

Much more than country music

Nashville and Asheville ideal destinations for tourists seeking an eclectic mix

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LYNN HADRALL

Who knew you could drive one day to see NHL hockey, the Parthenon, suffragettes and art deco buildings, and take a side trip to visit America's biggest private home?

We were searching for a winter vacation to combine history, culture and sports. We found it in a surprising place – the home of country and western music. Lonely Planet calls Nashville, Tenn., “one of the trendiest small cities in the east.” We found it has a funky urban vibe that goes well beyond cowboy boots and hurtin’ songs. One state over, Asheville, N.C., gets top billing from Lonely Planet and *Afar Magazine*.

It was 5 C when we left Kitchener on a winter's day at 7 a.m. and 27 C when we drove into Nashville at 7:30 p.m. We were within walking distance of the Bridgestone Arena and an old industrial area known as The Gulch.

The Barista Parlor coffee shop showcases Nashville's urban renewal. We discovered it while exploring The Gulch. We walked by an old garage with a pickup truck parked outside and watched two fashionable women hunt for an entrance.

Curious, we followed and discovered a



A monument in Nashville honouring the women's suffragette movement.

cool café with big-city prices to match. The airy interior is furnished with vintage motorcycles, retro T-shirts and merchandise, and garage doors that open on warm days. We enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere, the food and the music playing on vinyl, and had a lovely conversation with an Indianapolis couple who visit Nashville often. Like us, they had discovered a city in transformation.

We made a sweet discovery in an industrial building nearby. Colt's Chocolates is a dessert store owned by Mackenzie Colt, former cast member on the *Hee Haw* television show. Clerks let you sample

home-made goodies that make great gifts if you can resist eating them. The staff tell the story of how Colt, a former songwriter, parlayed her love of cooking into a career making goodies. I liked Butter Grahams the most, followed by Bella Butter Bark.

In established areas of the Gulch you'll find upscale restaurants, fancy eateries, and the Thompson, a luxury boutique hotel. It has a restaurant and rooftop bar where you can relax with a drink or take in the sights even if you're not staying there.

We visited in part to see NHL hockey Nashville-style. Or as they call it, Smashville. This was when the Predators were on their run to the 2017 Stanley Cup final. We watched Nashville play the Edmonton Oilers and cheered as Oilers star Connor McDavid battled Predators stars Mike Fisher and P.K. Subban.

Tickets were reasonably priced for seats with a good view. Prices on the official team website ran as low as US\$33. We chose US\$67 centre-ice seats in an upper tier. We met Predator fans and also people like us proudly wearing Canadian and Oilers sweaters.

The arena was buoyant inside and out. The festive mood started outside on a warm afternoon with music and a tailgate vibe. Intermissions featured a live performance by Craig Wayne Boyd, winner of “The Voice” television show. The arena is newer than some NHL barns, and it was great to be sur-

OPPOSITE PAGE: At the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, we found fascinating exhibits but the art deco architecture stole the show.

rounded by fans who are new to “ice” hockey yet already passionate about it.

The next day, enjoying blackened shrimp tacos and onion soup at the City Fire restaurant, we saw an NHL game playing in the bar. My husband glanced at the big screen to see the smiling face of Tanner Pearson, who we know from his minor hockey days in Kitchener. He had just scored his 20th goal of the season with the Los Angeles Kings. Small world.

While walking back from the Bridgestone Arena, we discovered a gem: the Frist Center for the Visual Arts. A large rose sculpture drew our attention to the extraordinary art deco architecture of the former post office, renovated to its original glory. It's now run as a non-profit art space, housing rotating exhibitions.

The art displays were fascinating, but it was the architecture and restoration that left a lasting impression. Built from 1933 to 1934, the building features high ceilings, cast aluminum doors, original stone work, and intricate detailing and staircases. Even the washrooms are done in art deco style. A beautiful gift shop has everything from posters and ceramics to jewelry from local artisans.

You can find the same attention to detail and celebration of history at the nearby Union Station Hotel. A walk through the elegant lobby transports you to a time when everyone dressed up to go on a train.

After exploring sights near our hotel, we went to a park farther afield, curious to see Nashville's full-scale replica of the Greek Parthenon, a temple dedicated to Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Originally constructed in 1897 as a centerpiece for the Tennessee Centennial Exposition, it was a nod to a city that some considered “the Athens of the South.” The 1897 replica was not meant to be permanent. It was such a hit that it remained in place and was permanently rebuilt in the 1920s. It features a re-creation of the Athena statue and houses an art museum and gift shop.

Nearby, an impressive monument unveiled in 2016 honours the women's suffragette



movement. In 1914 Nashville women marched to the park to demand the right to vote. They got it in 1920. The sculpture captures their fiery determination, featuring five women marching behind a banner that reads “votes for women.” It reminded me of the Famous Five monument on Parliament Hill. I took a selfie with those larger-than-life women.

Our next stop was historic Germantown, an area in north Nashville known as the city's first suburb. It's being transformed; historic homes mix with new eateries and retail stores. Most stores were closed when we visited on a Monday, but the owner of the Pieces boutique happily opened when she saw us admiring window displays.

Germantown hosts an annual Oktoberfest, a four-day celebration with a parade, live music, food and beer. It's billed as the “second largest Oktoberfest in North America.”

We couldn't leave Nashville without

sampling country music heritage. A stroll down bustling lower Broadway Street at night provides live music ranging from blues and bluegrass to rock and even pop. Many performers rely on customers' tips for their evening's pay. Some bars pass around buckets or have a tips jar on stage. There's a lot of talent on display.

The Grand Ole Opry offers backstage tours and packages that include a 90-minute evening performance. Our guide regaled us with tales of visiting music stars. He encouraged guests to stand on stage and view the theatre from that vantage point. He spoke about the television drama “Nashville,” which shoots locally.

While the Opry tour was interesting, the evening performance we attended felt tired. We might have been better to visit Ryman Auditorium instead. The Ryman in the heart of downtown Nashville is considered “the birthplace of country music.” While we were there it featured the Little Big Town



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: You need a full day to explore the Biltmore Estate near Asheville, N.C., with its triple fireplace in the banquet hall, and glass-roofed garden room.

band with guests Sam Hunt and Chris Stapleton.

Fans of the “Nashville” television series know it features the famous Bluebird Café. You'll find it in an unremarkable strip mall next to a jewelry repair store and hair salon. The café was closed for a private event when we visited, but walking around the area led us to the lovely, upscale Green Hills shopping district.

It's a short street filled with clothing stores, a Whole Foods outlet and a lot of charm. Customers were treated to free mimosas, champagne, fresh cookies and Mardi Gras King cake at various stores. Not a bad way to shop.

After enjoying Nashville's bustle, we headed southeast for the slower pace in Asheville, N.C. It's about a five-hour drive. There are interesting hotels in the city, but we stayed near a town called Sylva with a view of the Blue Ridge Mountains. From there we commuted to the 3,200-hectare Biltmore Estate, billed as the largest privately owned home in the U.S.

You need a full day to explore this chateau-style 250-room residence with 45 bathrooms, 65 fireplaces and three kitchens. It was built over six years by George W. Vanderbilt, one of America's wealthiest men. The home officially opened Christmas Eve, 1895, and the family opened it to the public in 1930 as a way to help preserve the estate and increase tourism during the Depression. There are no Vanderbilts living there anymore, but it remains a family business, with the fourth and fifth generations involved in daily operations.

In his introduction to the book “Biltmore: An American Masterpiece,” Bill Cecil Jr. writes that although he never knew his great-grandfather, he knows that the vision for Biltmore “was one of a self-sufficient



Nashville's full-scale replica of the Greek Parthenon.

estate, where a home equipped with cutting-edge technology would stand at the centre of a carefully designed working farm, beautiful park, and woods.”

That jaw-dropping image greeted us when we arrived for a 9 a.m. guided tour of the house, followed by a 1 p.m. motor tour of the grounds. Guides provide background and anecdotes about the family and estate. Our bus guide explained that the long drive from the main road is meant to awe guests when they emerge from the country setting to see the dreamy castle-like home.

There's definitely a “Downton Abbey” feel to it all. Rooms and furnishings are elaborate. Innovations of the era included an indoor pool, gymnasium, and bowling lanes that required a servant to return balls and reset pins. The servants lived on site and worked with the latest kitchen and laundry devices.

The exterior gardens and trails provide a chance to wander in a natural setting or view the many cultivated gardens. The Azalea Garden was the pride and joy of Canadian horticulturist Chauncey Beadle, who trained at the Ontario Agricultural College, now the University of Guelph. Beadle travelled the world in search of native specimens to plant at Biltmore. He and his friends became known as the Azalea Hunters. Beadle remained at Biltmore until his death.

After a tour of the home and gardens, you can taste wines at the nearby Antler Hill Village and Winery. George Vanderbilt travelled extensively and collected fine

wines. His descendants added the estate winery in 1985. Lovely labels on local wines make for great gifts.

There are options to stay onsite at the hotel, inn or cottage. The adorable English-style cottage has two bedrooms, two baths and will cost you about US\$1,700 a night.

Asheville is a university town, like Nashville. They both have that youthful energy and it's clear there's an urban rebirth under way. You can see that up close on a walking tour called the Asheville Urban Trail. Download a map from exploreasheville.com. The trail covers 2.7 kilometres and the guide offers five eras to explore: the frontier period (1784-1880); the gilded age (1880-1930); the times of Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938); the era of civic pride; and the age of diversity. Symbols carved into sidewalks help you navigate.

Asheville has stunning examples of art deco architecture. The City Hall was built in that style in the 1920s while the County Courthouse beside it was built in a more classic style. We wandered into both buildings and were most impressed with City Hall.

Some architectural gems in the downtown core have been repurposed. The Kress building sells works by local artisans. The Grove Arcade, an indoor shopping

arcade of the 1920s, is home to various shops. The 1920s grandeur of the S & W Cafeteria is evident from the outside, but it was in need of a new tenant when we visited.

There are significant Civil War monuments in that area of the state. Various groups have recently called for their removal. The Vance Memorial in the heart of Asheville pays tribute to Zebulon Baird Vance, a Confederate officer during the American Civil War and a governor of North Carolina. Bronze turkeys and pigs trotting past the monument are a tribute to ancient trading paths and the animals destined for market.

The Green Sage Café has delicious offerings for meat eaters and vegetarians. I enjoyed beets wrapped in kale leaf with a side of sweet potato chips. My husband opted for the Spicy Jack Burger with Slaw. The tiny but popular Old Europe café is a great place to relax with a chai tea, coffee or hot cocoa. Once refuelled, you should check out the funky independent boutiques. Embellish, on Broadway Street, features interesting jewelry.

We spent our last hours in rural Sylva, where a beautifully renovated library on a hill dominates the streetscape. The library is a former courthouse with a Confederate soldier statue in front. The statue honouring “our heroes of the confederacy,” has been the backdrop for recent news reports. Time will tell if it remains in place.

The modern library maintains its historic feel with charming windows of stained glass and local displays.

Norma Clayton, a genealogist, introduced us to local historian Bill Crawford who told us the story of Little Canada, located nearby. It got the name from fur traders who ventured south.

Our time in the south was over for now. We left the warmth of Nashville and Asheville after seeing history, urban renewal, and potential for future growth. These cities deserve to be top destinations for tourists seeking an eclectic mix. And who can resist a vacation itinerary that rhymes like Nashville/Ashville? 

IF YOU GO

Websites to help you plan your trip
Exploreasheville.com
Fristcenter.org, Biltmore.com
Visitmusiccity.com, NHL.com



Merge home automation with bathroom luxury.

Riobel's electronic shower system - the Genius Shower™ - blends in perfectly with all bathroom decors thanks to its versatile design. This high-tech shower system is sure to satisfy all expectations. Simple and user-friendly, its digital keypad is so easy to handle that everyone in the family will be able to use it, regardless of age or dexterity. You can activate one or two components simultaneously. Just push the buttons and relax. Thanks to its highly sophisticated temperature sensor, the Genius Shower™ easily lets you set the water temperature you want. No more freezing or scalding water!

Easy to install!

Easy-to-use Keypad!

Sophisticated Temperature Sensor!



Schweitzer's
Plumbing Centre

1768 Erbs Rd. W. St. Agatha

519-747-1819

www.schweitzers.ca

