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## Staycation Bible School: Two attractions in LaGrange, Ga., have spiritual twist

by Sara Milledge

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The 35-acre boxwood gardens at Hills and Dales Estate in LaGrange, Ga., were planted in 1841 as a way for the estate owner's daughter to express her spirituality.

Just as local vacation bible schools are winding down, LaGrange, Ga., is offering the real deal. Just an hour and a half drive from Anniston, LaGrange boasts two biblical attractions perfect for an end-of-summer day trip. From lush gardens with a spiritual twist to an interactive archeological dig complete with Old Testament artifacts, this west Georgia town has faith-based activities for the whole family. Pack a lunch, hop in the car and take a trip to a staycation Bible school.

### Hills and Dales Estate

Visitors to the 35-acre Hills and Dales Estate wander through classic boxwood gardens with a 180-year history. Lush green hedges and dainty pink blooms encircle Italianate-style fountains

and century-old trees tower over perfectly manicured lawns.

In 1841, Sarah Coleman Ferrell, the daughter of the estate's original owners, planted the formal boxwood parterre garden to express her spirituality.

"She was a very pious woman," said Jo Phillips, the estate's horticulturalist for the last 18 years. "The spiritual aspect is what makes the gardens unique."

The gardens feature faith-based designs carved into the boxwood, and each has a special meaning.

"There's a small cross planted in boxwood," Phillips explained, "a butterfly, which represents our glorified bodies, and a circle at the end of the path, which represents the eternal nature and love of God."

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And then there are the grapes. Not the physical fruit, but rather, grapes sculpted from boxwood.

"The grapes of Canaan are a promised land symbol," Phillips said, referring to a story in the book of Numbers. "She planted that ... because she considered the property her promised land."

The gardens also feature a floral depiction of what Phillips described as Ferrell's personal motto, "God is love," as well as a garden homage to 19th-century chapels.

The area, known as the Church Garden, features several elements of an outdoor church shaped out of boxwood and other plants. Although the pulpit and the piano have been gone for decades, the Church Garden is still home to a lyre-shaped harp, an organ, circular beds representing "offering plates" and high-backed, old-fashioned pews, all crafted from garden elements.

Phillips described the Church Garden as a "white garden," meaning the blooms are predominantly white.

"I really love the Church Garden," Phillips said. "It always seems really fresh and pretty in the springtime. It always feels bridal in that way."

Although the Church Garden is Phillips' favorite, it is Hills and Dales' fifth terrace that gets the most attention.

The terrace is the garden's largest, and features a large boxwood planting of the word "GOD" filled in with bright red blooms.

"That's really a significant feature. You can see it from the air. It's huge," Phillips explained. "She (Ferrell) wanted that image at the beginning of her garden as a reference to Genesis 1:1, and perhaps John 1:1, as the first major thing people see when they walked into the garden. It is one of the features of the garden that usually people want to see. It's one that's already made an impression on them."

While Phillips said many of the estate's 10,000 annual visitors arrive unaware of the garden's faith-based history, they notice it quickly.

"The public is often struck by the spiritual nature of the garden. It's something you can feel," she said. "Even people that you wouldn't think would feel the spiritual aspects do."

Hills and Dales is open to visitors Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Eastern time. The estate offers a variety of tours and packages, with an iPod Touch-guided audio tour of the garden for \$8 for adults and \$4 for children and students.

#### Explorations in Antiquity Center

Also in LaGrange, the Explorations in Antiquity Center offers families an interactive taste of life in biblical times. Like Hills and Dales Estate, the museum features an outdoor garden, but with an archeological twist.



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"It is a garden that had reconstructions of biblical replicas, as well as plants native to Israel," explained Hannaniah Pinto, who has been the director of programs since the museum opened in 2005.

"Most people that come are somewhat interested in Israel," Pinto said. "When they come here, we try to give them a chance to understand both the biblical stories and the culture."

The archeological garden houses a goat-hair tent, a desert oasis and a vineyard, in addition to replicas of Old and New Testament structures such as tombs, stables and a wine press.

The museum also features a Time Tunnel, where visitors can explore four ancient houses of worship, beginning with a 2000 B.C. Canaanite temple and continuing on through history to an A.D. 500 Byzantine church.

For the kids, Pinto said the museum's four archeological dig areas are a hit.

"They literally dig in the sand to find things from ancient times," he said. "They find coins, oil lamps and other biblical items. They really like it because they work hard."

In the Kids' Dig Area, older children can search for artifacts from Exodus through the second century in three sandy areas, with a fourth for younger children filled with dinosaur bones and fossils, just for fun.

Pinto added kids also enjoy a bread-making exhibit in the goat-hair tent, where visitors hear shepherds' stories, wear a kafiya (a head covering used by ancient shepherds), bake bread over a wood fire and shake whipping cream into butter.

"The kids love it because they're tasty and the kids made it themselves," Pinto said.

For adult groups, the Explorations in Antiquity Center offers a re-creation of a four-course Passover meal that features 15 different food items.

"That's a good experience, as well," Pinto said.

While he said visitors enjoy the meal re-creations and archeological digs the most, Pinto is fond of a different aspect of the museum.

"There is a section where we have grapevines growing. Near the grapevines we have a stone tower that you can climb up and sit overlooking the grapevines," he said. "I think that's my favorite."

The Explorations in Antiquity Center is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m.-6 p.m. and groups as well as families are welcome. Pinto suggests visitors set aside an hour and 45 minutes to explore all of the museum's exhibits. Admission to the archeological garden is \$10 for adults and \$6 for kids ages 4-12. Tickets for the Kids' Dig Area are \$10 for children ages 4-12, and admission is free for kids under 4. The Shepherd's Bread Making Experience is \$10 and the Biblical Meal is \$30 for adults and \$18 for children under 12, and includes admission into the museum and all the archeological replicas and outdoor exhibits.

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