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# North America's Downton Abbey: The Biltmore Estate

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7 May 2013



Love *Downton Abbey*? Want to experience the equivalent on this side of the pond? Take a tour of the Vanderbilt Estate, one of the most luxurious properties in North America.



STORY BY:  
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It's likely that PBS has been absolutely astonished by the popularity of the Masterpiece mega-hit *Downton Abbey* about the aristocratic Crawley family, their estate and the battalion of servants that run it. Who would have imagined the entire world would fall in love with this early 20th century upstairs-downstairs drama?

But the real star of this show is Downton Abbey itself, the lush, gorgeously furnished, behemoth of a house. Highclere Castle in Hampshire is the stand-in for Downton Abbey's outside and upstairs. Just as the Crawleys sought an infusion of funds to keep Downton running, the show's popularity has created an infusion of tourism funds for Highclere Castle, with tours that let fans imagine how their lives might be different if they had been born a Crawley.

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Credit: Jan Ross

But if you don't have the time, or the money, to jet off to jolly old England, don't worry, we have our very own version of Downton Abbey on this side of the pond, hidden away in the mountains of North Carolina, in the lovely town of Asheville.

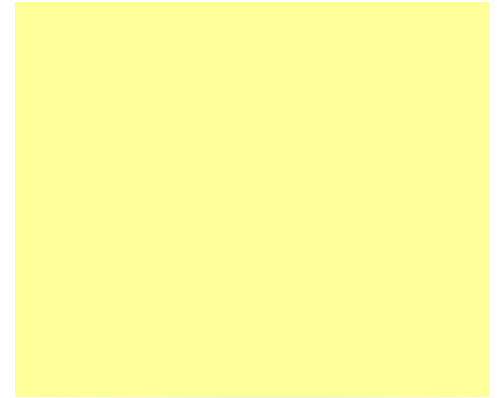
The Biltmore estate is a tourist attraction today but it was once the Vanderbilt family's home. The fabulous mansion was built by George Washington Vanderbilt II between 1889 and 1895 and is the largest privately owned house in the United States—it's 178,926 square feet and has 250 rooms.

Vanderbilt visited Asheville as a boy and loved the scenery and climate so much that he decided to create a summer home in the area. This country estate, with huge and lovely gardens, became the opulent Biltmore estate. The estate included its own village for all the workers and even a church. Both still stand today. Biltmore Village is a charming area with little shops and restaurants and the Cathedral of All Souls church.



Credit: Jan Ross

Vanderbilt employed the famous landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, famous for designing Central Park in New York, to create the gardens for the estate. Beyond the gardens, Vanderbilt was determined to leave the natural woodlands and some agricultural lands with a rustic three-mile approach road passing through to create the illusion of a pastoral setting. The very first forestry education program in the United States, the Biltmore Forest School, was established on the estate. After Vanderbilt's death, part of the estate was sold off to the federal government so the land would remain unaltered and is now part of the



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Pisgah National Forest.

Today the estate is a mere 8,000 acres and is controlled and run by descendants of Vanderbilt. During the Great Depression the family opened the house to the public for tours, but continued to live there until 1956 when the house was permanently opened to the public as a privately owned house museum.

With a 70,000-gallon indoor swimming pool, a bowling alley, two-storey library, lovely furnishings and artwork, as well as innovations of the time such as elevators, forced-air heating, fire alarms and an intercom system, Biltmore Estate is truly an incredible place to visit.



Credit: Jan Ross

Be sure to take the audio tour, which includes a history of the Vanderbilt family as well as this proud and elegant home. And stop to enjoy lunch in one of the Stable Café's renovated horse stalls. You can also spend hours exploring the 75 acres of gardens and the winery. And to complete the experience, plan to stay at the Inn on Biltmore Estate, a AAA, four-diamond 213-room hotel.

The Biltmore is a major tourist attraction for North Carolina, with over one million visitors a year from all over the world. These days, many of them are probably huge fans of *Downton Abbey*.

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## JAN ROSS



After a lifetime of travel, Jan Ross can pack a bag and hit the road with very little notice, although she will always have a little black dress and some snazzy shoes in there. She loves to travel with her husband of more than 35 years as he is a great photographer and she is often way too busy having fun to think about taking pictures. Active travel or relaxing, she is up for it all!

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