

North-south: fun finds on Interstate 95

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There are two ways to tackle a road trip: put the pedal to the metal to arrive at your destination as quickly as possible or adopt an it's-not-the-destination-but-the-journey attitude.

Having employed the former method over 15 years of traveling the 1,500 miles from Boston to Miami Beach each winter (and back each spring), it was time to find out what I've missed speeding past towns near Interstate 95. Turns out, a lot.

On a recent trip, my copilot and I were looking for diversions: a little history here, some

shopping there, a tasty meal and a comfortable bed somewhere other than at a corporate chain. Here are some places that delighted us:

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VERNON, CONN.

Vernon is only 90 miles from Boston, yet I always stop at Rein's N.Y. Style Deli-Restaurant for my fix of rugelach, bagels with whitefish salad, and dried apricots dipped in chocolate.

PHILADELPHIA

We scheduled an overnight in Philly with old college pals, though our early arrival — while they were still at work — meant finding an afternoon activity. After a drive along the scenic Schuylkill River, we spotted the Philadelphia Zoo. When do people without kids visit a zoo? In our case, hardly ever. A visit was in order.

The Victorian gates and 42-acre gardens are in the same location as on opening day in 1859 when the zoo housed 813 animals. Today, it's home to more than 1,300 animals, many of them rare and endangered, including zebras, western lowland gorillas, vampire bats, Sumatran orangutans, snow leopards, red pandas, polar bears, Nile crocodiles, king cobras, Galápagos tortoises, cheetahs, African lions, aardvarks, and more.

Our favorite habitat was the McNeil Avian Center, with lush walk-through environments featuring more than 100 birds from around the world, including a black-bellied whistling duck with a high-pitched, otherworldly call.

We gobbled ice cream for lunch, though more substantial offerings can be had at the Tiger Terrace (open year round): hotdogs, Angus and cheddar cheeseburgers, Italian sausage and pepper sandwiches, plus salads, fresh fruit, pizza, and fries.

RICHMOND

I planned this stop solely based on my desire to dine at the Rappahannock restaurant, but we found plenty else to rave about in the Virginia capital.

On a sunny afternoon, we stretched our legs in Carytown, a mile-long shopping district west

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of downtown with hundreds of hip, locally owned indie boutiques, restaurants, and specialty shops housed in colorfully painted two- and three-story buildings. We found coffee shops galore, plus a wine bar, ethnic eateries, bakeries, burger joints, a diner, and other places to stop for a meal or a bite. With its yellow pressed-tin ceiling, bistro seats, and very French menu, Can Can Brasserie tempted, but we saved our appetites and shopped instead.

Walking the length of Cary Street, we wandered in and out of stores selling clothing, jewelry, magic tricks, toys, beads, crafts, costumes, and more. Adjacent to the historic Byrd Theater, built in 1928, Bygones specializes in vintage clothing for ladies and gents, including tiaras, fedoras, gowns, tuxedos, gloves, and other accessories from 1900 to 1970. Phoenix, a women's clothing boutique, has an eye for distinctive textiles, designer shoes, and snappy accessories. And how could we resist a shop named World of Mirth with aisles of toys, games, books, and collectibles?

In the historic downtown we checked into the Linden Row Inn, a series of pre-Civil War houses built in Greek Revival style. (It's said that Edgar Allen Poe played in its garden.) Twelve-foot ceilings, antique furnishings, and granite bathrooms, along with free Internet and breakfast, made it an elegant and affordable find.

We walked from the inn to Rappahannock, a farm-to-table restaurant run by the folks who grow Rappahannock River Oysters. We dined on fragrant seafood stew — topped with a poached egg on grilled bread — and tasty smoked speckled trout with dumplings. Oh, yes, and a half-dozen salty Stingrays, oysters grown in the pristine waters of Mobjack Bay.

HAMER, S.C.

You see the billboards long before you spot the 200-hundred-foot-tall neon sombrero-shaped spaceship standing tall over South of the Border, my favorite stop for kitsch and photo ops. Who doesn't love ubiquitous billboard-boy Pedro? If you are traveling with children, check out the reptile lagoon, the amusement rides and video arcade at Pedroland Park, and shops selling gifts and souvenirs. My sister once stayed overnight (we didn't) and her kids loved the pool.

SUMTER, S.C.

Our farthest detour off I-95 (heading 15 miles west on US-378) was a day trip to Sumter, a historic town named after General Thomas Sumter, the "Fighting Gamecock" of the American Revolution. The town, with a rich African-American heritage dating more than 200 years, is home to Shaw Air Force Base.

We arrived in the morning and toured the city-maintained and -operated 120-acre Swan Lake

Iris Gardens. Paths and boardwalks wind beneath cypress trees through a botanical landscape of thousands of Japanese iris (blooming mid-May though early June), camellias, azaleas, day lilies, and Japanese magnolias. On the lake, you'll find eight species of swans — royal white mute, bewick, whistler, whooper, trumpeter, black Australian, coscoroba, and black necked — and also blue heron, great egrets, kingfishers, and aningas. It's worth the trip just to hear the trumpeter swans sing goofy tunes as their heads dip down and up.

There's also a butterfly garden, chocolate garden — with chocolate-smelling flowers — and a Braille Trail for sight-impaired visitors. If you travel during the holiday season, the nighttime Fantasy of Lights is the largest display in the state, featuring over a million colorful lights and 150 lighted figures.

In the historic downtown, we found shops selling antiques, collectibles, gifts, musical instruments, brightly colored fashions for men and women, a pharmacy, and restaurants. We poked our heads into Shivers' Fashions and were pulled inside by the exuberant owner, Shirley Harris. There we found our hands-down favorite discovery on the trip, the shop's millinery creations.

These were no mere hats. They were sculptural objects meant to make a statement about the wearer as well as the designer: pink wedding-cake domes, black feathered nests, white beaded mushroom crowns, gravity-defying yellow tiered towers, and a swooping black orb with white satin filigree.

"I have hat makers that will make it just like I want it. They add feathers, rhinestones, blue, black, white, whatever," said Harris. She pulled hats off racks and modeled them one after the other, posing for my camera.

DARIEN, GA.

For a town with fewer than 2,000 residents, there's a lot to do in Darien, the second-oldest planned city — after Atlanta — in the state. Friends insisted we visit Skippers' Fish Camp, a riverfront restaurant and bar featuring fresh oysters, seafood, steak, ribs, and shrimp, and we were happy we did. We dined at an outdoor table, overlooking the Darien River, enjoying bowls of succulent boiled shrimp in the shell caught in Skippers' own fishing boats.



If you want to stay the night, and see all the local sights, the Darien Waterfront Inn offers seven rooms with riverfront porches in a rehabbed 100-plus-year-old warehouse along Broad Street. In the historic downtown you'll also find modest shops selling art, antiques, crafts, jewelry, and gifts, and a wine shop offering Georgia artisan cheeses, locally produced spices, barbecue sauces, hand-rolled cigars, and more.

Nature enthusiasts will want to visit Sapelo Island, a 6,000-plus-acre barrier island with marsh and beach walks, restored lighthouse, antebellum mansion, and Hog Hammock, a historic African-American community. History buffs shouldn't miss Fort King George, built in 1721 by the British to counteract French and Spanish expansion, and briefly the empire's southernmost outpost in the Americas.

From Darien, it's a one-hour drive south to Jacksonville, Fla., then on to your final Florida destination.

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