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## ALABAMA

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# 'A More Positive Direction' in Alabama

Two of the STATE'S largest cities—Mobile and Birmingham—are honoring their roles in welcoming freed slaves and the U.S. civil rights movement.

BY RAYNA KATZ

Alabama



VISIT MOBILE

Underscoring cornerstones of their history, two of Alabama's major cities have introduced new attractions, or opened old spots, that honor the African American experience in America.

In Mobile, reprehensible stories—that of slavery and of Jim Crow laws (racial discrimination that remained in place until the 1960s)—are being shared to recognize the past while new tours are shining more spotlights on African American history. Birmingham is showcasing its role in the civil rights movement, sharing with the public for the first time a critical spot in the 1963 fight while adding new archives of the events of 60 years ago.

## MOBILE

A new museum, Africatown Heritage House, opened in July in Mobile. It features the story of the *Clotilda*, the last slave ship to enter the U.S., and the stories of the 110 enslaved Africans who survived the end of slavery and created Africatown, a community of free people of color in Mobile. New tour companies have opened to support guided tours in Africatown.

Additionally, the African American Archives has been renovated and renamed the Cultural Heritage Center. A new exhibit opening next month features a retrospective of Davis Avenue, the cultural and business district of Mobile's African American community during the Jim Crow years. The University of South Alabama Archeology Museum has reopened following a renovation, and it, too, has an exhibit tied to Jim Crow.

A wide assortment of tours have also come online or expanded in Mobile this year, including those focused on history, food, cocktails, ghosts and more.

Upcoming, The Franklin House—home to Dr. James Alexander Franklin, a pioneering Black caregiver during the Jim Crow era—will open this fall on the Dora Franklin Finley African American Heritage Trail. In 2024, the Admiral Hotel is slated to complete major updates. First built in 1940, the 156-room downtown property is a Historic Hotel of America and boasts 7,000 square feet of meeting space. Also on the horizon, a heritage trail focused on civil rights is in the works

and should be completed by 2025.

"As we tell these important stories in our history, visitors will see the diversity and strength of our people," says David Clark, president and CEO of Visit Mobile.

"Some stories are difficult to hear, but they are all our stories. We know these new offerings will have a positive impact on groups and visitors who come to Mobile."

## **BIRMINGHAM**

Birmingham's civil rights corridor is being spotlighted with renovations and new development.

The A.G. Gaston Motel, the headquarters to the local movement, was opened to the public for tours for the first time this summer. Opened in 1954, the property, which has undergone a \$10 million renovation, accommodated Black guests including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The property's Room 30 became known as the "War Room," where King and other civil rights leaders strategized.

Opening this fall in the corridor will be the Civil Rights Storytelling Zone, an art installation that will display photos and videos from the civil rights movement, along with captions and a QR code connecting visitors to more history.



## GREATER BIRMINGHAM CVB

"The Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument offers meeting planners an added value: a history lesson for attendees," says Steve Pierson, director of convention sales for the Greater Birmingham CVB. "With the additional educational options now available, attendees will gain a more complete understanding of our civil rights heritage and the strides being made to move in a more positive direction." The Storytelling Zone is part of a large public and private new complex, City Walk BHAM. Opened last summer, the 1.5-mile, 10-block-long public space is adjacent to the Birmingham Jefferson Convention Complex (BJCC). It features an amphitheater that can hold 1,500 attendees, a 5,600-square-foot beer garden and social space that is expandable to 20,000 square feet, an 86,000-square-foot lawn, 10 pickleball courts, food trucks and even a 58,000-square-foot skate park with a roller-skating rink.

The complex has numerous possibilities for groups, according to Toni Dennis, director of public relations and community partnerships, City Walk BHAM.

"We work with the BJCC because groups may have their meeting there and then receptions at City Walk," she says. "We do a lot of team building on the pickleball courts, too. Almost every spot, except for the playground, is available to rent."

City Walk BHAM sits under the I-20/I-59 bridge, to which color-changing, LED lighting was recently added along the edges—creating functional as well as decorative lighting. Also in Birmingham, the 259-room Renaissance Birmingham Ross Bridge Golf Resort & Spa, which features more than 25,000 square feet of meeting space, redid all of its greens.

Jennifer Gowers (MPI Georgia Chapter), principal event producer at GoPro Event Solutions, says Birmingham is an easy market to work in because everyone is friendly and willing to help.

"They make everyone feel welcome; it's very rare that anyone is turned away at the door, with or without an RSVP," she says. "The city and the hospitality industry support events, and our civil rights history is huge. The education it provides is second to none."



## **GULF SHORES & ORANGE BEACH TOURISM**

### **Key meeting hotel on the Gulf Coast gets a major refresh**

Along Alabama's Gulf Coast—a 32-mile beach destination—Perdido Beach Resort completed a full, \$20 million renovation last year after suffering damage from 2020's Hurricane Sally. The 344-room property, featuring 44,000 square feet of meeting space and three restaurants, retained many of its employees. A number of them are long-term employees who pitched in to help repair the hotel.

The extensive upgrades have practically created a new hotel and meeting venue for groups.

"The massive renovations at Perdido Beach Resort brought a very nice property to a whole new level, giving planners refreshed indoor and outdoor meeting spaces for a variety of group sizes," says Michelle Russ, vice president of sales, sports and events for Gulf Shores & Orange Beach Tourism. "Since the resort was renovated from top to bottom, the upgraded rooms, restaurants and onsite amenities make the property an even bigger sell for attendees to incorporate extended stays with friends and family."

The destination's other main meeting hotel, the Lodge at Gulf State Park, features 44,000 square feet of meeting space. Additionally, in Orange Beach—a part of the gulf area—the Orange Beach Convention Center features 18,000 square feet of

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space.