

An Industry of Ideas

Blending business with bohemia, Savannah attracts successful knowledge-based companies, entrepreneurs and creative types. *by Allison Hersh*



PHOTOGRAPHY: SCAD



BlueLime Studio's three partners create animated architectural renderings for high-end clients. Left: Savannah College of Art and Design class in large-scale fiber design.

Hannah Byrne founded Smack Dab Studios, a graphic design and Web site development firm, in 2004 in Atlanta. But three years ago, when gridlocked traffic and other big-city headaches grew too exasperating, Byrne moved her firm to Savannah. She

sought a better quality of life, closer relationships with clients and a more tightly knit business community. The move, she says, is the best decision she has ever made.

"I enjoy driving to meetings and looking up at the trees and Spanish moss as the sunlight speckles through," Byrne raves. "I truly love living in such a beautiful and

historic location."

Byrne is one in a growing army of savvy entrepreneurs attracted to Savannah's vibrant economy and supportive business community. By any measure, Savannah appears to be reaching a critical mass of entrepreneurs and right-brain creative types. While other Southeast cities have experienced declines in recent

years, Savannah's economy has grown quickly and consistently. Inc. magazine recently ranked Savannah as the third-best mid-sized city in America for doing business, recognizing the area's growing appeal as a progressive business community. From software development firms to maritime logistics companies, more than 350 knowledge-based businesses

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—Howard Paul, CEO, Benedetto Guitars



Bob Benedetto at work crafting premium jazz guitars. His studio moved to Savannah in 2006.

call Savannah home, contributing about 4,500 jobs and nearly \$260 million in wages to the local economy.

The city’s National Landmark Historic District serves as a study in contrasts, unexpectedly blending the past and the future. About 38,000 miles of fiber-optic cable run beneath the cobblestone streets, while 100 square miles of wireless broadband coverage fuel telecommunications for small businesses nestled in restored antebellum mansions.

Through strategic efforts led by nonprofits such as the Savannah Economic Development Authority and The Creative Coast Alliance, the city’s base of high-wage jobs in creative and technical fields has expanded. Those groups provide a broad menu of services and resources to help small businesses succeed in Savannah. The Creative Coast Alliance recruits and retains talent through direct outreach and provides networking, professional development and educational programs to innovative companies.

“There’s a perception that Southern towns can be closed and cliquy,” says Brynn Grant, executive director of The Creative Coast Alliance. “However, Savannah embraces smart, sincere people who care about the community.”

Chad Warner is one such person. Warner launched BlueLime Studio, a high-tech architectural rendering and architectural animation company,

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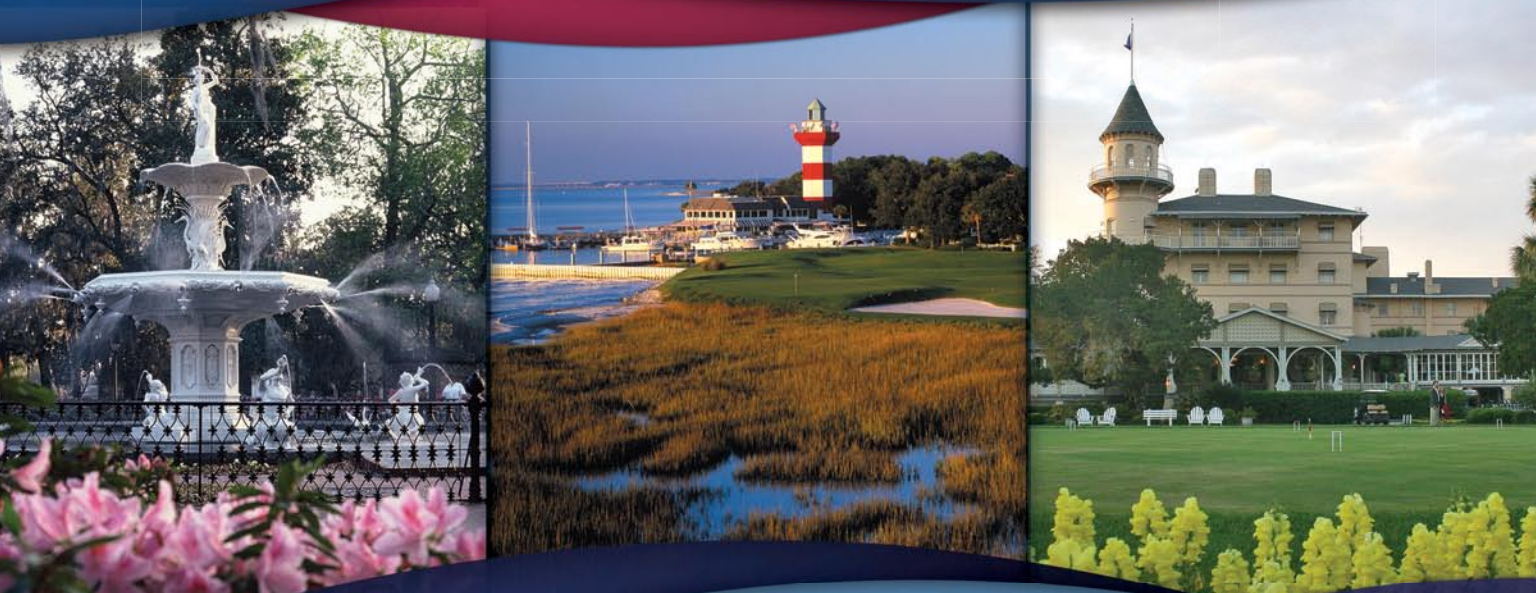
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“The welcome message is both highly polished and, quite simply, built into the city’s DNA structure. It literally illuminates the definition of Southern hospitality that people only read about in books. We, on the other hand, get the opportunity to live it every single day.”

— Jim Goodlett, president,
Morris Technonology



Entrepreneur Jim Goodlett champions Savannah's distinctive quality of life.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRISTINE HALL

in 2000 with two business partners he met through Savannah College of Art and Design. Today, the award-winning firm operates in a renovated cotton warehouse with exposed brick walls and oversized windows facing the Savannah River. The BlueLime team creates three-dimensional electronic renderings for elite clients from Dubai to the Bahamas.

“There are a lot of benefits to being a creative company in Savannah,” Warner says. “Savannah isn’t a bland, concrete jungle of a city. Plus, people from around the world call Savannah home. It is buzzing with creative energy and friendly people.”

Howard Paul couldn’t agree more. As president and CEO of Benedetto Guitars, he helped relocate the world’s premier jazz guitar maker to Savannah in 2006. The company considered Nashville, Atlanta and other sites, but in the end, Savannah trumped its big-city counterparts.

“Savannah has the right mix of business and bohemia,” says Paul. “Every town has international banking, high-speed connectivity and transportation in and out. In Savannah, civic pride comes from the arts, music, theater, architecture and cuisine. Creativity is an honored and respected trait in this environment, and the business community seems to really embrace it.”

Indeed, even some of the city’s oldest small businesses have successfully diversified their services over the years. Kennickell Print and Global Marketing, founded in 1892, now offers high-tech, multi-channel services to clients such as NASCAR, The Citadel and the National Football League. Kennickell has earned national acclaim for its innovative URL direct-marketing campaigns.

“The quality of life in Savannah is fantastic,” enthuses company president Al Kennickell. “I live on

the water, and yet I can get to work in 15 minutes. I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else in the world.”

That quality of life—which includes temperate weather, easy beach access, and a variety of year-round outdoor activities—continues to draw a wide range of companies. Jim Goodlett is president of Morris Technology, a local systems and e-commerce company. Savannah’s history as a port city and its reputation as a vacation destination, he says, contribute to the warmth that entrepreneurs feel when they connect with the city’s business community.

“The welcome message is both highly polished and, quite simply, built into the city’s DNA structure,” Goodlett says. “It literally illuminates the definition of Southern hospitality that people only read about in books. We, on the other hand, get the opportunity to live it every single day.”