The heart of Atlanta

An energetic cultural centre, this Southern city has seen radical change over the last half-century.

The cab driver was laughing. "Atlanta is Southern, but thinks it's New York."

I watched his eyes, creasing in the sun, in the rear-view mirror, but I couldn't read his expression.

"And what do you think?" I asked.

We were passing through Downtown; I bowed my head to locate the tops of skyscrapers. Only five minutes earlier, the streets had been lined with porches in a foam of pink azaleas.

We may have been on Peachtree Street, or maybe Peachtree Road, Lane, Avenue, Walk, Circle or Memorial Drive. There are over 70 roads in Atlanta named after the famous fruit tree. It's almost a shame to eat Georgian peaches any way but raw, but then there are cobblers, baking in traditional Southern restaurants across Atlanta. Their steam folds into the smoke of fried chicken, warming the dining areas, all of which feel like homes.

Peaches symbolise Georgia's eternal sunshine but, like most things here, they also belong to its racial history. Enslaved African-Americans were vital in the cultivation of the crop. Atlanta's racial tension and activism are deeply grooved – they cannot be extracted from a city that was architecturally designed to redline its Black community in the 1930s, and which was the hometown of Martin Luther King Jr.

The National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Downtown tells the story of King's mission across its upper wings. A basement level holds letters and mementos donated by his fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha, and can't be photographed by the public – a provision that adds to its spiritual atmosphere.

King was born and raised in Sweet Auburn. Each house in the neighbourhood is weathered now, its wood lap sidings muted and yellowed, and wandering the streets feels like walking through photographs. It's quiet here, even when King's speeches bellow from the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Park. In fact, it's especially quiet at these times. His tomb is erected outside the centre in a pool of bright navy water, alongside that of his wife, Coretta Scott's.

"We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream", read the basin's ceramic tiles. Down the street, gospel recordings boom from Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King was baptised and later became a pastor.

"Do I think it's New York?" the cab driver – an older African-American man named Walter – repeated, adjusting his cap at a red light. "Well, things have changed since I grew up here, and they had to. That Southern gentleness is quieter now. Every kind of culture and arts has exploded in the city."

Atlanta is also sometimes named Black Hollywood. It's the hip-hop capital, and home to Tyler Perry's film empire, whose 330-acre studios sit on Fort McPherson, a deactivated military base once built by slaves and used by the Confederate government.

"But," Walter said, "we're Atlanta, so long as we choose to remember."

As he drove, he told me about Atlanta's cityscapes and how they had transformed over the past half a century. Views captured in various archival photographs are now blocked by skyscrapers and giant complexes. Atlanta is swelling into a metropolis.

Later, I walked along the BeltLine and caught sight of the skyline. The BeltLine itself – a 22-mile throughway encircling

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Clockwise from left: Atlanta skyline; Homes in the Sweet Auburn neighbourhood; Two musicians in Piedmont Park; A female dancer performs for onlookers at a public park along the Beltline.

Atlanta – created a radical change to the central city, making it far more walkable and cyclable since 2005. It's also something of a landing point in its own right; there are bars and restaurants stringing its pathway, and I passed several parties congregating around DJ decks.

A troupe of Black street performers were dancing and flipping along the sidelines. I watched them glide over the crowd's heads while the sun beat down. Later, I walked toward Piedmont Park, stopping often because the views, of Atlanta's skyscrapers melting into a bright sprawl, were so dramatic.

Life feels electric and neon here, but something soulful glistens behind the buildings, just hiding out of view.

GETTING THERE Famously the world's busiest airport, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL) is reached by daily non-stop flights from London, Manchester and Edinburgh. Downtown is close by and easily accessed via MARTA, the city's transit rail system.

GETTING AROUND Atlanta's a driving city, but the MARTA rail system and Atlanta Streetcar both offer routes to get around.

BEST TIME TO GO The temperature's at its most comfortable in spring and autumn.

FURTHER INFORMATION
discoveratlanta.com