

ASHEVILLE

Between the Biltmore, the Blue Ridge mountains, beer and beyond, there's a lot to bring visitors to this arty North Carolina city, finds Amy Conry Davis

There's much more to Asheville than beer, the Blue Ridge mountains and the Biltmore, but these are still excellent reasons for a visit. Located in western North Carolina, about a 60 mile drive from the Tennessee state line, this unassuming mountain town has seen a significant boom over the past decades. As far back as the 19th century, the area has been highly sought after as a retreat from city living with resort spas and

sanatoria for health and healing. Nowadays, local and international visitors see it as an ideal retirement destination, thriving arts community and recreational paradise. With more than 40 craft breweries, it's been voted Beer City USA by *National Geographic*, four times. Despite its new growth, it maintains its welcoming, small-town feel and manages to fit culture, history, fine dining and natural beauty into every corner.

Hiker in Asheville
Right: Hallway looking into the
winter garden at Biltmore Estate;
downtown Asheville

DAY 1

The Biltmore House is Asheville's most-visited attraction and for good reason. This former hunting lodge, built for the Vanderbilt family in 1889, is a magnificent feat of architecture and design. The estate features 65 fireplaces, 35 bedrooms and sits on more than 8,000 acres. Home tours, which include the gardens and grounds, start at \$64 per adult and are offered year-round. Custom behind-the-scenes experiences, such as rooftop and backstairs tours, are also available. The holiday season is a particularly stunning time to see the home, with its candlelit displays of lights and festive decorations. It's a good idea to dedicate at least two hours to a tour and there are on-site eateries for drinks and light bites.

Each entrance ticket comes with a complimentary wine tasting, so don't bypass the Biltmore Estate Winery in nearby Antler Hill Village. For post-tour cocktails and appetizers, Cedric's Tavern on the estate serves local draft beer and warm, homemade pretzel rolls with mustard butter. Across from the estate's main entrance, Biltmore Village is a cobblestoned shopping district with upscale boutiques and art galleries. For dinner, a locally sourced elk strip loin or bison burger at the Red Stag Grill in the Grand Bohemian Hotel makes for a delicious end to the day.

DAY 2

From the Montford Area Historic District to South Slope to Charlotte Street, Asheville has several distinct neighborhoods with their own look and feel. Downtown Asheville is a vibrant, walkable urban area with plenty to see and do. A hearty southern breakfast of biscuits and stone-ground grits at Early Girl Eatery will start the day off right. Explore the newly renovated Asheville Art Museum, stroll through the Grove Park Arcade, or take in the architectural details of the Basilica of Saint Lawrence. Art deco buildings line the streets and house bookstores, antique shops, and a variety of retail spaces. In the summer, a community drum circle meets outside every Friday at Pritchard Park for lively jam sessions.

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For a true Asheville-esque lunch, vegans and vegetarians especially will appreciate the organic fare at Laughing Seed Café, followed by something sweet at French Broad Chocolates. Over at the River Arts District, take the rest of the afternoon to watch artists at work in their studios, or enjoy a cold beverage at the Wedge Brewing Company.

Once the sun sets, change gears for dinner and make the short drive to Weaverville. Though just a few blocks long, North Main Street is a hub of activity in this charming small town. Glass Onion features 'global Italian' dishes, such as housemade fettuccine or braciolo with polenta, as well as a large selection of imported wines.

DAY 3

Asheville is surrounded by thousands of acres of state parks, national forests and wilderness areas. Start early to get ahead of the crowds, especially in the fall and summer months. Bring along a few snacks and a fresh brew from PennyCup Coffee and spend the day discovering the Blue Ridge Parkway. This winding two-lane byway runs directly through town and can be accessed at different points throughout the city. Head to the Blue Ridge Parkway Visitor Center first for maps and information on sightseeing opportunities. Many of the roadside parking lots have tables or grassy areas for a picnic lunch with a view. The entire drive is dotted with trailheads, historic sites and scenic placards, so plan for a full day's worth of activities.

Split up the drive with stops at places such as the Nature Center, North Carolina Arboretum or the Botanical Gardens near UNC Asheville. For locally made crafts, the Asheville Folk Art Center has ongoing exhibitions and galleries featuring regional artists and makers. Cap off the day with dinner at a long-time locals' favorite, Cúrate near Pack Square in downtown. What was once a bus depot is now a trendy, Spanish-inspired restaurant, beloved for its tapas, cured meats and sangria rojo. □

// ESSENTIALS



When to go: Despite its mountainous geography, this region of North Carolina has fairly moderate temperatures year-round. The fall is an ideal time to visit Asheville but it can be crowded.

Currency: US Dollar

Language: English

Getting Around: There are a variety of transport options around Asheville, including a historic trolley, as well as regular bus routes and services such as Uber and Lyft. Much of the city is pedestrian-friendly and it's easy to drive around, too.

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Left: Acoustic guitarist and singer performing in a cafe in downtown Asheville