

Asheville, N.C.: It has Biltmore and lots more

by Fred and Karen Eckert

ASHEVILLE, N.C. - Most people who visit Asheville, an attractive small city in the mountains of western North Carolina, come just to tour Biltmore Estate, that massive chateau built in the late 1800s by George Washington Vanderbilt II. The largest privately owned home in the United States, it attracts more than a million visitors a year.

Biltmore is astonishingly opulent: 175,000 square feet, 250 rooms, sited among 8,000 acres of forest and meticulously manicured lawns with 75 acres of beautiful gardens. Here, in a gorgeous spot, Vanderbilt created his dream replica of a great European working estate ... super-sized.

BILTMORE ESTATE - The Biltmore Estate is astonishingly opulent. Nestled among 8,000 acres, it draws more than 1 million visitors annually. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert. **LOOKING GLASS FALLS** - The Looking Glass Falls near Asheville, N.C., is one of America's most photographed waterfalls. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert. **BLUE RIDGE SUNRISE** - The Blue Ridge Parkway is one of the most scenic drives in America. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert. **A MODEST HOME** - This modest home is the childhood home of American author Thomas Wolfe. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert. Originally it stood amid 125,000 acres, stretching for some 20 miles, taking in much of what today constitutes Pisgah National Forest. He wanted it to be self-sufficient, so he included a dairy operation, cattle farms, hog farms and a forestry management operation. It even included its own village for his estate workers, complete with a church.

Today its best-known side operation is its highly regarded winery, which, it surprises most people to learn, is America's most visited winery. Adjacent Biltmore Village is now home to boutique shops and fine restaurants. Visitors to Biltmore marvel at its sheer size - the footprint of the mansion covers four acres. What lies inside is equally amazing: an incredibly massive foyer, priceless art and antiques, 65 fireplaces, a huge indoor pool, a bowling alley and an immense two-story, wood-paneled library that would be the envy of many cities.

LOTS MORE THAN BILTMORE HERE

Biltmore may be on its own well worth visiting, but making it the sole focus of a visit to Asheville would deprive you of a much better experience. Stick around awhile and visit this area also for reasons that drew

Vanderbilt here in the first place: the pleasant city of Asheville and the beauty of the surrounding area of western North Carolina.

Nestled in the southern Appalachian Mountains at a spot where two rivers come together, Asheville (population 72,000) has the appealing feel of a small town. It has long been a resort town, since back in the days when Vanderbilt used to bring his mother here for the mountain-air tuberculosis "cure." Today people still come here for the fresh mountain air as well as Asheville's heralded arts and music festivals.

The vibrant downtown area abounds with art galleries, all sorts of specialty shops and quality restaurants. A particularly good place to shop in town is at the beautifully restored 1929 Grove Arcade. You will see lots of Appalachian crafts there, including in stalls set up outside of the building on weekends.

If crafts are your thing, be sure to also drive a few minutes out of town and visit the Folk Art Center. This is an unusually popular city with visitors who enjoy checking out authentic period architecture. That's because after Biltmore was finished, many architects and skilled craftsmen stayed on and worked on other projects in town, including its public buildings, such as its art deco city hall; a Catholic church with a grand dome and Spanish baroque towers; and an art deco Baptist church. The city is also renowned for its abundance of well-maintained turn-of-the-century houses.

A downtown attraction of special importance is the Thomas Wolfe Memorial, which occupies the nicely restored boarding house that the great novelist's mother owned and operated and in which he grew up. This is the place he wrote about in his acclaimed work, "Look Homeward Angel."

Asheville was one place where that book was not well received. Residents were so incensed by his portrayal of them that he did not dare show his face in town for several years. He wrote another famous book about that experience, borrowing its title from a remark made to him by a friend - "You Can't Go Home Again."

He is home now, buried in Riverside cemetery under a modest marker that states his parentage, dates of birth and death, identifies him as a "Beloved American Author" and contains brief quotes from two of his works.

Close by in the same cemetery is the grave, also modestly marked, of another giant of American literature, William Sidney Porter, better known by his pen name, O. Henry.

O. Henry's link to Asheville was that his wife was from here. He hated the place, saying he just could not stand to look out at the mountains.

"They depress me," he said.

Very, very few people share O. Henry's peculiar sentiments. Quite the opposite. It is precisely the stunning beauty of the mountains that surround Asheville that make it such a popular spot with visitors and with retirees. One such mountain not far from Asheville, by the way, was immortalized in one of the best-selling novels of the past decade, Charles Frazier's "Cold Mountain."

A GREAT BASE FROM WHICH TO EXPLORE

Besides the city itself being an enjoyable place, another good reason not to limit your visit to just Biltmore is that Asheville is a great place to base yourself for exploring some of nature's splendor.

If you are an adventure traveler, just outside town you will find great spots for hiking, mountain biking and whitewater rafting.

If you just want to take in some stunning views, all you have to do is drive minutes from town up onto the Blue Ridge Parkway, one of the most scenic routes in America.

Mountains, streams, lakes, forests - this area has all the ingredients that make for spectacular scenery, including waterfalls. Or, perhaps, especially waterfalls. For among the attributes that make Asheville such a nice place to visit is that it is a fine base from which to visit wonderful waterfalls. A short drive northeast from town brings you to Linville Falls, one of the region's prettiest waterfalls. Head south out of town and within an hour you are in Transylvania County, "The Land of Waterfalls." No other county in the United States has so many waterfalls, which include Whitewater Falls, considered the highest cascades east of the Rockies, and Looking Glass Falls, one of America's most-photographed waterfalls.

Frommer's, the travel guide company, has picked Asheville for its Top 12 Must-See World Travel Destinations of 2007. If you visit, among the things you will learn and may wish to inform Frommer's is that Asheville is located in the Appalachian Mountains, not the Smokies, and the great writer-poet Carl Sandberg was not born in nearby Flat Rock; he died there. But they got one thing right: Asheville is indeed a great place to visit.

IF YOU GO

Contact the Asheville Convention and Visitors Bureau at 800-280-0005, e-mail info@exploreasheville.com or clicking on www.exploreasheville.com.

Accommodations: Asheville is home to three of the country's best inns. The Inn on Biltmore Estate, www.biltmore.com, the only accommodation located on the Biltmore Estate. Grove Park Inn Resort and Spa, www.grovesparkinn.com, which features a fine golf course. Richmond Hill Inn, www.richmondhillinn.com, the romantic choice, a Southern Living magazine favorite, a hilltop Victorian mansion with rooms in the mansion and in a cottages wing and a garden pavilion wings.

Dining: Gabrielle's, located in the Richmond Hill Inn, is exquisite, absolutely superb, the finest restaurant in Asheville and surrounding areas, fantastic food and wonderful ambience. Rezaz Mediterranean Cuisine, in the Biltmore Village area, is an excellent choice for dinner. For breakfast or lunch, best choices are The Corner Kitchen in Biltmore Village and Tupelo Honey Cafe, downtown.

Travel Guides: For sound judgments and reliability, it's hard to beat Fodor's (www.fodors.com) travel guides. And when touring North Carolina, be sure to check out the travel publications of the John F. Blair company (www.blairpub.com).

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