



Columbus

Experience the
river wild

By Allison Entrekin

They blew up the dams. Blasted them clear out of the water. The two antique levees that once tamed the Chattahoochee on its journey through Columbus, Georgia, are no more. Now, like a giant roused from its slumber, the mighty river is showing its strength, roaring past the city and kicking up six-foot waves. Intrepid adventurers are rushing to meet its challenge—and test their mettle—rafting, kayaking, even river-surfing the two-and-a-half-mile stretch of rapids that constitute Whitewater Columbus, the longest urban course of its kind in the world.

The whitewater idea was hatched in 1998 by a group of locals who wanted to restore the river to its natural state and create a tourist attraction in the process. Studies, surveys, and computer models ensued, and in 2010, the official “Ready 2 Raft” campaign was launched. In the spring of 2012 and 2013, they obliterated the dams, and last May, the first rafters put in their oars.

GD&CO



Whitewater Columbus



National Infantry Museum



Springer Opera House

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If you see just one thing besides raging rapids during your trip, make it the National Infantry Museum and Soldier Center in Patriot Park, which tells the gripping story of America's Infantry soldiers. Originally housed in a former Army hospital on the grounds of Fort Benning, the museum moved into its impressive 190,000-square-foot digs in 2009. Its signature attraction, The Last 100 Yards, invites visitors to walk 100 yards through eight iconic battle scenes. The music, sound effects, and lifelike mannequins create an emotional experience that will stay with you long after you leave. Other notable exhibits include a tribute to the families of the fallen and wounded, and an inside look at the first weeks of basic training.

Keep the flag flying high with a visit to the National Civil War Naval Museum at Port Columbus, the only museum of its (Continued on p. 81)

To say Whitewater Columbus has been a success is an understatement. A whopping 16,000 people shot the rapids last summer, and organizers expect to welcome as many as 25,000 this year. Rafters appreciate the range of grades—from Class I to Class IV (easy to advanced)—

from which they can choose, and dig the tailgating atmosphere. Cheering picnickers camp along the Chattahoochee RiverWalk, overlooking the action, and post-whitewater libations await at Uptown Columbus' plentiful bars and restaurants, just two blocks away.

The whitewater attraction is a fitting addition to Columbus, a city that has always lived on the edge. Established in 1828 as a trading post on Georgia's western border, it was the last frontier town of the original thirteen colonies. In 1918, Fort Benning, home of the U.S. Infantry, was established just outside Columbus; together with the textile industry, it has long constituted the bulk of the area's economy.

These days, many of the old textile mills house condos and restaurants that cater to professionals who work at Columbus-headquartered Fortune 500 companies, such as TSYS and Aflac. And the rail lines that once served as this frontier town's main connection to the outside world now form an eleven-mile pathway welcoming bikers, walkers, and joggers.

If you travel to Columbus to experience its whitewater thrills, make time to explore the rest of the city. You'll find that it's vibrant, youthful (the median age is thirty-three), and technologically savvy—the city has even developed a geocaching tour (a high-tech treasure hunt played with a GPS device) to show off the RiverWalk.

The landmark Columbus Marriott makes an ideal home base for your vacation. It's located in a restored 1861 cotton mill and is within walking distance of most of Uptown Columbus's attractions, including the RiverWalk.

RESOURCES *Whitewater Columbus* columbusgawhitewater.com, *Uptown Columbus* uptowncolumbusga.com, *Columbus Marriott* marriott.com, *National Infantry Museum* nationalinfantrymuseum.org, *National Civil War Naval Museum* portcolumbus.org, *Country's Barbecue* country sbarbecue.com, *Dinglewood Pharmacy* 706-322-0616, *Minnie's Uptown* 706-322-2766, *Springer Opera House* springeroperahouse.org

(Continued from p. 53) kind. Check out the remains of several ships, including the mammoth Southern ironclad ram *CSS Jackson*. Originally constructed of more than 4 million pounds of heart pine and solid oak encased in iron, it's the largest surviving Confederate warship. Be sure to climb aboard the full-scale replica of the *USS Water Witch*, a side-wheel steamship that served in the Civil War.

After getting your fix of adrenaline and your fill of Americana, break for a meal at one of Columbus's iconic restaurants. Country's Barbecue, located in a 1930s Greyhound bus station, serves pulled pork and collards, and James Brown croons on the jukebox. Kids (and kids at heart) go nuts for the milkshake bar and the chance to get behind the wheel of the station's retired bus.

At Dinglewood Pharmacy, which has been independently operated since 1918, order a "scrambled dog"—a hot dog topped with chili, onions, cheddar cheese, pickles, cole slaw, and oyster crackers and served in a banana-split dish. And for a Southern-style veggie plate (featuring plenty of butter-soaked and deep-fried favorites), order from the hot bar at Minnie's Uptown.

The excitement doesn't end with nightfall. Catch a play at historic Springer Opera House, the State Theatre of Georgia. Its stage once welcomed the likes of Oscar Wilde and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, the Columbus local known as the "Mother of the Blues." (Her restored home is now the site of a blues museum.) And through May, Uptown Columbus hosts a weekly outdoor concert in the heart of the city's entertainment district. Pull up a lawn chair (all roads are blocked off), let the kids run around, and sip a beverage served up by one of the many street vendors.



Off the River Forty-five minutes north of Columbus, you'll find two of Georgia's top attractions. Callaway Gardens, in Pine Mountain, offers 14,000 acres of natural beauty and plenty of outdoor activities. Tee off on the par-72 Mountain View Course, relax on the white-sand beach, and take in one of the world's largest azalea displays (above). In Warm Springs, visitors can tour the Little White House, the beloved home of former U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Dip your toes in the 88-degree springs that lured F.D.R. to Georgia in search of relief from polio, and see the famous unfinished portrait for which he was sitting when he suffered a fatal stroke. callawaygardens.com, gastateparks.org/littlewhitehouse



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