

Why you'll feel at home Sweet Home in Alabama

Golden sands, blue skies and Southern hospitality ensure a trip to remember

I have been in love with the rousing US rock anthem Sweet Home Alabama since I first heard it on the radio as a teenager in the mid-1970s.

The vivid lyrical imagery conjured up by the legendary band Lynyrd Skynyrd of stoic and defiant southerners living in a place “where the skies are so blue” captured the imaginations of millions of music fans around the world.

Growing up under the dark and gloomy skies of Glasgow, the memorably descriptive words sung by the late Ronnie Van Zant – plus the now-iconic opening guitar riff – had quite an impact.

I recall the song made me feel so good that I immediately wanted to pack a bag and go there.

Decades later, I finally got to do just that.

And on an eight-day trip to the

southern state at the end of April, I discovered that Alabama is just as famous for its cute country towns, beaches and warm hospitality as it is for its signature song.

I travelled there from Edinburgh via Atlanta, Georgia, on a Delta Airlines flight that took about six and a half hours. This was followed by a short-hop connection down to the charming coastal city of Mobile. From there it was a 40-minute transfer by minibus to the luxurious Grand Hotel on the fringes of beachside Fairhope, my base for the first few days.

The historic spa and golf resort is spread across 550 lush acres on Mobile Bay and is known as the “Queen of Southern Resorts”. Main attractions include two championship golf courses, a 20,000-square-foot European spa, and a private beach. The resort also

offers daily traditions like a historic cannon firing.

From there it was easy to explore the quaint streets of upmarket Fairhope, recognised as one of the most charming small towns in America.

I also enjoyed taking part in leisurely local activities, including a class in fresh pasta making at the MARI Italian Cooking Lab and making sun catchers just a short drive away at the Orange Beach Coastal Arts Center.

Another highlight was a visit to The Hope Farm, a working farm-to-table restaurant in Fairhope that blends dining, agriculture and community into one experience.

It was created by a father and son with a vision of connecting

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DEEP SOUTH:
The spectacular
beach at Gulf
Shores, above.
Left to right, the
Battle House
Renaissance
hotel in Mobile,
Embassy
Suites hotel,
Fairhope, and
the Grand Hotel.

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people to where their food comes from, combining a love of farming with a passion for food and wine.

What makes it special is its sustainable, on-site farming practices, including hydroponic gardens that produce fresh ingredients used directly in the kitchen. Delicious.

From there I decamped for a two-night stay at the newly opened Embassy Suites hotel in Gulf Shores. It sits directly across from a spectacular public beach and boasts sweeping views of white sand and the sparkling waters of the Gulf.

There I turned back the clock and took a fun lesson hosted by local firm the Sandcastle University that teaches the best tools, tips and tricks of building amazing sandcastles to groups of all ages and skill levels.

OK, my ham-fisted effort looked more like an ancient Scottish ruin, but at least

I gave it a go.

Another standout was a visit to the tranquil Gulf State Park. It is sited just minutes from the beaches and is an outstanding system of walking and cycling trails covering more than 6,000 acres. It features an abundance of vibrant plant and wildlife.

My top pick of restaurants at Gulf Shores had to be Voyagers, a fine-dining experience with a relaxing attitude, where chef Brody Olive's perfectly executed dishes are accompanied by first-class service.

Final stop was a two-night stay in Mobile itself.

It is a welcoming, safe and friendly small coastal city that is packed with history and is known as the birthplace of American Mardi Gras.

And as if on cue, as the city skyline loomed into view on the approach, Sweet Home Alabama was suddenly blasting out from the minibus speakers, providing the perfect soundtrack.

While in Mobile, I stayed at the

elegant downtown Battle House Renaissance hotel. Originally opened in 1908, the property features a stunning grand lobby, marble floors and stately room designs.

Attractions in Mobile include touring the Second World War-era USS Alabama Battleship Memorial Park, where you can step back in time while exploring the ship and the USS Drum submarine, along with a pavilion stocked with more than 30 historic military aircraft.

Overall, it was a fabulous visit to the southern state and it exceeded my expectations.

In fact, I enjoyed Alabama so much that I plan to return there later in the year to explore the north of the state. Just like Lynyrd Skynyrd famously sang... Lord, I'm coming home to you.

TRAVEL FACTS



Travelbag offers 10 nights in Alabama from £2,499pp including indirect return flights from Glasgow International Airport, and 11 days' car hire. Selected departures in February 2027. Book by June 30, 2026. Based on two adults sharing. All packages subject to availability. To book, Call Travelbag on **0203 393 9620** or visit **www.travelbag.co.uk**



Russell showing off his efforts at Sandcastle University.