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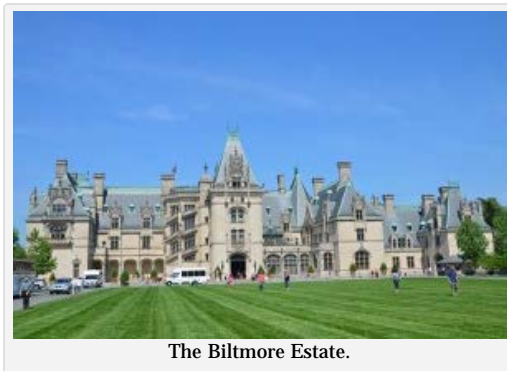
In 1876, author Frances Tiernan wrote a book called "The Land of the Sky." Located between the soaring Smoky Mountains and the Blue Ridge Mountains, this moniker was adopted as Asheville, North Carolina's nickname and is still used today.

Our first visit to The Land of the Sky was actually a happy accident. On our drive from Lexington, Kentucky to Savannah, Georgia, we found a place about halfway in between to stop at a small city in North Carolina, and that just so happened to be Asheville. It was a serendipitous event that introduced us to this lovely, kitschy, fascinating little town that often draws visitors back for return visits. It quickly became obvious that this was a place we too would return to again and again.

Where to stay in Asheville?

After our initial visit, we have returned to Asheville two more times so let me tell you about the three equally wonderful but totally diverse locations where we have stayed.

1. The [Hilton Biltmore Park](#), a gorgeous, modern hotel, is located in the middle of Biltmore Park Town Square, a charming little shopping area with plenty of shops and restaurants just a few steps from the hotel entrance. There is even a movie theater located right beside the hotel. It's also just a short distance from the Blue Ridge Parkway, a scenic byway in the area, downtown Asheville, and the



The Biltmore Estate.

Biltmore Estate, so it's truly an ideal location. This four diamond, LEED-certified, luxury hotel is a luxurious retreat during your stay in Asheville. We especially enjoyed the fact that the hotel has a large parking garage adjoining it where parking is free – a very nice amenity – and they even offer valet parking as well. The hotel has a fitness center, indoor pool, complimentary Internet access and a wonderful restaurant called Roux. The guest rooms have the famous Hilton Serenity beds, large flat screen televisions, and attractive decor. One of the most surprising things about this particular Hilton to us is that pets are allowed and we saw plenty of people with their well-behaved dogs on leashes. Asheville is very pet-friendly and we saw dogs all over town, most especially on the terraces of the restaurants downtown. This is a great place to visit if you like to travel with your pet and the Hilton is a great choice to a place to stay with your canine buddy.

2. On our next visit, we

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The Grove Park Inn.

discovered the wonderful and truly unique [Grove Park Inn](#). We both fell in love with this historic and gorgeous place. Opened in 1912, the hotel is built of huge granite stones which were quarried locally and has an expansive lobby filled with rocking chairs situated before one of the largest fireplaces I have ever seen. The lobby opens onto a dining terrace with a view of

the sweeping vista of mountains and forests, along with the city in the background that is absolutely incredible. With truly luxurious amenities like a Keurig coffeemaker and Bose radios in each room, the Grove Park Inn also has a luxury spa, golf course, both an indoor and outdoor pool and plenty of shopping and dining choices. The quirkiest thing about the hotel is, because it is situated on a mountain, you take an elevator down to your room instead of up and, believe me; this took some getting used to! We were in one of the Property View rooms, which are located in the contemporary wings and in the historic Main Inn. These rooms overlook the lovely Spa gardens and the historic courtyard. In addition to the historic 18 hole golf course, the hotel also had a 50,000 square foot fitness center which offers fitness classes, personal training, racquet ball, tennis, an indoor pool and even some great kid's programs and camps.

The Grove Park Inn is also home to the Nantahala Outdoor Center, which an incredible array of outdoor activities in the area. Named "One of the Best Outfitters on Earth" by National Geographic, the Nantahala Outdoor Center at The Grove Park Inn offers whitewater river rafting, kayak and canoe trips, as well mountain biking, hiking, climbing and fishing adventures. You can also enjoy guided hikes, fly fishing and horseback riding in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park or zip line through the forest on an exciting canopy tour.

Although we didn't have time for a spa visit on this trip, the Spa at the Grove Park Inn is truly incredible and is one of the top 5 hotel spas in the country, according to Travel+Leisure Magazine. You actually descend into what seems like an underground cavern, with soothing music and cascading waterfalls – it's really beautiful. With 43,000 square feet of relaxation space, it's one of the largest spas I have seen and I was impressed with the wide variety of treatments which were available. The hotel even has a small shopping area off the lobby with a wide variety of interesting little shops.

3. The [Reynolds Mansion Bed and Breakfast Inn](#) is truly one of the classiest places we have ever stayed. When we came down to breakfast, we experienced a lovely dining room table completely set with china, silver, and beautiful fresh flowers. This could have been a little intimidating, especially combined with the incredible, opulent furnishings of this beautiful mansion but it wasn't at all, because of the incomparably gracious and friendly innkeeper, Billy



Breakfast at the Reynolds Mansion Bed and Breakfast.

Sanders. The evening before, we pulled into the driveway of this lovely mansion, tucked away in the Blue Ridge mountains of Asheville, North Carolina away from the frenzy of the tourists visiting the Biltmore Estate and the busy, kitschy downtown area with street musicians, restaurants with patios filled with visitors and their friendly dogs, and that incomparable arts and crafts vibe that makes up this town.

The Reynolds Mansion Bed and Breakfast has so much history. you can spend hours just roaming around, looking at all the paintings and the furniture which has been carefully chosen to highlight each room. Built in 1847 by Daniel Reynolds and now listed on the

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National Register of Historic Places, the mansion is considered one of the best and most original interpretations of Colonial Revival architecture in Western North Carolina and has ties to Senator Robert Rice Reynolds, Evelyn Walsh McLean and the Hope Diamond. Billy Sanders, along with Michael Griffith, have worked hard to return the mansion to some of its original, splendid beginnings. The Grand Dining Room is capable of seating up to twenty-six and there is also a beautifully decorated library and parlor which open onto the expansive front porches which provide a fabulous view of the area.



Asheville street musicians.

Tripadvisor ranks this B & B as the #2 location in the United States and, incredibly (but not surprisingly) #12 in the entire world and it was definitely #1 with us. Billy showed us around the place and we were just amazed at all the gorgeous furnishings which somehow combined to make the place not only elegant but comfortable as well. Each of guest rooms is lovelier than the last, all beautifully furnished and comfortable with private bathrooms, flat screen televisions and some even

have extras like fireplaces. We were in the Claudette room which has a queen bed, an additional single bed, and a fireplace which would be great in the winter. This room is directly off the upper porch which features a great view of the surrounding mountains. A little sitting area with a flat screen television made the suite a perfect place to relax. We spent our entire tour just amazed at what a wonderful and hospitable place the Reynolds Mansion truly is. Soft drinks, ice, and wine are available in a little room located right off the dining room and we helped ourselves to some ice and drinks later that evening, appreciating this nice gesture. Directly across from the house is the renovated Carriage House which has four large suites and there is also a Cottage overlooking the swimming pool which has two luxury suites with full kitchens. The swimming pool is a surprising extra at a bed and breakfast; we have only seen a pool at one other location. The next morning we enjoyed our breakfast of fresh fruit, a delicious pastry, a full plate of sausage, eggs, and a breakfast wrap and didn't need to eat again for a long time!

Where to eat in Asheville?

Asheville is rapidly becoming a culinary destination and there are plenty of choices of great, local restaurants many of which use locally sourced ingredients. Here are three particularly nice places where we have eaten.

1. **Roux** is the delightful gourmet restaurant located inside the Hilton Biltmore Park, and they offer breakfast, lunch and dinner. Roux uses as much local food as possible and has an innovative menu which features southern comfort food presented in a lovely and delicious manner. During our stay at the hotel, we enjoyed an amazing dinner here. We had great customer service, with our waiter cheerfully recommending his favorites from the menu, which were all



Delicious salmon at Roux.

excellent choices. I'm a big fan of ordering local food, so our first choice was the "Local Board" which had three delicious cheeses from local farms and was absolutely lovely and scrumptious. Next, it was time for the entrée and, after much debate, I decided on the salmon. I'm always hesitant about ordering salmon as it can be absolutely delicious if it prepared correctly and a dry, miserable mess if it is not. Luckily, Roux knows all about preparing salmon correctly. At this point, we were absolutely stuffed and no business ordering dessert but our kind server informed us that we absolutely must try their bread pudding as it was completely wonderful in every way. This may very well be the best advice

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we received on our entire trip, because it was wonderful, along with everything else we enjoyed that evening.



The Stable Café.

2. When you visit the Biltmore Estate, there's an area with little shops and restaurants near the mansion and we enjoyed sandwiches at the [Stable Café](#). Located in the original, 19th century stables for the mansion, it's even set up with booths in the original stalls! Of course, it's been completely renovated and you would never know you are eating where the Vanderbilt thoroughbreds used to reside. Try the delicious chicken

salad sandwiches when you are ready for a break from touring. The chef specializes in house-made items and using the local estate wood for an extensive menu of smoked meats.

3. The famous [Tupelo Honey Café](#) is a place where you simply have to stop for a meal. They have two locations but the one in town is the best place to sit on the patio and soak in the kitschy, slightly hippie, laid-back vibe that is downtown Asheville. Comprised of students from UNC Asheville, tourists, local residents, and plenty of friendly dogs (which are welcome everywhere), there's lots to see here from the patio of the café. Everything on the menu is good but the biscuits are so good, they might make you plan another trip to Asheville.

What to do in Asheville?

There's plenty to do in Asheville and you will find yourself returning again and again to try those activities you missed! Just strolling around town checking out the shops and people watching is a perfectly viable way to spend the afternoon, but try these activities as well.

1. There is pretty much time for a spa visit on any trip (at least this is my philosophy) and one of the best things we did at the Hilton Biltmore Place was pay visit the [Sensibilities Spa](#) for an afternoon. Enter the door of the spa, discreetly tucked away beside the lobby of the Hilton and you smell that fabulous and relaxing spa smell. Hushed and quite lovely, this relaxing place is the perfect way to spend an afternoon. I had a massage and a facial and could have cheerfully spent the entire day in this quiet, idyllic place. At one point later in the week during our travels, I was looking at myself in a mirror in the bright sunlight, marveling at how great this weather was for my face when I suddenly realized the facial might have had something to do with it! So, check out the Sensibilities spa and the European facial!

2. We spent an entire day (and you could easily spend more) at the [Biltmore Estate](#) and you absolutely cannot go to Asheville without doing this. You can purchase your tickets there or online and they include not only a tour of the mansion, but also the gardens and a tour at wine tasting at the Winery. This huge estate is absolutely gorgeous and



Biltmore Estate gardens.

extremely impressive. It's hard to believe this behemoth was, at one time, a completely private residence. We were immediately impressed as we entered through some gorgeous gates, then wound our way through acres and acres of lush fields and beautiful forests (there are actually an incredible 8,000 acres) before finally arriving at the house which is actually more like a palace than a house. George Vanderbilt's 250 room mansion is just as impressive today as it was when it was first built back in 1895. Your tour includes an audio portion so be sure to put on the headphones and listen to the fascinating history of this place. You just can't believe the amount of time and money that went into making this place truly a showplace. You are going to want to spend some time walking around the incredible

gardens. Everywhere you turn, there are beautiful, shaded walks, benches, fountains and incredible flowers.



Folk dancers in Asheville.

3. One of the best ways to see Asheville is with a [Grayline Trolley Tours of Asheville](#). Tickets are available at the visitor center, the trolleys run every half hour, and your ticket is good for two days of hop on/hop off touring – our favorite way to see a destination! We were amazed to see so many beautiful homes throughout Asheville and learn all about the history of this wonderful mountain location.

Wherever you stay, whatever you eat, and whatever you do, I guarantee you will enjoy a visit to this charming mountain town. Like us, you will find yourself returning again and again – even if it is not on the way to your next destination!

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For twenty years, I worked as a librarian in an elementary school but finally decided to get serious about travel writing and devote all my time to it. Now, I travel the world and write all about it. I can't imagine a more fabulous or fulfilling job. I write a regular travel column for two regional, Central Kentucky magazines and contribute regularly to other magazines and online travel sites, such as [The SavvyGal](#), [A Luxury Travel Blog](#) and

[The Vacation Gals](#). I'm an avid reader and stay active with Yoga, Pilates and Zumba classes. My favorite place in the whole world is a beach - any beach. I have been married for 34 years and my husband is my favorite travel companion. I also rely on him for his excellent photography skills. We have two grown children and the best grandson in the world. Slowly but surely, we are visiting all the places we have dreamed about. Hopefully, the next one will be the one you want to read about!

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