



Asheville RISING

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Yes, Asheville boasts the legendary Biltmore Estate, but this city in North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains is more than its mansion.

By Theresa Gawlas Medoff

*Y*ou can't go to Asheville, North Carolina, without touring the Biltmore Estate. That would be akin to skipping Notre Dame on your visit to Paris or bypassing the Colosseum in Rome. The 250-room French Renaissance chateau is a New World palace constructed in the early 1890s for George Vanderbilt, grandson of THE Vanderbilt, and it's the largest residential home ever built in the U.S.

But just as Paris has more to offer than its cathedral, and Rome beckons with everything from art to food, so too, is Asheville a multi-attraction destination that rewards visitors who stay and explore awhile.

BLUE RIDGE BEAUTY

It was the beauty and the perceived health benefits of the climate in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Western North Carolina

that first drew tourists to Asheville in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Among them was George Vanderbilt who, like so many visitors since then, fell in love with the region. Unlike most, Vanderbilt was able to buy up a significant amount of land—some 125,000 acres. After George's death, his wife, Edith, sold 80,000 of those acres to the federal government, forming the core of Pisgah National Forest. Now comprising 500,000 acres of old-growth forest ribboned with hundreds of miles of trails, the national forest draws nature lovers for its hiking and biking and for tubing on the Davidson River. Those who want a more leisurely experience should consider a scenic drive through the national forest on the Blue Ridge Parkway or along the Highway 276 corridor, with stops at 60-foot-high Looking Glass Falls, just off the side of the road; the natural waterslide and swimming hole Sliding Rock; and the Cradle of Forestry



Battery Park Book Exchange and Champagne Bar

Heritage Site, home to the first school of forestry in America.

On a blustery day in early spring, my two daughters and I went hiking in Pisgah with Christine Martens, a hike guide for Blue Ridge Hiking Company and a transplant to the area from Virginia. “Some people come to Asheville for the beer. Some people come for the food. Some come for Biltmore,” Martens says. “I came for the mountains.”

The four of us trekked a challenging half-mile from a mountaintop parking lot to the summit of 6,000-foot-high Black Balsam Knob to take in a sweeping view of the mountains and surrounding countryside, following up that hike with a jaunt to Skinny Dip Falls, where on summer days you’ll find people swimming in the natural pool beneath the falls.

Pisgah National Forest isn’t the only recreation game in town. The Blue Ridge Parkway runs through southern Asheville, and within an hour’s drive of the city, you can reach Chimney Rock State Park or Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Even if all you do is take in the surrounding blue-tinged mountains from a spot in downtown Asheville, you’ll understand why tourists have been drawn to the region for a century and a half.

LESSONS IN URBAN RENEWAL

Talk to anyone who’s been to downtown, and they’ll inevitably gush, “I love Asheville!” That’s the post-late-1990s Asheville they’re referring to—a vibrant, walkable city filled with shops, galleries, restaurants and breweries. Today’s Asheville, a city of some 88,000, is the envy of urban renewal planners everywhere, but it hasn’t always been that way.

“In the 1970s, your mama told you that you didn’t have to come downtown [because] there was nothing there. And she was right,” recalls Kevan Frasier, who grew up in Asheville and now owns the tour company Asheville by Foot and the recently opened board game café Well Played.

In a two-hour walking tour of downtown Asheville, Frazier led us through the town’s history, from its incorporation in

1797 to the arrival of the railroad (and the first tourists) in the 1880s to the Great Depression, when the town fathers refused to default on Asheville’s significant debt (after all, much of the money was owed to them, Frazier points out). The money was paid back over a 50-year period. Ironically, it was that debt that helped to preserve Asheville’s historic buildings. With no money to invest in infrastructure, people made do with the older buildings; today, Asheville boasts some 170 early-20th-century buildings downtown, one of the largest such concentrations in the country.

With the city’s debt satisfied but downtown Asheville a boarded-up ghost town, thoughts turned to urban renewal. Much of the fervor bubbled up from ambitious local and transplanted entrepreneurs, and they accomplished the renewal with barely a chain business in sight. In fact, so incensed were some Ashevilleans by the opening of an Urban Outfitters downtown in 2009 that people picketed the store for months. As recently as 2015, when national clothing retailer Anthropologie came to town, protestors marked its opening with a mock jazz funeral procession.

Aside from a few such interlopers, downtown Asheville retains its local, down-home and slightly eccentric vibe. It’s home to no fewer than three gourmet chocolate shops and four independent bookstores, including the cozily overcrowded shelves of Battery Park Book Exchange and Champagne Bar, a dealer in new and used books that also serves up adult beverages. Asheville is chockablock with shops; the



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Glass artist John Almaguer with some of his artwork



Hand-built porcelain by Michael Hofman

Groveswood Gallery



city's tourism website lists 222. In addition to stores selling new and vintage clothing, antiques, jewelry, housewares, and arts and crafts, you'll find purveyors of less commonly found goods such as specialty honey and beeswax candles (Asheville Bee Charmer), products made by women artisans in a store that fronts a women-focused museum (aSHEville) and baked goods for dogs (Three Dog Bakery). In a nod to the town's eccentricity, there's also Asheville Salt Cave, where believers in the healing properties of salt crystals can spend 45 minutes in a zero-gravity chair listening to soothing music while "surrounded by 20 tons of imported Polish and Himalayan salt."

In addition to the more typical buskers around town, you'll find such unusual musicians as Abby the Spoon Lady—on the spoons, natch; a bagpiper; and even a man playing an aboriginal Australian didgeridoo.

For locals and visitors alike, a favorite activity is attending Asheville's Friday night drum circle in Pritchard Park to play, dance or just listen. The grassroots gathering has been going strong for 15 years now. "Asheville's hippie scene really converges in the park Friday nights. You'll see people hula-hooping and dancing. There will be hundreds of people there at any one time, and they come and go throughout the evening," says Landis Taylor of Asheville's tourism bureau.

FOODIE FUN

Side-by-side with the shops and galleries, downtown Asheville and surrounding neighborhoods boast acclaimed chef-owned restaurants, ethnic eateries and a healthy number of vegetarian dining spots, including 20-year stalwart The Laughing Seed Café. Not surprisingly, farm-to-table is ingrained in the Asheville ethos, and with some 150 farms in the region—there's even a trout farm—fresh fare isn't hard to come by.

In the Oscars of the food-and-drink world, Asheville is home to no fewer than six chefs nominated for James Beard Awards in the past few years: John Fler of Rhubarb and the Rhu, Meherwan Irani of Chai Pani, Katie Button of Curate and Nightbell, Elliott Moss of Buxton Hall, Jacob Sessoms of Table and Brian Canipelli of Cucina 24.

Visitors can wash down all that award-winning cuisine with some tasty brews, thanks to Asheville's celebrated beer scene. With 29 breweries within the city limits—another six fill out Buncombe County—Asheville has more than three times as many breweries as it did when it first earned the nickname "Beer City USA" in 2009. So enamored are Ashevilleans with their beer that you can start your morning with a beer-glazed doughnut from Vortex Doughnuts and finish off your evening with beer-infused ice cream at The Hop Ice Cream Café in West Asheville. In between, you can sign on for one of several beer-themed tours or head out with an Uber driver on Asheville's self-guided Ale Trail.

If you're not partial to brews, you can quench your thirst at four area distilleries, including one—Asheville Distilling Company—that bottles good ol' corn whiskey. You can imbibe as well at the city's numerous bars dedicated to wine or craft cocktails.

ART ON THE (RIVER)SIDE

Asheville has had a thriving arts community ever since Vanderbilt imported stoneworkers and woodcarvers from around the world to ornament his over-the-top mansion. It took the artisans five years to complete the work, and afterward, many remained in the area. Edith Vanderbilt, an ardent fan of the Art Deco movement, founded Biltmore Industries in 1901 to teach woodworking and wool-making skills to local youth. She later sold the works to Edwin Wiley



The Biltmore Estate

COURTESY OF THE BILTMORE COMPANY



The library at Biltmore

Grove, who built the renowned luxury hotel next door, the historic Omni Grove Park Inn.

Visitors can take a guided tour of the former Biltmore Industries buildings, now known as Grovewood Village, and afterward shop at the Grovewood Gallery, noted for its outdoor sculpture garden and two expansive floors of American-made furniture, ceramics, textiles, and other high-end arts and crafts contributed by hundreds of artists.

Visitors will find a good number of arts and craft galleries downtown, too, but for the real mother lode—and a chance to interact with the artists themselves—head to Asheville’s River Arts District, a former industrial area along the French Broad River just west of downtown. Take a guided tour, as we did, with John Almaguer of Asheville Art Studio Tours. A working glass artist who trained at the Zanetti Studios in Murano, Italy, Almaguer knows many of the 300-plus artists in the still-growing arts district, and he’ll take you to the studios of artists working in a variety of media.

Before those artists began setting up studios here in the late 1980s, Almaguer says, the district “was a decrepit, rundown, sketchy part of town. Now it’s a place with all these studios and galleries and restaurants and phenomenal breweries.

“People don’t think of Asheville, North Carolina, as an arts area, but they don’t realize that it’s world class. We have more art spaces in a concentrated area than Miami’s Wynwood District or Berlin’s Mitte area,” Almaguer boasts.

Among the artists you’ll find working in the River Arts District is painter Philip DeAngelo, formerly of Ocean City, New Jersey, who appreciates the area’s “passion for all kinds of arts” and the visitors “who come from all over the country to enjoy art.”

Adds DeAngelo, “It used to be that everyone who came to Asheville came for Biltmore. Now, people are coming for the arts.”

ABOUT THAT MANSION

George Vanderbilt’s heirs first opened the family home to the public in 1930, and the tourists are still coming to Biltmore, to the tune of one million visitors per year. You’ll want to spend at least several hours taking a self-guided or guided tour of the grounds and the 250-room manse, which counts among its amenities 34 bedrooms, 43 bathrooms, 65 fireplaces, 3 kitchens, an indoor bowling alley and a 70,000-gallon indoor swimming pool that had to be filled each time Biltmore’s residents wanted to swim—and promptly drained afterward—as the pool had no filtration system.

Besides the exquisite craftsmanship that went into ornamenting the mansion itself, you’ll be awed by décor that includes 16th-century Flemish tapestries, Ming Dynasty porcelain bowls, and original paintings by the likes of Pierre-Auguste Renoir and John Singer Sargent. Outdoors, the artwork comes in the form of gardens designed by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, most famous for New York’s Central Park and San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park.

Throughout our several-day visit to Asheville, numerous locals responded to our delight in their city by foretelling, “People come to visit, and they always end up staying.” Spend enough time here, and you might just end up settling down, too, just like George Vanderbilt—though your house will probably be a bit more modest.

For more information, visit exploreasheville.com.