



ASHEVILLE CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

In Asheville, the Spirit Moves You

A trip to this Blue Ridge Mountain destination will help you connect with your inner Bohemian while enjoying the city's worldly charms. **By Barry Glenn**

IT'S A CLOUDLESS SUNDAY AFTERNOON

in Asheville, North Carolina, but along the city's riverfront, rubber chickens are raining down. They're being fired by multimedia artist Sean Pace, who's cranking them out like a machine-gunner from the motorcycle-like work of art he calls "Class War Limo"—a piece that most passers-by mistake as a still-life metal sculpture. Until he starts the engine. The exhibition is over in a few minutes, and two or three delighted bystanders venture across the street to retrieve the dozen or so chickens. Two vehicles brake so they can pass, one of them an SUV bearing a bumper sticker that could serve as the coda for Pace's performance:

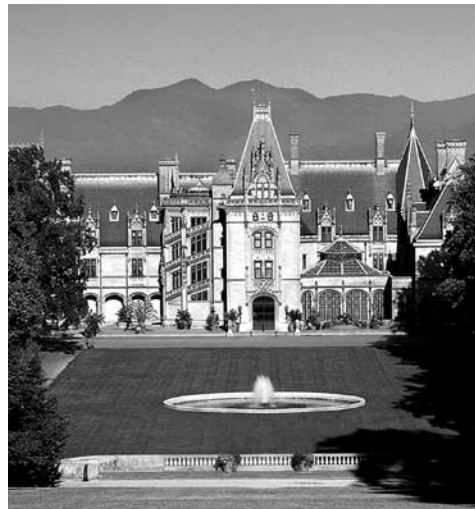
"Keep Asheville Weird," it reads.

This city of 75,000 nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains *is* weird—but it's an uplifting, supernatural weirdness. After spending a few days here, a visitor comes away feeling like he or she has experienced something out of this world, even spiritual.

That's because one can't help but feel inspired while here, whether by the dozens of artists at work in the River Arts District or by the city itself. The sense of something special also comes from the surrounding mountains, some of the oldest in the world, where one can gaze at the misty blue hue of the peaks in the summer, then a few months later marvel at the dazzling palette of autumn colors—and realize that the transformation has happened on schedule for thousands of years. There's also the challenge to the soul that comes from hiking or taking an exhilarating whitewater rafting trip on the French Broad River. And, as you tour the 250-room Biltmore House, the onetime palatial residence of the Vanderbilts, you can sense the spirit of the privileged, who, a century ago, walked the halls, entertained in the ballroom, or sat with a good book amid the thousands of volumes in the two-story library.

If you're an Orlandoan, there are a couple of particulars about

Asheville artist Sean Pace fires rubber chickens out of his "Class War Limo" creation. Grand Bohemian Hotel Asheville (far right), with its Old World hunting lodge décor (bottom far right), is the newest luxury resort to open in the city. The 175,000-square-foot Biltmore House (bottom center) is a must-see for visitors. Asheville boasts a vibrant arts scene, which includes the Jonas Gerard Fine Art gallery (bottom left).



Asheville sure to lift your spirits. First, the city is only a 95-minute flight away. AirTran started non-stop service in June from Orlando on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Second, Orlando-based hotelier Richard Kessler, whose Grand Bohemian Hotel lends a touch of class to downtown O-Town, has opened a dazzling boutique hotel on Asheville's south side.

It's fitting that Kessler would choose a city that invites visitors to discover their inner Bohemian. The Grand Bohemian Hotel Asheville, situated directly across from the entrance to the Biltmore Estate, certainly lives up to its name. It exudes the charm of an Old World hunting lodge, with whimsical glamour that features stone floors, oak walls, leather walls, antlers, chandeliers, antler-like carvings atop chandeliers, a stuffed boar sporting a Tyrolean hat, soaking tubs to die for, and elk tenderloin on the menu (a menu that glows in the dark, powered by LED lights under the pages).

A bit overwhelming? Not for long. You quickly learn to revel in the plush surroundings and the abundant art. Dozens of paintings

Asheville is one place where you can eat to excess but have plenty of opportunities to walk it off.

adorn the walls of the 104-room hotel, including several that depict a European red stag making itself at home in the North Carolina mountains.

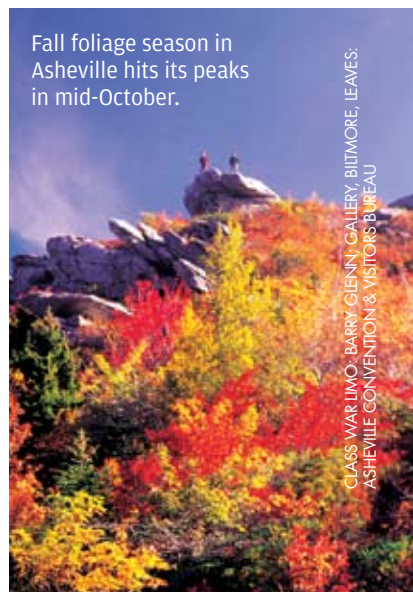
And you *are* in mountain country. Just listen to the voices—the friendly Grand Bohemian bartender with the Carolina drawl who describes the activities at the Blue Ridge BBQ Festival in nearby Tryon (“This is the *governor-endorsed* barbecue festival.”). Or the sixty-something woman driving a Biltmore Estate shuttle, who

gives tourists information about the Vanderbilts' 175,000-square-foot abode in a twang as Southern as homemade pecan pie.

Listen also to the inner voices that tell you Asheville is one place where you can eat to excess but have plenty of opportunities to walk it off.

The first part of that theory can be tested during Sunday brunch at the Grove Park Inn Resort & Spa. The legendary lodge offers beautiful views of the mountains and downtown Asheville, but you may

Fall foliage season in Asheville hits its peaks in mid-October.



CLASS WAR LIMO: BARRY GLENN; GALLERY, BILTMORE, LEAVES: ASHEVILLE CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU



GRAND BOHEMIAN: THE KESSLER COLLECTION; RAFTING: ASHEVILLE CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU; BILTMORE INN: BARRY GLENN; BRUNCH: GROVE PARK INN RESORT & SPA

be too busy looking over a feast so huge that it takes two large rooms (“hot” and “cold”) to accommodate the spread. Willpower always loses out to appetite at the Grove Park, and it's little wonder, with offerings like gravy and biscuit, cheese and potato casserole, roast beef, crab legs, mussels and dozens of other delicious dishes, including at least 20 desserts.

But you're not finished. Only 30 minutes from Asheville you can traverse trails with names like Craggy Garden or Graveyard Fields. They vary in length and difficulty, and some are accessible from the Blue Ridge Parkway, south of town. Best of all, any day now they will be alive with color.

Or you can walk through the

River Arts District, where more than 110 artists have transformed warehouses and other old buildings into working studios. You'll find potters, sculptors, watercolorists, glass blowers, woodworkers, even flute makers. In November and June the district sponsors a weekend Studio Stroll, a kind of open house in which all the creators are accessible to talk about their craft—artists like the former homemaker who was overheard on a recent Sunday telling a couple of customers how she became interested in painting:

“I was emptying my children's finger paints down the sink one day and suddenly noticed that I liked how the yellow swirled among all the other colors...”

That's the spirit.

Advice on Asheville



Rafting on the French Broad River

For help planning a trip, check out exploreasheville.com, the Web site of the Asheville Convention & Visitors Bureau. It has a multitude of information on everything from touring the city's seven breweries to sightseeing downtown.

Getting there: AirTran (airtran.com) offers nonstop service between Orlando and Asheville on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. In early August, round-trip fares were going as low as \$88 (not including baggage fee and taxes). Rental car pickup/dropoff is a breeze, just outside baggage claim, at Asheville Regional Airport.

Where to stay: Three places deserve mention for a one-of-a-kind experience. The **Grand Bohemian Hotel Asheville** (bohemianhotelasheville.com), with its European hunting lodge theme, is the newest addition to the luxury hotel scene, having opened in April. The **Grove Park Inn Resort & Spa**



The Inn on Biltmore Estate

(groveparkinn.com) boasts a storied history (it opened in 1913) and a superb spa. **The Inn on Biltmore Estate** (biltmore.com/stay) features magnificent views of the mountains—and is just down the road from the Biltmore winery, where you can enjoy free tastings. Each of these three hotels generally will run you \$200-plus a night, but check their Web sites for special packages. Asheville also boasts nearly 50 bed and breakfasts and, for the budget-conscious, plenty of hotel chain accommodations.



Grove Park Inn's Sunday Brunch

Where to eat: The **Grove Park Inn's** Sunday brunch is beyond amazing. Grand Bohemian's **Red Stag Grill** is also an excellent choice (don't miss the Kessler calamari as an appetizer). A favorite among locals is downtown's **Fiore's Ristorante Toscana** (fioreasheville.com), with a Tuscan-inspired menu featuring items like chicken saltimbocca and grilled spinach ravioli.

Trolley tour: Why not act like a tourist while visiting? You're from Orlando, after all. The drivers are knowledgeable about the city and its history. And you can get off at one spot and sightsee, then catch the next trolley passing through a couple of hours later.

Autumn colors: They're the reason to go to Asheville this time of year. With more than 100 kinds of deciduous trees, Western North Carolina has one of the longest fall color seasons in the country. Color comes to the higher elevations (like Mount Mitchell) as early as mid-to late September, then spreads, lasting well into November at the lowest heights. The peak time around Asheville is early to mid-October. The tourism bureau offers weekly “color reports” at fallinthemountains.com.

—Barry Glenn