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trippin' out

Blue Ridge Mountain Escape

by Aaron Leventhal

"Asheville ranks in the top 50 globally for authenticity, stewardship, integrity of place."
- *National Geographic Travelers* survey, 2008

Asheville, North Carolina, nestled in a valley along the French Broad River and ringed by the majestic Blue Ridge Mountains, has emerged as one of America's premier vacation destinations. Its natural beauty, year-round temperate climate, vibrant downtown, dynamic arts scene and award-winning independent restaurants draw millions of visitors annually to this remarkably diverse community of 75,000 residents. A pleasant seven-hour drive south along Route 23 from Columbus to Asheville takes you along country roads and through pristine mountain passes.

Originally inhabited by the Cherokee and settlement farmers, Asheville became a popular destination in the 19th century as sanitariums sprang up to treat individuals with respiratory ailments seeking the fresh mountain air. Asheville changed forever when George Vanderbilt fell in love with the region and built his 250-room, French-inspired Biltmore Estate, attracting a stampede of socialites from the eastern seaboard. The town boomed into the 1940s and then languished for decades until a spirited band of entrepreneurs, artists and retirees rediscovered Asheville's unique charms in the 1990s. The community has blossomed ever since.

Attractions - Dozens of attractions can keep you busy for a week or longer. Asheville Urban Trail, a 1.7-mile self-guided downtown walking tour, passes most of the city's major landmarks. The Thomas Wolfe Memorial State Historic Site has hourly tours of the famous novelist's boyhood home. The North Carolina Arboretum features 434 acres of gardens and forest trails. The Basilica of St. Lawrence, an early 20th century masterpiece by Spanish architect Rafael Guastavino has the largest freestanding elliptical dome in the United States. Western North Carolina Farmers' Market has dozens of vendors hawking fresh produce, cheeses, raw honey and baked goods. Put aside a day to visit Cherokee to experience an 11,000-year-old civilization by exploring its Oconalufree Indian Village, Museum of the Cherokee Indian and outdoor drama "Unto These Hills." There are also plenty of restaurants, shops and a Harrah's Casino in Cherokee. Dozens of outdoor outfitters offer rafting expeditions, zipline canopy tours and canoe, kayak, tube and fly fishing rentals. Primitive hiking trails abound, along with dozens of scenic and challenging golf courses.

The Arts - The visual and performing arts flourish in what *American Style* magazine cited as one of the top 10 small arts destinations in the nation. There are dozens of fine arts and crafts galleries, antique boutiques and gift shops around every corner of downtown and Biltmore Village. Not to be missed is the River Arts District, where once dormant warehouses and factories have been converted into more than 100 galleries and studios, including Odyssey center for ceramic arts, Curve Studio featuring encaustic painter Constance Williams and Wedge Studios with galleries, a brewery and tasting room. Community arts groups - including Asheville's Community Theatre, Lyric Opera and Symphony Orchestra - fill the calendar year-round with concerts and performances at affordable prices. In the summer, there are outdoor festivals downtown practically every weekend, including Bele Chere in July with four stages of free live music and Goombay in August.

Food and Brew - More than a hundred nearby sustainable family farms, greenhouses and orchards provide fresh, organic fruits and vegetables, natural corn-fed beef and free-range poultry and eggs to tailgate markets and more than a hundred independently owned and operated restaurants in the Asheville area. Many celebrated restaurateurs and chefs have moved here to offer an astonishing variety of cuisines that elevate dining in Asheville to an art form. Among my favorites are Mayfel's for authentic Louisiana specialties, Mela Indian Restaurant with a daily all-you-can-eat lunch buffet, Doc Chey's Noodle House for Thai dishes, Laughing Seed Cafe for exotic vegetarian food from around the world and Luella's Barbecue, for the best ribs in town. For a complete listing of Asheville independent restaurants (AIR), log on to www.AIR-asheville.org. Recently Asheville was voted "Beer City USA" in an Examiner.com national poll. It has seven craft breweries, many open for tastings.

If You Go - Begin your visit at the Asheville Visitors Center (36 Montford Ave., Exit 4C off I-240), where hospitable staff will provide tons of tourist information. From there, hop on the Asheville Historic Trolley Tour for an informative, 90-minute trip around the city (888.667.3600). Moving Sidewalk Tours also departs from the Center for a two-hour downtown tour on Segway i21's. I stayed at Asheville Vacation Villas (800.733.3211) in one of its 30 furnished cabins in a wooded area with access to Crowne Plaza Resort's outdoor swimming pool, golf course, tennis courts, fitness center, restaurant and bar. Also, Grey Beard Realty (888.228.8008) manages more than 200 rental locations in the area.

Gay Oasis Thrives in Bible Belt

During my month-long winter stay in Asheville, my friend Joe Spinelli and his partner Tim Phillips drove down Route 23 for a visit and much-needed long weekend getaway. They discovered an extraordinarily progressive, artistic and entrepreneurial community that is genuinely welcoming and open in the heart of the Bible Belt.

According to Pete Moyle, co-owner of O. Henry's, North Carolina's oldest gay bar (www.nataliesmalls.com) as well as LaRue's Backdoor and Straps, "Asheville is a very gay friendly community. A large number of the downtown businesses are owned and operated by gays." His clubs, all under one roof at 237 Haywood St., feature drag impersonators, male strippers and a leather scene only on Saturday nights frequented by both gays and straights.

Jeff and Sherrie Davis are a straight couple who purchased Arthur Fray's legendary gay nightclub Scandals in 2006 (www.clubscandals.net). Today, Scandals is housed in a large four-story brick building at 11 Grove St. Drag shows are held every weekend, produced by Queens and Kings. Salsa dancing on Fridays and live bands in the lower level boiler room. "Everyone who comes to our clubs feels comfortable knowing they will not be judged or scrutinized here," says Jeff. In fact, he envisions his clubs as "a window into where the country is headed in the future. There is no discrimination here of any kind. Nobody is labeled gay or straight. One's sexual preferences are personal and bear no relevance here."

Other popular gay clubs include Hairspray, a lesbian favorite (www.clubhairspray.com) with a '60s ambiance offering DJs, karaoke, live bands and drag shows; Smokey's After Dark, a bar open daily after 4 p.m.; and Firestorm Cafe and Books (www.firestormcafe.com) noted for cultural offerings from films and live bands to readings and a variety of performances. Dozens of other gay-friendly entertainment venues include MoDaddy's Bar & Grille, the Grey Eagle, Tressa's Downtown Jazz Blues and the Orange Peel, recently voted the best concert venue in the U.S. by *Rolling Stone*.

1891 Cedar Crest Victorian Inn (www.cedarcrestinn.com) is owned and operated by innkeepers Bruce Mazzola and his Brazilian partner Marcio Santos. They purchased the inn in 2007, moving from Ft. Myers, where they owned and managed a hotel. This exquisite historical gem is perched on a hilltop on four acres of land across from the entrance of the Biltmore Estate. The inn's 17 rooms include a carriage house and guest cottage and are all individually furnished with period antiques. Amenities include a three-course gourmet breakfast, wireless Internet, library and croquet court. For information and reservations, contact Mallory at 800.252.0310.

Win a Vacation Package to Asheville, NC! To enter the prize drawing, log on to: www.highstreetmoneysavers.com/nc. For more information: Contact the Asheville Convention & Visitors Bureau at www.ExploreAsheville.com or 800-257-1300. Columbus-based travel writer Aaron Leventhal is publisher of High Street Neighborhoods, www.HighStreetMoneySavers.com. Photos by Dani Leventhal.

