

Globe Magazine

THE BOSTON GLOBE SEPTEMBER 15, 2019

FALL TRAVEL

Plunge into the new season in the Blue Ridge Mountains, in southern Spain, and on the New England coast.

In Asheville, North Carolina, Adi the Monk busks in his usual downtown spot.

Plus

Think before you post that about your kids

Miss Conduct: My hurtful sister-in-law



FALL TRAVEL

Blue Ridge Serenade

Overflowing with live music, art galleries, and great food, Asheville makes artsy look easy. **By Jon Gorey**

DUSTY AFTERNOON sunbeams splash down on a half-dozen performers plucking, strumming, and singing old-time Americana in the corner of a cozy pub. It's a fittingly unpretentious spotlight for this casual weekly jam session, a decades-old tradition at Asheville's cozy **Jack of the Wood** (jackofthewood.com, 828-252-5445). But as in the city outside, the mellow mood in here too easily belies the profound artistry before me: These are impeccable musicians.

Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina, there's a lot to love about Asheville, from the local-first food scene to its Brooklyn-in-the-mountains sense of style to the warm welcome you receive in a city that loves you back. But art comes especially easy here; it's everywhere I turn. Music fills the bars, but also the streets, where buskers entertain tourists and lunch-hour diners. There's art on the walls of its galleries, working studios, coffee shops, and a lot of the building exteriors, too. And in autumn, nature is doing her part, painting the surrounding mountains in Impressionistic blots of red, orange, and gold.

The last time I visited Asheville, I reveled in the restaurants and street performances, an overfed spectator dazzled by musicians' sidewalk shows. On this trip, I still intend to eat too much—the abundance of nearby farms and award-winning chefs makes it impossible not to, and hiking in the mountain air works up a worthy appetite. But I've also brought my guitar along, hoping to become a small part of this city's big arts scene, if only for a moment.

To the Top of the Chimney, to the Top of the Wall

Asheville has its own small airport, but there are several daily nonstop flights from Boston to Charlotte, and it's an easy (and mostly pretty) two-hour drive from there. About half an hour



Above: Musicians busking outside the Woolworth Walk, an art gallery. Right: Visitors atop Chimney Rock in Chimney Rock State Park.

west on Route 74, decaying strip malls and big-box tombstones of the retail apocalypse give way to pastoral farmland and distant peaks, as the Blue Ridge Mountains come into view. I'm reminded that, when I'm not part of the vehicular swamp inside Interstate 495, sometimes I actually enjoy driving.

A big part of Asheville's appeal is its mountain setting, with



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hikes of almost any level in just about every direction. So on my route through western North Carolina, I make a quick detour into **Chimney Rock State Park**, near Lake Lure. The top of the namesake rock formation affords sweeping views of **Hickory Nut Gorge** and surrounding mountains, for what is literally a steep price: the climb, dubbed the “Ultimate Stairmaster,” is about 500 steps up a series of sturdy wooden staircases. If that makes your calves quake, don’t fear: There’s an elevator carved deep inside the rock, which can whisk you up 26 stories in a jiffy—leaving just 44 steps and a gift shop between you and the top of the 315-foot monolith. Since I’m visiting on a weekday, there’s no line for the lift (the wait can top 15 minutes or more on busy fall weekends), and I take the easy way up. I’m a bit early for foliage season, which hits the highest peaks in late September and cascades down the mountains until early November, but the view is still spectacular.

On the knee- and quad-busting descent, I discover there are a number of offshoots and vistas along the climb that allow for breaks or the chance to explore other nooks and crannies, such as the Gneiss Cave and Crevice Pass. There’s even a children’s animal encounter about to take place on a picnic deck (the staff member says she’s featuring reptiles today, which I can only assume includes snakes, so I quicken my downhill pace). From there, I hike the Hickory Nut Falls Trail to the base of the 404-foot waterfall featured in the 1992 film *The Last of the Mohicans*. There are several more trails of varied intensity, including an epic climb to the top of the falls, but kids might enjoy the Great Woodland Adventure trail best of all. The terrain is easy but more varied to stave off boredom, and the path is punctuated with educational animal-themed stations that challenge kids to leap as far as a jumping spider or crawl through tunnels like a chipmunk.

Eating Up Artsville

Few things smell so good as a mountain forest in the crisp autumn air, but a plate of tacos after hiking said forest comes pretty close. On my way into town, I stop for a late lunch at the colorful flagship location of **White Duck Taco Shop** (whiteducktacoshop.com, 828-254-1398) on the fringe of Asheville’s industrial River Arts District. Lines are known to stretch out the door here at lunch time, when the picnic tables perched beside the French Broad River fill up fast. I want to devour half the chalkboard—there are standards, like fried fish and BBQ carnitas, plus more creative fillings like mole-roasted duck and Korean beef with kimchi—but settle on the Bangkok Shrimp taco. It’s light and sweet with cucumbers and a sesame glaze.

Roughly two dozen industrial buildings in the **River Arts District** (riverarts-district.com) host the studios and galleries of about 200 working artisans, where you can watch painters and potters at work, take home a one-of-a-kind souvenir, or even enroll in a jewelry making, glass blowing, or pottery workshop, among others. The district is a little scattered about: Pockets of vibrant art studios, restaurants, and coffee shops are interrupted by train tracks and hollowed-out warehouses, making it a challenge to tour the whole area on foot. But on the second Saturday of each month (and during the annual Fall Studio Stroll, November 9-10), free trolleys bounce between the creative clusters.

I get my art fix by popping into a couple of galleries downtown, including the **Woolworth Walk** (woolworthwalk.com, 828-254-9234). The restored interior of the 1938 F.W. Woolworth building now showcases the work of almost 200 local artists on two floors, and includes a 1950s-style soda fountain serving club sandwiches and ice cream sodas. The mixed-media work of **Jacqui Fehl** (jacquifehl.com) stops me in my tracks, and I can’t help but leave with a pack of postcard prints.

Another gem of early 20th-century architecture is the **Grove Arcade** (grove-arcade.com, 828-252-7799), a gorgeous, glass-topped indoor marketplace that spans an entire city block. If you’ve ever wished you could order a beer or wine and sip it among two floors of books while Etta James plays in the

background, A) we share the same dreams, and B) you must visit the **Battery Park Book Exchange & Champagne Bar** (batteryarkbookexchange.com, 828-252-0020) at the Arcade’s south end. It’s a perfect evening to enjoy their lovely outside seating area, but instead I roam the stacks of used volumes, beer in hand, until dinner beckons.

People rave about the 4-ounce petite filet at **Chestnut** (chestnutasheville.com, 828-575-2667), but the local shrimp and grits—with bacon, spinach, and a peppercorn cream sauce balanced by the acidic burst of cherry tomatoes—puts me in a salivating state of culinary catatonia: For a solid 10 minutes, I can think of nothing but how delicious each bite is. Despite a dazzling cocktail menu and sprawling wine list, it’s hard not to order a beer when more than half the drafts are brewed nearby; the Gaelic Ale from local



The Biltmore Estate, the largest private home in America and Asheville’s most popular attraction.

At 8,000 acres, the estate is twice the size of Dorchester and nearly 10 times that of New York’s Central Park.

craft pioneer **Highland Brewing** doesn’t disappoint.

I nurse my amber ale while awaiting my cousin Phil, who’ll be joining me for the rest of the trip. From my window seat, I can see columns of fire dancing on the second-floor terrace bar at **Aloft** (marriott.com, 828-232-2838) across the street. The pyrotechnic patio entices, but I’m already booked at the colorful **Hotel Indigo** (ashevilleindigo.com, 828-239-0239), which, from its perch at the

top of town, affords miles of mountain views from my room.

Phil arrives just as Chestnut is closing. He hasn’t eaten yet, so we make our way to **The Times Bar** (thetimesbarasheville.com, 828-774-5028), a cocktail bar that somehow captures the easy elegance of a bygone era—classy, but not at all stuffy. The bartenders take their seasonal concoctions quite seriously, and the bar bites, from blistered shishito peppers with chimichurri aioli and sea salt to smoked trout tater tots with crème fraîche, are mouthwatering.

We close the night at the fabulously weird **Sly Grog Lounge** (slygrog.wordpress.com), a junkyard arcade of a dive bar. It’s not technically a bar—it’s a private club that costs a penny to join—and on this night its rambling assortment of vintage furniture, video games, old TVs, and other miscellany is mostly open to the outdoors, giving the place a yard sale vibe. A funk band is just stepping off the stage as we arrive, soon to give way to “Get Weird Wednesdays,” a weekly collaborative electronic jam. The resulting soundscape is as advertised, but it’s still art.

A Slippery Slope

Just south of downtown, Asheville's South Slope deserves a day of its own. But at the very least, stop here for lunch on your way to the Biltmore Estate (or for dinner on the way back to downtown). I park in the heart of the neighborhood and helplessly follow the smell of smoky, savory meat into **Buxton Hall Barbecue** (buxtonhall.com, 828-232-7216), housed in the gritty industrial grandeur of a former wood-floor roller rink.

Opened in 2015 by a pair of James Beard Award nominees, Buxton Hall is beloved for its whole-hog barbecue: Locally raised pigs are slow-smoked over hardwood coals for 18 hours and infused with a vinegar-based sauce. I go a little lighter and order the also-famous chicken sandwich; the delicate crunch of the buttermilk batter and house-made pickles brightens up the more sultry, smoky flavors of the juicy chicken breast and white BBQ sauce. Dry-rub-dusted watermelon packs a sweet, salty, spicy punch on the side.

Walking back to my car, I fight off the urge for a pint next door at the enormous-but-inviting **Catawba Brewing** (catawbabrewing.com, 828-552-3934)—not to mention the dozen or so other breweries, cideries, and distilleries within a four-block radius. Then I bravely beat back a second wave of temptation at **Vortex Doughnuts** (vortexdoughnuts.com, 828-552-3010), where trays of both traditional and inventive house-made treats beckon to my already bursting belly. The South Slope, it turns out, is a slippery one, tilting me toward delicious decadence.

The Great Indoors

I've never really understood it, but with no royal family to obsess over in America, we instead seem to worship celebrities and billionaires, the twin crowns of capitalism. And so it is that the most popular tourist attraction in Asheville is the **Biltmore Estate** (biltmore.com, 800-411-3812), the 175,000-square-foot mansion—that's over 4 indoor acres, mind you, with 35 bedrooms and 65 fireplaces—built by George Vanderbilt in the 1890s. The Biltmore draws over a million visitors each year, and you'll want to buy tickets ahead of time so you can reserve an entry time.

I grudgingly overpay (my admission is \$69, plus another \$12 for the audio guide) to gawk at the grotesque glamor of unthinkable wealth. The largest private home in America, the Biltmore has 250 rooms (and seemingly as many helpful, cheerful staff members), but only three dozen or so are open to the public. Some are more spectacular than others—the first-floor dining room is particularly eye-popping, the early indoor pool is fascinating, and you'll also encounter portraits by Renoir and John Singer Sargent. While the home's meticulously preserved architecture and furnishings are stunningly impressive, the audio guide proves well worth the cost, as there's little if any descriptive signage to put those details in context.

The mansion is indeed a piece of pristinely preserved historic beauty, but having toured The Breakers—the 70-room Vanderbilt “cottage” in Newport, Rhode Island, also designed by Biltmore architect Richard Morris Hunt—I start to feel a bit “been there, done that” around 30 rooms in. Once my self-guided tour of the house is over, though, I discover the best part of the estate: the grounds, which were designed by Frederick Law Olmsted.

The mountains outside of Asheville offer plenty of opportunity for breathtaking hikes. But if you like your wilderness a little less wild, the gardens and walking trails around the Biltmore offer a truly tranquil retreat and plenty of room to roam: At 8,000 acres, the estate is twice the size of Dorchester and nearly 10 times that of New York's Central Park. Trekking to the small waterfall at the far edge of Bass Pond, I follow a gravel path that meanders along and over a gurgling stream, through patches of sun-kissed forest so magically manicured they look as though they're tended not by human landscapers, but by pixies or leprechauns.

Art and Soul

Today, Phil and I are going to try some busking, so we start off with a hearty breakfast at the **Early Girl Eatery** (earlygirleatery.com, 828-259-9292).

The biscuit French toast puts a Southern spin on a favorite sweet staple, but the sweet potato and local sausage scramble is particularly heavenly.

After breakfast, Phil and I walk around downtown Asheville looking for a good place to set up. The ideal busking spot is one that's in view and earshot of a steady parade of passersby, but not in their way (the city is generally lenient, but regulations require you to leave at least 6 feet of sidewalk space); bonus points if an overhang or narrow street offers some sound resonance. While we're scoping out the streets, we pop in to some unique and wonderful shops. **Malaprop's Bookstore/Cafe** (malaprops.com, 828-254-6734) is exactly what you want an indie bookstore to be, and the honeycomb-shaped shelves of **Asheville Bee Charmer** (ashevillebeecharmer.com, 828-424-7274) are a bonanza for quirky and earth-conscious gifts.

Finally, we settle on a spot, near a pair of cafes on Wall Street. I haven't performed in the street, nor with Phil (a Berklee-trained guitarist), for quite a few years, but music is like a time machine. Belting out Bob Dylan, I feel young again. We play a few songs, earn a few dollars, and we can't stop smiling. Because making art is fun, and beautiful, and joyfully easy.

At least, it sure feels that way when you're in Asheville. ■

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