

# Girlfriend getaways

*Getting away with your gal pals is a chance to renew friendships and rejuvenate with fun and relaxation. These locations offer something different for a successful trip.*

STORY: MARY ANN DESANTIS



## Putting toes in the sand

### CLEARWATER BEACH, FLORIDA

In Florida, girlfriend getaways almost always involve some beach time. One of the most popular destinations for putting toes in the sand is Clearwater Beach, consistently named among the top beach vacations. The crystal-clear Gulf waters always are beautiful, but the views and tranquility from a balcony room at Opal Sands Resort & Spa are unbeatable. And the good news is that all the Opal Sands rooms are balcony rooms overlooking the shimmering waters.

Clearwater Beach bustles from morning to night with shoreline activities, restaurants for all budgets, and entertainment. But for those who want the ultimate relaxation, never leaving Opal Sands is a viable option.

In addition to tastefully appointed suites with spa-size master baths and kitchenettes, the resort offers a luxurious spa with a rooftop garden where I relaxed in a personal-sized “yurt,” following a soothing massage. Other spa treatments include rejuvenating body scrubs and enhanced facial treatments. The relaxation area outside the treatment rooms is the perfect location for meeting up with your BFFs for herbal teas and treats.

Opal Sands also offers one of Clearwater Beach’s local favorites for restaurants. Sea-Guini is known for its fresh seafood, exquisite pasta and custom cocktails. As my gal pals finished a sunset cruise aboard the Schooner Clearwater—a 52-foot staysail schooner built for relaxing



— the captain’s wife and first mate asked where we were headed next.

“You girls know how to do it right,” the Clearwater native commented when we told her Sea-Guini. The fine-dining restaurant happened to be one of her longtime favorites.

For more casual fare, the hotel’s Sandbar cafe is open for lunch. It’s a great place to enjoy one last meal overlooking the Gulf before bidding your friends goodbye and making plans for next year’s getaway. **[opalsands.com](http://opalsands.com)**







## Channeling your inner chef

### GREENWOOD, MISSISSIPPI

The cocktail bar at The Alluvian hotel in Greenwood, Mississippi, was filled with groups of women, including my own group. We were all waiting for our respective classes at the renowned Viking Cooking School across the street.

Viking, the manufacturer of high-end ranges and appliances, began in this Delta city in 1987. Since then, Viking has heated up nearly three city blocks downtown with its corporate headquarters and state-of-the-art culinary center. The cooking school, which began in 2005, aims to get more amateurs like me into its classes (and, hopefully, into its appliances and kitchenware). Designed for both novice cooks and seasoned home chefs, Viking’s classes range from three-hour workshops to a six-week series to accommodate a wide range of interests and schedules.

Viking has made Greenwood a destination for bridal parties, mother-daughter excursions, and other visitors who want to channel their inner chefs and learn new culinary skills in a no-pressure environment. I learned a few simple culinary tricks just by watching Viking instructor Loren Leflore, but the real challenge was learning how to make Delta hot tamales with friends watching me press cornbread dough into something edible. Loren, a consummate coach for insecure cooks like me, says, “You’re doing great,” with a sweet Southern accent so encouraging that I decided to make several tamales right there under the Viking spotlights.

“Greenwood is a perfect destination for girlfriend getaways because it is low pressure,” says Danielle Morgan, executive director for the Greenwood Convention and Visitors Bureau. “Friends, mothers, aunts, cousins, or sisters come to Greenwood to get away from it all...relaxing and having a good time are the main objectives.”

Viking partners with The Alluvian, a luxurious boutique hotel that opened in 2003, mostly to accommodate the cooking giant’s out-of-town guests, of which there are many, including international visitors who not only want to cook but also experience some of the area’s famous blues venues. The Alluvian, with only 45 guest rooms and five luxurious suites, also offers a world-class 7,000-square-foot spa for those who prefer to indulge in relaxation over cooking.

Greenwood has gained even more attention since it was the background for the 2011 movie “The Help.” Especially popular for girlfriend getaways are “The Help” tours, featuring spots around town where the movie starring Emma Stone and Viola Davis was filmed.

“Whether it’s being pampered together at the Alluvian Spa, touring sites from the ‘The Help,’ or enjoying a class at the Viking Cooking School over a glass of wine, Greenwood offers the perfect recipe for priceless memories,” Danielle says. “Sometimes, getting away from the business of life with people you love is all it takes to reset your perspective.” ***thealluvian.com***

Opener photo: Izzy Huddins; Savannah photos courtesy of Riverstreet Inn and Savannah Riverboat Cruises; Clearwater photos courtesy of Opal Sands Resort; Greenwood photos courtesy of Greenwood Convention and Visitors Bureau, and Mary Ann DeSantis

## Mixing shopping & history

### SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Quite possibly, you and your girlfriends are planning a trip for the fall—a perfect time to visit Savannah, Georgia, where you can get a head start on your holiday shopping or just take in the sights.

The charming Southern city seems to make the list for every major travel magazine’s girlfriend getaway suggestions—and with good reason. Quaint shops and boutiques, galleries, restaurants, and historical sites will keep your group busy for days. And it’s the ultimate walking city, especially along Broughton Street, known for its great shopping.

I am prejudiced when visiting a historic city like Savannah. I think it’s worth staying right in the historic heart and I’ve long been a fan of the River Street Inn, originally built in 1817 as a cotton warehouse on the Savannah River. Today, the historic hotel offers 86 luxurious guest rooms with modern-day amenities.

Start your getaway with some phenomenal shopping at The Paris Market and Brocante, featuring museum-worthy display windows beckoning you to come inside. The shop is filled with exquisite, yet affordable, gift items that you won’t find anywhere else.



Farther along Broughton Street, peruse the 24e Design Co. for one-of-kind furniture and accessories, like an airplane door coffee table. Called “the coolest store in Savannah” by locals, 24e offers design inspiration but it’s not furniture for the meek.

Savannah is filled with dining options, especially Southern fare. Mrs. Wilkes Dining Room at 107 Jones St. has been a favorite with locals since a young Sema Wilkes opened a boardinghouse in 1943. Another favorite is Circa 1875 Gastropub, where you definitely need to save room for French-inspired desserts.

With more than 300 years of history, Savannah calls for you to walk off those lunch calories by visiting some of its famed sites and gardens. Then wind down with a sunset cruise on Savannah Riverboat Cruises for a memorable conclusion to your girlfriend getaway. ***savannah.com***

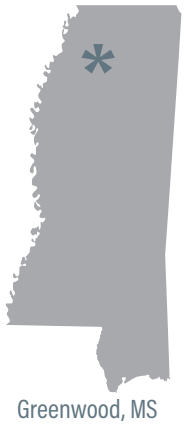


Savannah, GA



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Greenwood, MS