Capitol building itself, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the First Confederate Capitol was completed in 1851 with additional wings added over the following 140 years.

Of note inside the building are the handcrafted spiral staircases created by Horace King, a former slave who was freed in 1846.

The rotunda at the center of the building is topped by a large dome, the walls of which are decorated with eight painted murals by Roderick MacKenzie, depicting the history of the state from the earliest European settlers to the 1930s.

Both chambers date to the original construction. The old House Chamber is larger, and the site of several events leading to the Civil War.

The Alabama Succession Convention met there on 11 January 1861 and voted to withdraw from the Union.

www.alabama.gov

Montgomery at the forefront of civil rights



Rosa Parks

With the *War between the States* lost by the South, the black slaves were freed although their suppression was not over.

Racial segregation remained rampant in the southern states of America.

A focus of international attention

Montgomery became the focus of international attention, for all the wrong reasons- albeit with ultimately the right result.

And all thanks to a lady called Rosa Parks.

In December 1955 Rosa, an African American, boarded a Montgomery city bus to go home from work.

She sat in the middle section of the bus behind the seats reserved for whites.

When the bus filled, and a white passenger got on, the driver complied with common practice and asked the blacks, including Rosa, to give up their seats to him. While other black passengers complied, Rosa politely, but stoutly, refused.

The police were called and Rosa was duly arrested.

She was subsequently fined \$10 by the court, but Rosa's action became the catalyst for peaceful protest including a 13 month boycott of the city's buses by its black citizens.

The City authorities and bus company eventually caved in. Black and white citizens had equal rights on the public transport system.

And a major victory had been gained in the struggle for human rights in the USA.

The Rosa park museum



Visitors to the Rosa Parks Museum get a fascinatingly insightful, visual re-enactment of the Rose Parks incident in the museum that bears name.

www.troy.edu/rosaparks

The Civil Rights Memorial



The Montgomery Civil Rights Memorial at 400 Washington Street is dedicated to those who died during the modern Civil Rights Movement.

www.splcenter.org/civil-rights-memorial

House of the Confederacy

The First White House of the Confederacy, across the street from the Capitol at 644 Washington Avenue, was the executive residence of President Jefferson Davis and family while the capital of the Confederate States was in Montgomery.

The house served as the Confederate White House February to May 1861 when the capital moved to Richmond, Virginia.

During that time, the White House was the setting for many lavish parties and receptions hosted by Mrs. Davis.

Completely furnished with original period pieces from the 1850s and 1860s, the Italianate-style house is open to the public.

Many personal items of President and Mrs. Davis are in the house as well as authentic furnishings.

It has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1974.

www.firstwhitehouse.org

The Museum of Alabama



The Museum of Alabama is located inside the Alabama Department of Archives and History at 624 Washington Ave.

It is a place to explore Alabama's past from prehistory to the present.

Exhibitions include *The Land of Alabama*, introducing the geology and natural resources that shape the state's history.

The First Alabamians, featuring artifacts, murals, and a diorama tells the inspiring story of fourteen thousand years of Native American culture.

A centerpiece exhibition called *Alabama Voices* covers the dramatic unfolding of Alabama history from the dawn of the 1700s to the beginning of the 21st century.

More than 800 artifacts, hundreds of images and documents, and twenty-two audiovisual programmes tell the story of struggles over the land, the rise of a cotton economy, the Civil War, industrialisation, world wars, civil rights, the race to the moon, and more.

www.museum.alabama.gov

Regeneration becomes a whole new ball game



Like many smaller American cities, downtown Montgomery slumped into sharp and almost terminal decline during the middle and latter part of the 20th century.

Those downtown residents who could afford to move out of town to more 'desirable' areas.

As a result, businesses closed, shop fronts boarded up and facades left to crumble.

A 'ghost town'

No one wanted to be seen downtown, and what was once a teeming part of the Alabama State Capitol became a ghost town.

Montgomery gets the biscuits



Things started to change for the better, in 2004, when the Montgomery Biscuits minor league baseball franchise arrived to play their home games at the *Montgomery Riverwalk Stadium*.

With the team came the fans then the first bars and restaurants.

The downtown regeneration of Montgomery had begun.

The Biscuits season runs from April to August with tickets always available for home games.

Going to the Biscuits is a great way to experience the family orientated excitement of this all-American sport.

And if, like me, you do not have a clue about baseball do not worry.

As someone told me, you do not have to be a baseball fan to love going to a game.

www.milb.com

Hank also brings 'em back



Hiram "Hank" Williams's career began at the age of 14 by winning a talent show at the Empire Theater in Montgomery in 1937.

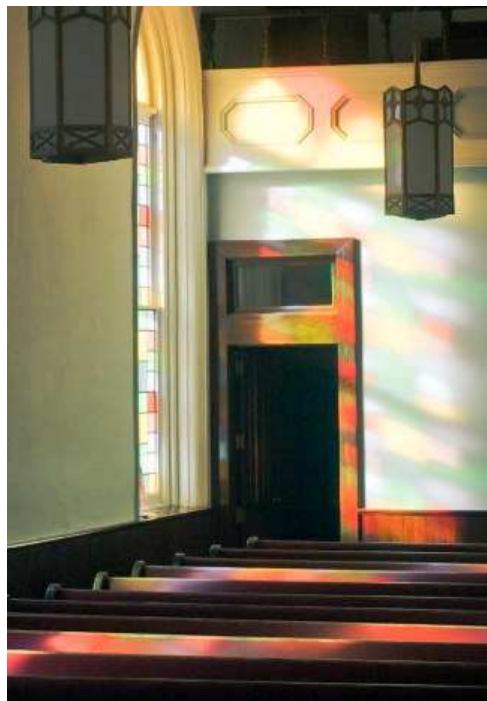
The Hank Williams Museum, in downtown, houses Hank's 1952 Baby Blue Cadillac in which he made his final journey.

Also on display are Hank's suits, boots, hats, ties, awards, furniture, horse saddle, portraits, records, albums and more.

A life size statue of Hank is located in Lister Hill park just across from the City Auditorium where Hank's funeral service was held.

www.thehankwilliamsmuseum.net

The Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church



The Dexter Avenue Baptist Church is the only church where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. served as Senior Pastor (1954 – 1960), and where he developed into the Civil Rights leader he is known for.

Visitors get to know about the history of this church, which has been home to an African American congregation since the 1800s, and learn about the role that the church played in the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

A National Historic Landmark, it still has the modest pulpit where Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. first preached his message of hope and brotherhood.

www.dexterkingmemorial.org

The Harriott II



The Harriott II is an authentic replica of a 19th-century paddle wheeler, named in honour of the Harriott, the first riverboat to operate between Montgomery and Mobile, carrying cotton in the 1820s.

It offers a range of river and dinner cruises down the Alabama River

www.funinmontgomery.com

A downtown on the up and up



In 2005, the Retirement Systems of America unveiled plans to locate a Renaissance hotel and spa, in the heart of downtown, with a conference centre and theatre as part of the project.

The name was apt as the five star hotel that now stands here served to fast track the renaissance of downtown Montgomery (see *A Place to stay in Montgomery*).

Other hotels and restaurants and bars have returned, the area around the State building has received a major landscaping and people are moving back in to live in loft conversions.

The Market District

The regeneration of Dexter Avenue, to be known as *The Market District*, epitomises the new found confidence coming back downtown.

Market Street was once the centre of Montgomery life, a thriving business, retail and entertainment area before falling into sharp decline.

The city is now refurbishing the grand buildings with living space, restaurants and retail outlets.

The *Market District* will soon become a magnet, once again, for residents of, and visitors to, Montgomery.

www.montgomerymarketdistrict.com

Work well in progress



The regeneration of downtown Montgomery is still a work in progress, but one that is well in progress.

And that's what makes visiting here so rewarding.

There is more than enough by way of attractions and entertainment in Montgomery to warrant a visit.

At the same time, to witness the transition of the city from harsh recent times towards a very bright and exciting future is fascinating.

The Alabama Shakespeare Festival



The Alabama Shakespeare Festival, in the Carolyn Blount Theatre, is among the ten largest in the world.

It produces up to nine productions annually, including three works by the Bard.

www.asf.net

Haunted Montgomery Tours

Haunted Montgomery Tours offer a highly entertaining, after dark, walking tour that highlights downtown's historical elements as well as some 'famous' hauntings.

www.hauntedmontgomerytours.com

Wining and dining in Montgomery



Dining Guide of the River Region's Best Restaurants

Restaurants of Montgomery, Alabama and its River Region is the Montgomery dining guide of the best restaurants in the area.

Its website offers information on Montgomery's best restaurants and their chefs. There are restaurant menus and daily specials, along with reviews and recommendations for dining.

www.montgomeryrestaurants.com

More information

www.visitingmontgomery.com
www.alabama.travel

A place to stay in Montgomery

The Renaissance Montgomery Hotel and Spa : www.marriott.com



By Ann Mealor

In the heart of the state capital stands the magnificent Renaissance Montgomery, the flagship hotel of the town.

Impressive, inside and out, the reception area immediately commands your attention with its unusual old hunting lodge style artwork providing plenty to marvel at as soon as you walk through the door.

Art, modern, traditional, and contemporary, features throughout.

A row of traditionally dressed southern belles hangs behind reception providing dramatic interest and colour during the very efficient checking-in process.

Our room, The Governor's Suite, was magnificent and indicative of the décor throughout the hotel.

The fully fitted, but compact kitchen came with fridge, microwave and everything needed for a self sufficient stay.

The toiletries were excellent, high quality Aveda products, which I always appreciate.

Stunning views

Our room offered views of the Alabama River and waterside area.

And the balcony was a great place to relax of an evening sipping wine and enjoying an excellent cheese platter.

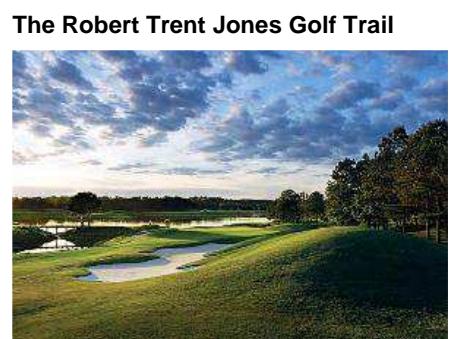
The roof top pool

The hotel rooftop provides a great location for the pool, gym and spa equipped with whirlpool, sauna and a soothing relaxation area.

There is a range of rejuvenating and relaxing beauty treatments to choose from and professional advice is readily available.

Happy hour

We spent some very enjoyable 'happy hours' sat outside in the Exchange Bar, one of the hotel's three bars and restaurants, enjoying speciality cocktails and great live music.



Breakfast a treat

Breakfast was a treat too. We were particularly impressed by omelettes, whipped up to order by Darlius at the omelette station - a cooking demonstration in itself.

We also tucked into his delicious freshly cooked Belgium waffles drizzled with maple syrup. On the healthy side, there was fresh fruit, yoghurt and cereal as well as breakfast staples.

The hotel staff were excellent and so friendly. We couldn't have asked for a better Montgomery experience.

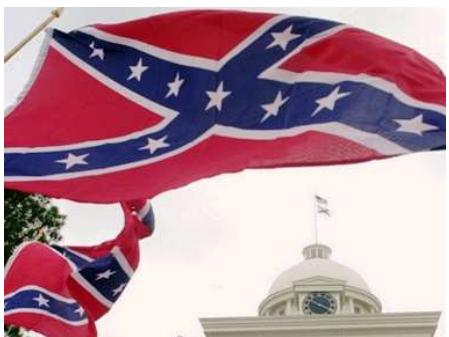
For golfers, the Capitol Hill in nearby Prattville, which has been named number two public golf site in the country by *Golf World* readers, forms part of the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail.

The Golf Trail is a stunning collection of 11 championship calibre golf courses in Alabama.

Each course is linked to a five star resort hotel in destinations including Montgomery, Huntsville, Mobile and Muscle Shoals.

www.rtjgolf.com

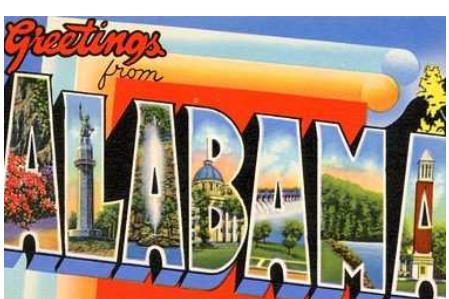
A snapshot of Montgomery



The new Market District



Rosa Parks Museum



Alabama Shakespeare Festival

AllWays travellers to Alabama



Grab your keys. It's time to take an Alabama road trip.

This *AllWays traveller to Montgomery* is one of five *AllWays traveller* features in the Alabama series.

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Ann Mealor

Ann Mealor is a professional travel writer and photographer and Commissioning Editor of *AllWays traveller*.



Ashley Gibbins



Ann Mealor