



Asheville's dining scene is just one reason to visit downtown.

# A Breath of Fresh Air

A visit to this North Carolina mountain retreat could lead to something more lasting.

BY KRISTEN MANIERI

## YOU'LL HEAR IT FROM LOCAL ARTISTS AND STREET MUSICIANS,

even from restaurant owners in Asheville, N.C.—the same story of the vacation they spent here that turned into a relocation. A hip little city tucked into the Blue Ridge Mountains, Asheville is filled with transplants who fell under its spell, and it only takes a few days to discover why. With a thriving farm-to-fork food culture, an endless list of outdoor adventures, and a fresh, mountain air that I wish could be bottled like the area's renowned craft beer, Asheville represents paradise for those in search of something real and pure. Plus, it offers something we Central Floridians long for but will never find in our backyard: seasons, each with its own kaleidoscope of color. The fact that summer temperatures rarely exceed 82 degrees pretty much seals the deal for me.

Asheville's downtown is teeming with great restaurants, friendly pubs, funky boutiques and coffee shops, while just a few miles away countless hiking trails offer infinite solitude and, if the timing is right, views of spectacular autumn colors. Eat, see and breathe. But be careful, you might not want to leave.



Autumn brings out the best in Asheville.

## What to Do

While the late George Vanderbilt's 8,000-acre **Biltmore Estate** (biltmore.com), with its 250-room mansion completed in 1895, has earned its place as a visitor staple, it's just one of many fabulous diversions to experience in this mountain town. Take in a view of the city's skyline while zip lining over treetops with **Wildwater's Asheville Zipline Canopy Adventures** (wildwater rafting.com). The outdoor adventure company also offers a more mountainous zip line course an hour away in Hartford, Tenn., along with a thrilling whitewater rafting excursion down the Pigeon River. Asheville's hiking trails shouldn't escape your itinerary, either. Fill up your picnic basket at the **Asheville City Market** (asapconnections.org/citymarket.html), open Saturday mornings through mid-December, then tackle a landscape so pristine that producers of *The Hunger Games* saw fit to film here. An excellent compilation of hikes can be found at [romanticasheville.com/hiking.html](http://romanticasheville.com/hiking.html). Not a hiker? Opt instead for a drive along the **Blue Ridge Parkway** (blueridgeparkway.org) and make a stop at one of its numerous roadside overlooks. Afterward, quench your thirst at **Pisgah Brewing Company** (pisgahbrewing.com), the area's only organic brewery located 10 miles east in Black Mountain, N.C.



The author takes in the view after hiking Lookout Trail in Montreat, east of Asheville.

DOWNTOWN, FALL FOLIAGE: ASHEVILLE CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU; MOUNTAINS: MARC MANIERI



## Where to Eat

For a city of less than 100,000, Asheville is big as a dining destination, with 250 independent restaurants and 17 farmers' markets. You can wander into any downtown eatery and be assured a great meal, but the favorites are **Tupelo Honey Café** (tupelohoneycafe.com) and **Early Girl Eatery** (earlygirleatery.com). Tupelo's menu pays homage to Southern fare, with fried green tomatoes and goat cheese grits, while Early Girl is well-known for its Sunday brunch that features the area's best omelets and multigrain pancakes. At **River Arts District** (riverartsdistrict.com), a west Asheville art studio hub, you'll find **White Duck Taco Shop** (above; whiteducktacoshop.com), a quick-food joint with soft tacos crafted with atypical flavor combinations such as jerk chicken or Bangkok shrimp, best enjoyed with white or red sangria.

## Where to Stay

There are loads of great inns and hotels in or near downtown, but if you're coming for a mountain vacation, you might as well stay in the mountains. The **Village of Cheshire** (below; villageofcheshire.com), located 20 minutes from downtown Asheville in Black Mountain, has exactly the sort of luxury log cabin escape visitors crave, with prices at \$150-\$350 per night. Besides its seven fully equipped cabins and tree houses, most decked out with gigantic beds next to wood-burning fireplaces, Cheshire also boasts a gourmet market, breakfast diner and a wonderful little bistro called **The Blackbird** (theblackbirdrestaurant.com) with a fanatically local-focused menu of Carolina comfort food and freshly caught fish from nearby streams and rivers. It's just steps from the cabins, making it all the more inviting.



Florida Wine, you're going to love it!

Explore our Wineries... Visit [www.TryFloridaWine.com](http://www.TryFloridaWine.com)

WHITE DUCK TACO SHOP: KRISTEN MANIERI; CHESHIRE CABIN: KEVIN MEECHAN

**Getting There** You can drive about 10 hours from Orlando or fly direct from Sanford International Airport on **Allegiant Air** (allegiantair.com) into Asheville Regional Airport (AVL), located about 17 miles from downtown. Flights are typically inexpensive.