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CATHOLIC TIMES

A journal of Catholic life in Ohio

MARCH 7, 2010
THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT
VOLUME 59:21
WWW.CTONLINE.ORG



Pilgrimage: A Journey of Faith

ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA: BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAIN ESCAPE SOUTH DOWN ROUTE 23

BY AARON LEVENTHAL

“Asheville ranks in the top 50 globally for authenticity, stewardship, integrity of place.”

National Geographic Traveler Survey, 2008

Asheville, North Carolina, nestled in a valley along the French Broad River and ringed by the majestic Blue Ridge mountains, has emerged as one of America’s premier vacation destinations. Its natural beauty, year-round temperate climate, vibrant downtown, dynamic arts scene, and award-winning independent restaurants draw millions of visitors annually to this remarkably diverse community of 75,000 residents. A pleasant seven-hour drive south along U.S. 23 from Columbus takes you along country roads and through pristine mountain passes to Asheville.

Originally inhabited by the Cherokee tribe and settlement farmers, Asheville became a popular destination in the 19th century as sanitariums sprang up to treat individuals with respiratory ailments seeking the fresh mountain air. Asheville changed forever when George Vanderbilt fell in love with the region and built his French-inspired, 250-room Biltmore chateau, attracting a stampede of socialites from the Eastern seaboard. The town boomed into the 1940s, then languished for decades until a spirited band of entrepreneurs, artists, and retirees rediscovered Asheville’s unique charms in the 1990s. The community has blossomed ever since.

Dozens of attractions can keep a visitor busy for a week or longer. Asheville Urban Trail, a 1.7-mile



The 250-room Biltmore Estate is America’s largest private residence

self-guided downtown walking tour, passes most of the city’s major landmarks. The Thomas Wolfe Memorial State Historic Site has hourly tours of the famous novelist’s boyhood home. Biltmore is billed as America’s largest private home, with gardens, a winery, shops, and restaurants. The North Carolina Arboretum features 434 acres of gardens and forest trails. The Western North Carolina Farmers’ Market has dozens of vendors hawking fresh produce, meats, cheeses, raw honey, jams, baked goods, flowers, and plants. The Folk Arts Center, 20 minutes from downtown on the Blue Ridge Parkway, has galleries, craft demonstrations, and handcrafted works for sale. Visit Cherokee to experience an 11,000-year-old civilization by exploring its Oconalufree Indian Village, Museum of the Cherokee Indian, and outdoor drama “Unto These Hills.” Outdoor enthusiasts will find dozens of outfitters offering rafting expeditions,

zipline canopy tours and canoe, kayak, tube, and fly fishing rentals. Primitive hiking trails abound, along with dozens of beautiful and challenging golf courses.

The visual and performing arts flourish in what American Style magazine cited as one of the top 10 small arts destinations in the nation. There are dozens of fine arts and crafts galleries, antique boutiques, and gift shops around every corner of downtown and Biltmore Village. Not to be missed is the River Arts District, where once-dormant warehouses and factories have been converted into more than 100 artists’ galleries and studios, including the Odyssey center for ceramic arts; Curve Studio, featuring encaustic painter Constance Williams; and Wedge Studios, with galleries, a brewery, and tasting room. Com-

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loved church, including its designation on the National Register of Historic Places on March 24, 1978. In 1993 Pope John Paul II named St. Lawrence as one of 38 minor basilicas in the United States.

Alice points out that Guastavino was also an accomplished musician who took pains to perfect the acous-

tics in the church. He wrote an original score for a Mass which was performed in part for the basilica’s centennial celebration.

She invites *Catholic Times* readers to attend weekend Masses celebrated by Father Wilber N. Thomas, rector, and Father C. Morris Boyd, parochial vicar. The basilica’s director of music ministries, Andrew Davis, said “the acoustics bring music to life in a way where one feels God and the Holy Spirit embracing us and renewing us.”

Alice says, “I am often told by visitors that the moment they enter the basilica, they feel that this is the house of God and sense a closeness to Him.”

Following weekend Masses, there are complimentary guided tours that detail the history and architecture of the church and its inspirational artistic collection, which includes magnificent stained glass windows from Germany’s “Munich school,” a 17th-century Spanish crucifixion tableau made of hand carved walnut for the main altar, lifesize sculptures, dozens of classical paintings, and chapels with walls of colorful tiles made from Guastavino’s polychrome terra cotta.

The basilica is located at 97 Haywood St. For information on the basilica’s programs and services, log onto saintlawrencebasilica.org.



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munity arts groups including Asheville's Community Theater, Lyric Opera, and Symphony Orchestra fill the calendar year-round with concerts and performances at affordable prices.

More than a hundred sustainable family farms, greenhouses, and orchards in western North Carolina and the southern Appalachian Mountains provide fresh organic fruits and vegetables, natural corn-fed beef, and free-range



Bruce, a vendor at the Western North Carolina Farmers Market in Asheville, N.C.

Photo by Aaron Leventhal

poultry and eggs to a myriad of tailgate markets and more than a hundred independently owned and operated restaurants in the Asheville area. In recent years, many celebrated restaurateurs and chefs have moved here to offer an astonishing variety of cuisines that elevate dining in Asheville to an art form. Among my favorites are Mayfel's for authentic Louisiana specialties, Mela Indian Restaurant with a daily all-you-can-eat lunch buffet, Doc Chey's Noodle House for Thai dishes, Laughing Seed Cafe for exotic vegetarian food from around the world, and Luella's Barbecue for the best ribs in town. For a complete listing of Asheville independent restaurants (AIR), log on to www.AIRAsheville.org.

Begin any visit with an informative, 90-minute trip on Asheville Trolley Tours (888- 667-3600). You can hop on and off the trolley at any of eight popular locations along the way. One of the stops, the Asheville Visitors Center (36 Montford Ave., Exit 4C off I-240) has a hospitable staff and tons of tourist information. Visit www.ExploreAsheville.com or call (800) 257-1300.

I stayed at Asheville Vacation Villas (800-733-3211) in one of 30 furnished cabins in a wooded area with access to the Crowne Plaza Resort's outdoor swimming pool, golf course, tennis courts, fitness center, restaurant, and bar. Also recommended is the 1891 Cedar Crest Victorian Inn (800-252-0310), perched on a hilltop across from the entrance of the Biltmore Estate.

The intimate historic inn has a croquet court, wireless internet, and three-course gourmet breakfast. Grey Beard Realty (888-228-8008) manages more than 200 rental locations in the area.

Columbus-based travel writer Aaron Leventhal is publisher of High Street Neighborhoods, log on to HighStreet-Moneysavers.com to enter a drawing to win one of two great Asheville vacation packages.

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