

Catching the Spirit

A ghost tour is the perfect Halloween treat. Here are a few of the eeriest.

By Jeff Book

★ Our fascination with those who can't quite quit this mortal coil is undying. We love to get spooked by tales of apocalyptic zombies, bodice-ripping vampires, and especially — eternally — ghosts. Plagued by troubled pasts, doomed to dark mischief, these unmoored souls are all too human in their need to act out and act up. They capture our imagination when we're young, and they never let go. One sign of this is the spate of TV shows such as *Ghost Adventures* and *Ghost Hunters*, which use high-tech gadgets to detect spirits. There are even apps that claim to communicate with the dearly departed.

Small wonder that across America, ghost tours have sprung up like toadstools after a rain. So popular are these spiritual scavenger hunts that you can find them in almost any place with a history and an evocative setting. According to the Ghost Tour Directory (ghosttourdirectory.com), the U.S. is now possessed of 375 such outings. Mingling historical facts with supernatural stories and macabre humor, the tour guides aim to entertain — and raise goose bumps. On some tours they bring along instruments to record evidence of spectral activity: electromagnetic or thermal energy, orbs and other optical traces, and electronic voice phenomena, also known as ghost chatter. The tours are typically conducted in the evening; daytime just doesn't work.

A ghost tour is always open to the unexpected. Tour-goers sometimes share their own otherworldly



anecdotes. And sometimes they encounter something truly weird and spine-chilling.

"I was starting a tour in front of Colonial Park Cemetery on a chilly November night, when the temperature dropped suddenly," recalls James Caskey, historian and tour owner of Savannah's Cobblestone Tours (ghostsavannah.com). "I noticed nobody was listening to me — they were all staring into the cemetery with their mouths open. I turned around and saw columns of mist, the size and shape of people, rising from the graves. We were all speechless."

Freaky, weather-related fog? Or something more spooktacular? Founded in 1733, Savannah has been called America's most haunted city, with good reason. "It's a city marked by tragedy, from the many who died in the Revolutionary War to countless victims of disease and disaster, including plagues and huge fires," Caskey explains. "As Savannah grew, it was built on the dead." Indeed, the city is home to Native American burial grounds, graves of colonists and slaves, a Jewish cemetery, and other skull-and-bone zones.

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Tobias McGriff of Blue Orb Ghost Tours (blueorbtours.com) says that many of Savannah's ghosts are the result of "tragic death dealt with in careless ways, people laid to unrest. It creates a disconnect in the psychic ether." Some victims of the city's yellow fever epidemics were buried alive, he notes, their coma-like symptoms misunder-

stood by untrained volunteers. "That's why you started to see coffins with alarm bells and escape hatches," he adds. "And wakes — as the name suggests, they were held in part to give the deceased a chance to wake up."

Savannah visitors can troll for ghosts on foot, in a horse-drawn carriage, in a hearse, or in what's billed as the Trolley

of Doom. Rustling palmettos and oaks draped in Spanish moss add to the Southern Gothic mood of lamp-lit squares, stately architecture, and aged graveyards. Like McGriff, Caskey prides himself on the historical accuracy of his tours. "You don't have to make anything up — Savannah's history is so colorful," he declares. "And a large part of any ghost story is the surrounding history and context."

Savannah's ghost tours pose gripping riddles. Is the 1790 Inn haunted by a servant girl who was impregnated and abandoned by a sailor? Do slaves buried beneath Calhoun Square account for reported sounds of weeping? Do ethereal children make mischief in the Kehoe House bed and breakfast, formerly a funeral parlor? Why do employees avoid the derelict upper floors of Moon River Brewery? The latter is a key stop on several haunted pub crawls, which are fun even if the only spirits you encounter are those in your cup.

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Ultimately, ghost tours are sensational history lessons, providing a vivid sense of place and perhaps a thrilling glimpse of the supernatural. In his book *Haunted Savannah*, James Caskey cites William Faulkner's famous quote: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." An apt motto for every ghost tour. ★

Jeff Book (jeffbook.net) writes from Birmingham, Alabama.

More Favorite Haunts

CAPE MAY, NEW JERSEY

All of Cape May is a National Historic District. Many of its Victorian homes are said to be haunted, including the 1879 Physick Estate. The Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts and Humanities offers tours of the estate as well as ghost trolley tours (capemaymac.org). Or take in the spirited show at Elaine's Haunted Dinner Theater, followed by her lively Walking Ghost Tour (elainedinnertheater.com).

LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA

Now permanently docked as a hotel and attraction, the ocean liner *Queen Mary* still exudes transatlantic glamour. In a vintage stateroom or over a posh meal, it's easy to imagine the ship's ritzy past. But the Cunard liner also transported thousands of troops during World War II, earning the nickname "the Gray Ghost." According to repeated sightings, resident spirits include a lady in white who dances alone by a piano and a young crewmember crushed in an engine-room accident. The Haunted Encounters Tour and other shipboard programs highlight the apparitions (queenmary.com).

SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

The 1692 witch trials gave Salem enduring notoriety. Beyond the tourist-shop witch kitsch lurks an undeniable spookiness. Leah Schmidt's Haunted Footsteps Ghost Tour weaves together tales of colonial sorcery, cold-blooded murder, and paranormal activity — sometimes said to be experienced first-hand. "We have certain hot spots where people hear voices, feel someone touch them, or have their camera batteries drained," Schmidt says. "Strange things occur with startling regularity" (salemhistoricaltours.com).

NEW ORLEANS

Plagues, mayhem, slavery, voodoo, vampires, and all that jazz spice up the Crescent City's rich ghost-tour gumbo. Master storytellers blend history and folklore on French Quarter Phantoms walking tours (frenchquarterphantoms.com). An ordained voodoo priestess who performs weddings, Bloody Mary leads both walking and van tours (bloodymarys.tours.com). "I help connect people to the spirit world and give them an insider's perspective," she says. "My family has been here since 1718."

SEATTLE

Seattle has dark stories to match its gray skies. The wide-ranging vans of Private Eye Tours (privateeyetours.com) stop at eerie spots such as Comet Lodge Cemetery and a former Chinatown gambling den, site of a killing spree 30 years ago. Mercedes Yaeger's Market Ghost Tours (seattleghost.com) unfold in and around famed Pike Place Market, built in 1903. "Nearby was a mortuary and a YMCA where orphans lived," she says. "Underneath are burial grounds for Native Americans, early settlers, and Chinese immigrants. Let's just say I've seen things I can't explain."

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