



The Biltmore House & Gardens.

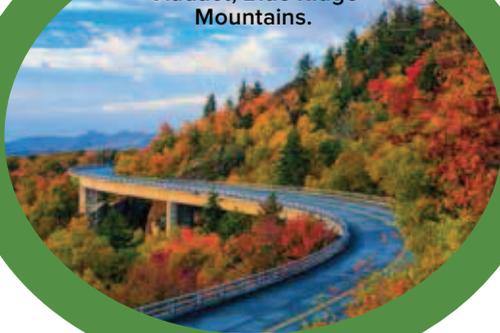
THE SOUTHERN CHARM OF

Asheville

Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, Asheville is a gem

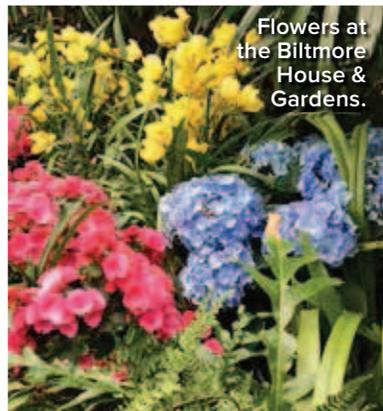
By Rob & Wendy Lindsay

Linn Cove Viaduct, Blue Ridge Mountains.

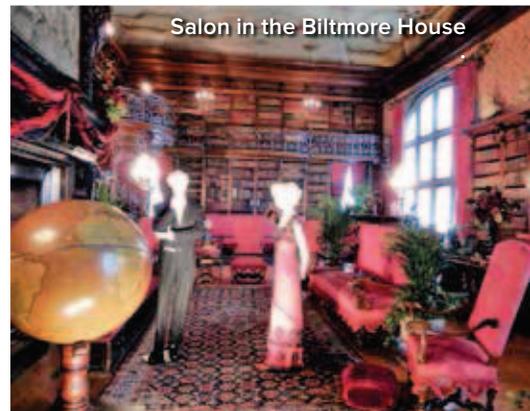


Asheville, North Carolina, has it all: stunning mountain scenery and the Blue Ridge Parkway, a mosaic of artists and crafters, an eclectic food scene, a wonderful B & B network, a variety of fascinating architecture, and an inn with a legacy of hosting the rich and famous—plus, it's the microbrewery capital of America. Its crown jewel is the incredible Biltmore House & Gardens, site of the largest

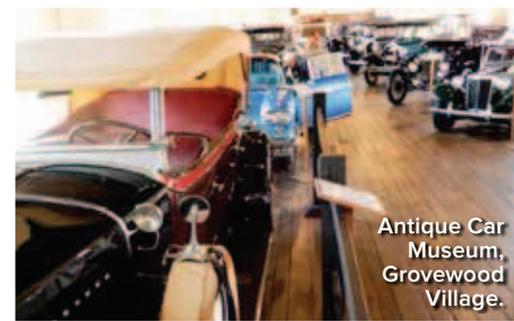
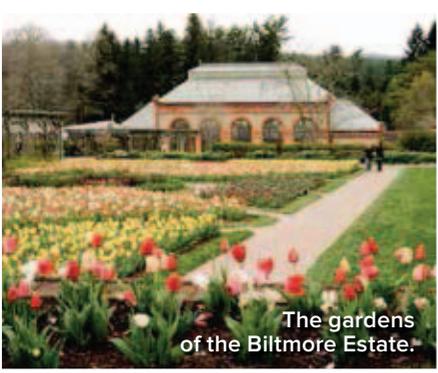
Flowers at the Biltmore House & Gardens.



Salon in the Biltmore House



Photos: iStock/Rauluminate (estate) and Jaredkay (road); Lindsay Editorial (others).



As construction progressed on all fronts, Vanderbilt and his

upstairs in the family and guest rooms and below stairs in the servants' workrooms. At the time we toured, many of the rooms had mannequins dressed in the striking costumes worn in the movie *Titanic*. (The link here might be that the Vanderbilt family had been booked to return from Europe on the *Titanic*, but business pressures had caused them to take an earlier ship.) It really helps give a sense of the era when George and Edith entertained there.

wife, Edith, began amassing artworks and artifacts from around the world to be displayed in their new Asheville house. Their little country retreat had grown to become a grand 250-room chateau-style mansion. Among the resplendent rooms are 35 bedrooms, 65 fireplaces, and 43 bathrooms. Biltmore House had electricity, running water, and elevators well before most places in the United States. It was and still is the largest private home on the US National Register of Historic Places.

Understandably, Biltmore is the biggest tourist attraction in Asheville and together with the Antler Hill Village & Winery shops and galleries, plus the cluster of hotels on the property, it remains the largest employer in the area. Since it first opened its doors, Biltmore has been an international magnet for the rich, and to this day, well-heeled tourists make up a good percentage of Asheville's tourist trade.

western rim of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Whether you stay there or not (it is today The Omni Grove Park Inn), it's worth a visit just to see the wonderful view from the massive terraces.

appearance is the result of Grove's wanting it to look like a house, not a hotel. The fieldstone walls and an unusual undulating roof design were to give the appearance of an English thatched cottage. The massive stone walls—four feet thick (1.2 metres) and six storeys tall—are of stone quarried from the mountain by a

family home open to the public in the United States.

Is it health, wealth, or scenery that has drawn visitors to this fascinating mountain resort city? Opinions vary.

Back in the early 1800s, visitors were already arriving by stagecoach every summer from the hot, humid lowland south to enjoy the cool mountain air. Many came for their health—to escape malaria or on a doctor's recommendation to recover from tuberculosis with rest and relaxation in the clean, invigorating alpine air. Some also came to "take the waters" at one of the nearby natural hot springs.

The Biltmore Estate

One such visitor in the late 1880s was wealthy young George W. Vanderbilt II, who was about to transform Asheville's image. Enthralled by the mountain scenery when he accompanied his mother on a trip for her health, Vanderbilt decided to build a country guest house for entertaining family and friends in this idyllic spot. Heir to the vast fortune amassed by his father and by his grandfather (the shipping and railway magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt), Vanderbilt imagined on a grand scale.

He engaged renowned architect Richard Morris Hunt and challenged him to create a chateau as grand as anything Vanderbilt had seen in his extensive European travels. Construction began in 1889. Over six years, more than 1,000 craftsmen and labourers were hired and a special railway line was built to bring workers and construction materials to the site. Eight kilometres (five miles) away, a small self-sustaining village was created for the small army of artisans, craftsmen, gardeners, foresters, and future household staff. Today that town site has become Antler Hill Village, which welcomes visitors with numerous boutiques and a winery.

To preserve the mountain vistas from his country retreat, Vanderbilt had purchased a vast tract of land, of which 8,000 acres (more than 32 square kilometres) remain. He hired Frederick Law Olmsted, the father of American landscape architecture, to design gardens near the house, create a farm, and provide accessibility to the forests. Biltmore was to be Olmsted's last major project (he also created Montreal's Mount Royal Park and co-designed Central Park in New York City). True to Olmsted's vision, there is something to see and enjoy year-round.

Biltmore Tips:

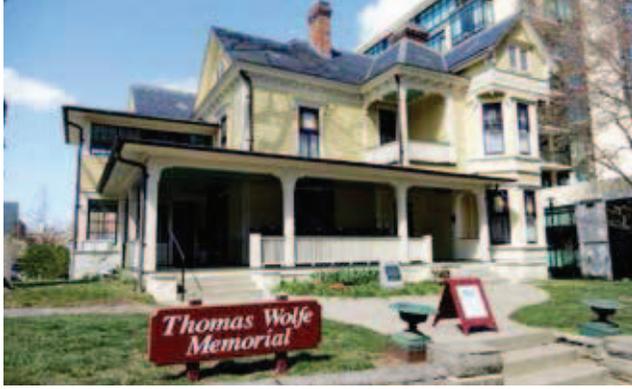
- If you're driving, make sure you have a good supply of fuel in the tank—the estate covers a large area with no gas stations.
- Parking lots are quite a distance from the mansion and gardens. Allow at least a half-hour before your entry time to park and catch the minibus from the parking lots.
- Don't miss the splendid sunken gardens and conservatory.
- Consider dividing your visit over two days, one day each for the gardens and mansion.
- There may be 43 bathrooms inside the mansion, but none are for tourists. Before your two-plus-hour tour, use the tourist washrooms outside.
- There's an elevator inside the mansion, but only between the first and second floors—all other levels are accessed by stairs only. However, the gardens are level and you can even circle them by car when exiting.

Photos: iStock (map); Lindsay Editorial (others).

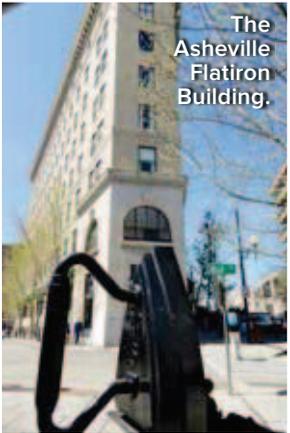
Photos: Lindsay Editorial.



Pack Square Park, on the Asheville by Foot tour.



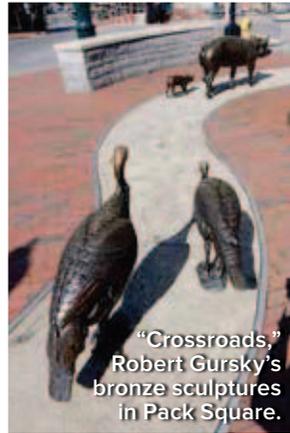
Thomas Wolfe Memorial



The Asheville Flatiron Building.



Asheville Community Theatre.



"Crossroads," Robert Gursky's bronze sculptures in Pack Square.



An example of decorated building.

crew of 400, some of whom had worked on the Biltmore estate 20 years earlier. Under the direction of his son-in-law Fred Seely (who later became the hotel manager), the inn was constructed in the remarkably short time of one year. The aim was to provide a calm and relaxing experience for guests, so the interior was built and furnished in the clean, simple lines of the Arts and Crafts movement. The light fixtures and much of the furniture were created at the famous Roycroft studios of New York. The inn is an unusual place. Where else have you seen an elevator built into the back of a massive stone fireplace?

"O' Blue Eyes"

On the property a short distance from the inn is the Antique Car Museum at Grovewood Village; car buffs shouldn't miss it. There are Ford Model A's and

Model T's, Chevys, Dodges, and many others ranging in year from 1913 to 1959, all in running condition. The highlight for us was a luminous blue 1957 Cadillac Eldorado Brougham that had all manner of special features and accessories not common in its day: along with its big V8 engine, it has power windows and seats, an automatic dimmer for the lights, cruise control, and self-levelling pneumatic suspension—plus a stainless steel roof, silk seats, men's grooming- and ladies' vanity kits, and gold-finished drink tumblers, all included for the price of US\$13,074. At that time, a standard Ford or Chevy cost around \$2,000 and a regularly equipped Cadillac was between \$4,000 and \$5,000. Even the Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud cost less than the Eldorado Brougham. This one was painted a shimmering "Lake Placid blue"; after Frank Sinatra bought one, car salesmen began referring to the colour as "O' Blue Eyes."

Admission to the car museum is free, with donations gladly accepted. Guided tours are available Wednesdays to Saturdays at 1 p.m. (the museum is closed from January to March).

At Pack Square Park in the centre of downtown Asheville, we met Kevan Frazier, the founder of Asheville by Foot

Walking Tours. In one short hour touring with Frazier, we discovered Double D's Coffee and Desserts, an old English double-decker that brews locally roasted coffee (the owners start up the engine once a year to prove that it's still a vehicle and not a store); the Flatiron Building, with a giant sculpture of a flat iron across the street that attracts buskers; a "ghost church"; and enough art deco buildings (including City Hall) to give Miami Beach a run for its money.

Asheville City Hall and the Buncombe County Clerk of Superior Court building sit side by side, at 70 and 60 Court Plaza, respectively, overlooking a lovely community park popular for concerts and festivals. The courthouse is very straight and angular, while City Hall (built circa 1928) is a bold eight-storey art deco-designed structure with an unusual octagonal roof—the contrast is striking. Local folks gave the mismatched pair the nickname "the cake and the box it came in."

Frazier also introduced us to the many famous writers linked to Asheville. We three loitered in front of a large cream-coloured house on Spruce Street, discussing the writing career of the celebrated writer Thomas Wolfe; Wolfe lived there with his mother, who ran it as a boarding house, until 1916. Wolfe thinly disguised the boarding house and many of the locals in his first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*. (The book caused such uproar that it was banned at the local library for seven years.) F. Scott Fitzgerald was a regular guest at The Grove Park Inn when his wife, Zelda, came for treatments at the local Highland Hospital. And in the nearby community of Flat Rock, the home farm of poet Carl Sandburg is now a National Historic Site.

Book-lovers might also appreciate the Battery Park Book Exchange, a combination second-hand bookstore

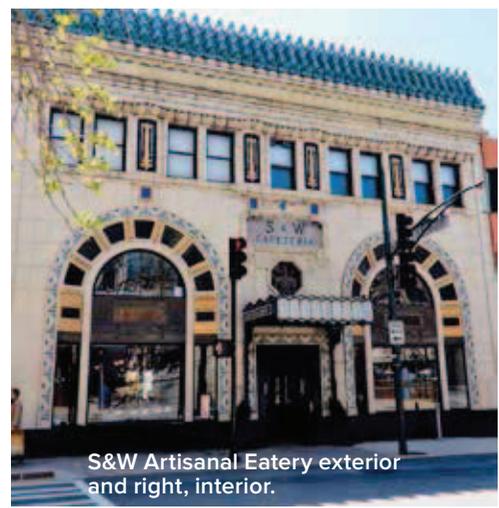
Photos: Lindsey Editorial.



Top photos: Beaufort House Inn.



Two views along the Blue Ridge Parkway.



S&W Artisanal Eatery exterior and right, interior.



Chef at Buxton Hall Barbecue.



Bouchon, French bistro. Below: a creation by Chef Michel Baudouin's at Bouchon.



located in a marvellous art deco building (built circa 1929)

where the two-level dining room and bar has a pleasing combination of art deco and modern styles. After restaurateur Sakis Elefantis gave us an enthusiastic description of each dish displayed on the restaurant's extensive buffet, we sampled all our plates could hold—and soon realized that this is a restaurant for which one visit is not nearly enough.

The pièce de résistance was dinner at Bouchon, a French bistro that combines Chef Michel Baudouin's culinary

Photos: Lindsay Editorial.

Photos: National Park Service/U.S. Department of the Interior (Blue Ridge Parkway); Lindsay Editorial (others).

and champagne bar, or Malaprop's Bookstore/Café, where you can go on a "blind date" with a book—the book is wrapped in brown paper, to be revealed only after you've bought it.

Near the corner of East Walnut and North Market streets sits Asheville Community Theatre, which is remarkable for a couple of reasons. On that corner sits a fascinating art deco stainless steel sculpture entitled *On the Move* that can play realistic travel sound effects—anything from a stagecoach to a jet plane. There's also a historic plaque proclaiming that William S. Hart, of cowboy movie stardom, staged plays there around 1900 and that two then-unknown actors, married couple Charlton Heston and Lydia Clarke Heston, were directors.

Later, back at the beautiful and historic Beaufort House Inn (built circa 1894), we crossed paths with the history of Charlton Heston again. We learned that in 1947, he and Lydia lived for six months in what is now named the Rose Room, next to our room, on the second floor. Apparently while the Hestons were directing at the community theatre, they were saving up to pursue their acting dreams in California.

The elegant Queen Anne-style Beaufort House Inn, with its gracious hospitality and delicious breakfasts, is one of 14 B & B's included in the inns of the Asheville Bed & Breakfast Association. The organization maintains high standards and refers guests. While we were enjoying the sunshine on the wraparound porch, the innkeeper, Christina Muth, brought us a copy of the association's cookbook *Morning in the Mountains*, which is full of favourite breakfast recipes from Asheville's B & B's; just reading it makes your mouth water.

Asheville itself is a foodie's paradise, with new independently owned restaurants opening every month and a cornucopia of choices when it comes to eating out. At the Rhubarb restaurant, we discovered the eatery's family-style "Sunday Supper," at which total strangers are seated together at large tables. Conversation flowed as the large bowls and platters were passed and we all commented on the locally sourced menu created by the area's award-winning chefs. We also had lunch downtown at S&W Artisanal Eatery, which was a delight from beginning to end. It is

background in Lyon, France, with locally sourced ingredients. After a delectable meal, we learned that Baudouin is opening a second bistro in the suburbs that will cater to locals, since his downtown bistro is always packed with tourists like us.

For a change of pace, there is Well Played, where you can sip a coffee and even enjoy lunch while playing board games. And the Eating Asheville food tour takes you to sample the fare at seven different restaurants.

Many towns and cities have a craft brewery or two, or even three or four; Asheville and area has at least 35. Since 1994, when Oscar Wong opened the successful Highland Brewing Company, the craft-brewery scene has grown, building Asheville's reputation as a destination city for beer drinkers. In fact, the city claims to have the most breweries per 100,000 residents of any US city.

The South Slope district (coming to be known as the Brewery District) offers nine breweries within walking distance, most of which regularly appear on Top 10 or Trip Advisor lists. There's also Buxton Hall Barbecue, which also offers brew tastings, including one specifically for "after a hot day mowing the lawn"; the barbecue ribs aren't bad, either.

For a different experience, we visited the River Arts district, situated along the French Broad river. This is an area of abandoned factories and gutted warehouses that has been given vibrant new life, with artists of every stripe building studios to suit their particular needs. There are at least two dozen separate and linked buildings with dozens of artists—painters, sculptors, photographers, woodworkers, metalworkers, ceramicists, jewellers, basket-makers, and more. Even after a couple of hours of talking with artists and viewing galleries, we'd barely skimmed the surface. And should you tire of walking, you can

relax at the Wedge brewery, with food trucks and other restaurants nearby.

Last but far from least is the scenic beauty of the Blue Ridge Parkway, a mere 13 kilometres (eight miles) from downtown Asheville; in fact, the parkway runs through part of the Biltmore estate. It is the most visited National Park unit in the United States and draws hikers, bikers, equestrians, cyclists, whitewater enthusiasts, and driving tourists to the Asheville area year-round.

The parkway runs 755 kilometres (469 miles) along the highest mountain ridges in Virginia and North Carolina. The road isn't maintained in winter, so higher sections and tunnel areas are often closed from November to April. The speed limit is 45 mph (72 km/h) and even lower in some sections.

The most popular times to drive the Blue Ridge Parkway are in the fall, when "leaf peepers" viewing the vibrant colours often cause traffic jams, and in late spring, when the hillsides are covered in the vivid white, pinks, purples, and reds of wild rhododendrons. We were a bit too early for the rhododendrons, but we did see Asheville decked in the gentle pinks and whites of dogwoods, the deep-pink of redbuds, and the blazing magentas, scarlets, and pinks of azalea bushes.

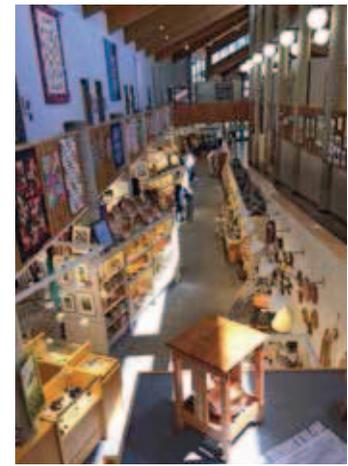
The advantage of making our parkway drive in early spring was manifold, including less traffic and better views through the budding trees before they leafed out. Additionally, we were often the only ones at lookouts and therefore could spend as much time as we wanted enjoying the endless panoramic views of the undulating blue ridges that stretched to the horizon.

At Milepost 384 is Blue Ridge Parkway Visitor Center, which is open year-round (most visitor centres are seasonal). There are paper maps, brochures, and exhibits, a high-definition

movie, information desks usually staffed by rangers, and a huge electronic interactive map of the parkway—you can zoom in on any area to see it in much greater detail. It's a great stop to help plan your drive.

At Milepost 382 is the parkway's Folk Art Center, another stop we highly recommend. The centre showcases the very best of traditional and contemporary crafts in a juried selection. You'll find something for every taste—

woodcarvings, leather work, weavings, hooked rugs and hangings, traditional corn husk dolls, contemporary glass, and ceramics, plus quilts and quilted wall hangings. As a reminder of your visit to the lovely Asheville area, the Folk Art Center is a wonderful spot to buy souvenirs and gifts that are authentically handmade. **I**



Craft arts at Folk Art Center.



If You Go...

Asheville, North Carolina, is off of US Highway I-40 and within easy reach of both the I-75 and I-77, two of the major north-south routes popular with Canadian snowbirds. It lies approximately midway between these two highways. Another travel option is flying into nearby Charlotte, North Carolina, and picking up a rental car to make the 2½-hour drive.

For general Asheville information, go to www.ExploreAsheville.com.