

Travel

ROADTRIP GREENVILLE, S.C.

A Main Street renaissance

Euphoria festival part of Greenville's revitalization.

By Blake Guthrie
For the AJC

In May of this year, Travel + Leisure declared Main Street in downtown Greenville one of "America's Greatest Main Streets."

The magazine cited the city's "tremendous strides over the last few decades, successfully turning its Main Street area into a lively and pedestrian-friendly destination."

This turnaround can be traced back to visionary city leaders in the 1960s and 1970s and experienced firsthand at events such as Euphoria, a culinary, wine and music festival that occurs at locations along Main Street each September.

Many public and private leaders were involved in spearheading Greenville's downtown renaissance all those years ago, but it was former Mayor Max Heller who used the bully pulpit of his office to really get things going.

Heller was an Austrian Jewish immigrant who came to the United States as a young man in the late 1930s, fleeing the Nazis. With help from local residents, he wound up in Greenville with \$1.60 in his pocket and landed a job in a shirt factory. In less than 10 years he became vice president of the company, then went on to start his own successful shirt company. Upon retiring he became a public servant, serving as a city councilman before being elected mayor.

Under his leadership, Main Street began its transformation from a bleak, four-lane thoroughfare containing boarded-up stores and crumbling 1950s facades covering over historic buildings, to a lively, tree-lined, pedestrian-friendly business district. The polluted Reedy River that flowed through downtown was cleaned up, the highway bridge that covered Reedy Falls was torn down and Falls Park was created, complete with a curved pedestrian bridge downstream, so people could enjoy the sight of the waterfalls cascading down the river just off Main. Seeing pictures of what Main Street used to look like, such as the ones that tour guide John Nolan shows on his walking tours of downtown (www.greenvillehistorytours.com), and then looking at that same place today is striking.

The before-and-after is so different that you can't believe you're standing in the same spot where the picture was



Main Street in downtown Greenville is a tree-lined, pedestrian-friendly urban oasis following a decades-long revitalization process. In May, Travel + Leisure magazine named it one of "America's Greatest Main Streets." KRIS DECKER / FIREWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

taken.

The vision that Heller had was inspired by his roots. He wanted a people-centered downtown, like the European villages he remembered as a youngster, not one that people whizzed through in their cars to get to somewhere else.

So Main Street underwent major traffic calming measures. Four lanes were reduced to two, with angled parking spaces and pedestrian areas replacing the other two lanes.

And trees were planted that today make the street a shady oasis of shops, restaurants and outdoor events, including free music concerts. Vision realized.

Heller died in 2011 at the age of 92, but not before he saw a statue of himself unveiled along Main Street on his 90th birthday in 2009.

The statue is part of the Max Heller Plaza, lined with narrative panels that show and tell the story of a man who truly lived the American dream and gave back to the community that supported him.

Euphoria began in 2006, in part to celebrate downtown's revival, but also to showcase an emerging culinary scene, with wine and music events thrown in for good measure. The festival's founders are platinum-selling singer/songwriter Edwin McCain and restaurateur Carl Sobocinski, who both call Greenville home.

"People kept asking us to do all these different charity events in town," McCain says, "so we figured why not have one big event to spotlight Greenville and all that it has to offer."

McCain will be performing with Atlanta's



Edwin McCain (center), co-founder of Greenville's Euphoria festival, performed at last year's event. He'll perform this year with Atlanta favorite Shawn Mullins. STEPHEN STINSON

Shawn Mullins at this year's festival. The two will kick things off Sept. 20, along with Nashville songwriter and Greenville native Chuck Cannon, at the in-the-round storytellers-style "Songwriter's Recipe" performance.

The festival will continue throughout the weekend at various downtown locations with plenty of other talent besides musicians, including acclaimed chefs and master sommeliers at a variety of tasting, cooking and dining events.

On Friday night the "Taste of the South" dinner will take place at the Peace Center's TD Stage amphitheater overlooking the river.

Participants will dine on Southern dishes from different local restaurants while McCain and Mullins perform again in concert. Regional breweries will be on hand — including Sweetwater and Greenville's Thomas Creek Brewery — for craft beer tastings, dinners and the Saturday afternoon "Beer Garden."



Trees were planted decades ago that today make Main Street a shady oasis of shops, restaurants and outdoor events. KRIS DECKER / FIREWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

IF YOU GO

Greenville is 145 miles northeast of downtown Atlanta on I-85.

Stay

The Westin Poinsett.

Historic and renovated downtown hotel within easy walking distance to Euphoria events. Rates start at \$159. 120 S. Main St. 864-421-9700, www.westinpoinsettgreenville.com. **Pettigru Place.** Bed and breakfast in a historic downtown neighborhood. Rates start at \$125. 302 Pettigru St. 864-242-4529, www.pettigruplace.com.

Eat

Soby's. New South cuisine in a historic brick building with a vibrant bar and dining room downstairs, and a loft dining area. Entrees \$16-\$29, 207 S. Main St. 864-232-7007, www.sobys.com.

Nose Dive. Greenville's take on the modern gastro-pub, with a grits bar brunch on weekends where you serve yourself grits and an array of hearty toppings. Entrees \$12-\$18. 116 S. Main St. 864-373-7300, www.thenosedive.com.

Visitor info

Euphoria, Sept. 20-23. Many ticket options are available, from VIP and weekend passes to individual event and tasting tickets. Weekend pass \$245; VIP package \$695; individual event/tasting tickets range from \$35 to \$150. For more info and to buy tickets visit the website www.euphoriagreenville.com. **Greenville CVB Visitors Center.** 206 S. Main St., Greenville. 1-800-717-0023, www.greenvillecvb.com.