

Unsung Heroes

Look past the usual suspects and you'll find a world of history, culture and diversity in North Carolina's smaller towns.

By Davina van Buren

EVEN PEOPLE WHO have never been to North Carolina can usually name a few of its major cities: Charlotte, which is home to the NFL's Carolina Panthers; Raleigh, the state capital, and Asheville, a once-sleepy mountain mecca launched to the bucket list travel status after the Obamas vacationed there in 2010.

But don't sleep on North Carolina's lesser-known cities. From the Blue Ridge mountains to the Atlantic Ocean, the state can be traversed in just seven hours. While the center of the state may not offer the same dramatic peak and beach views as those to the east and west, it is chock full of its own treasures. are three underrated group travel destinations in the Tarheel State.

FAYETTEVILLE

Best known as home to Fort Bragg Army base (the world's largest military installation by population), Fayetteville is beloved by planners due to its accessibility. It's the state's largest city on Interstate 95, the main north-south thoroughfare on the East Coast.

The Crown Complex is the town's main convention center, but several other versatile meeting spaces are available, too. Cape Fear Botanical Garden, a 77-acre oasis, can host a variety of events in smaller meeting rooms, the 6,800 sq.-ft. Orangery or under a tent on the Great Lawn; and the Metropolitan Ballroom sits in the heart of downtown Fayetteville on a corner overlooking The Market House, one of the state's 50 National Landmarks.

Fort Bragg is home to the 82nd Airborne Division, which can deploy anywhere in the world within 18 hours. During down time, visitors can tour the 82nd Airborne Division War Memorial Museum, JFK Special Warfare Museum or view monuments dedicated to fallen military heroes. The CVB can also help plan a meal with the troops, a visit with paratroopers at a drop zone, or for the truly brave, a skydive with the All Veterans Group Parachute Team.

Thanks to its military community, Fayetteville is both inherently patriotic and diverse, the latter of which can be seen in the cuisine. Foodies can follow



Cape Fear
Botanical
Garden

the International Cuisine Trail to find noteworthy locally owned international eateries. Families can find plenty to do while you're at a meeting. Kids will enjoy the Fascinate-U Children's Museum, trampoline parks and more, while adults can try their hands at axe-throwing or take in a round of golf at nearby Pinehurst Country Club.

GREENSBORO

If you visit in summer, you might think Greensboro is named for the emerald tree canopy and mature trees that grace its stately old neighborhoods. In fact, it's named for General Nathanael Greene, who led American forces in the Battle of Guilford Courthouse during the Revolutionary War. It is home to several four-year colleges and universities, attracting a diverse and educated demographic and is often referred to as "Tournament Town" because of its wealth of athletic venues—fields,

courts, stadiums and a state-of-the-art aquatic center. In recent years, the city hosted the men's and women's ACC basketball tournaments, the PGA Wyndham Championship and the U.S. Figure Skating Championships.

The Greensboro Coliseum Complex is the town's premier meeting space, hosting more than 1,100 events per year. Its 167,000-sq.-ft. Special Events Center includes three exhibition halls, a 5,000-seat mini-arena and eight meeting rooms.

Just down the road lies Koury Convention Center. With 250,000 square feet of versatile space, it can accommodate meetings of 20 to 3,000 guests. The adjacent Sheraton in sports sleek rooms with ergonomic workspaces, rainfall showers, plush amenities and a handful of restaurants and bars. Four Seasons Town Centre, home to more than 200 businesses, can be accessed via a skywalk from the property (no worries if you forget a tie or scarf).



Greensboro Science Center is an aquarium, zoo and museum.



Castle McCulloch is a former gold refinery.

Another great option is Proximity Hotel. When it opened in 2007, it was the nation's first LEED-certified hotel and currently follows more than 70 sustainable practices including solar power, use of natural lighting, reclaimed materials and geothermal energy. This is one of those places that proves "green" can be downright sexy—for creatives and companies whose ethos promotes sustainability, Proximity offers a wealth of inspiration and beauty.

For those who enjoy hitting the links after work, check out Grandover Resort & Spa. The public, PGA facility features two challenging 18-hole courses designed by renowned golf architects David Graham and Gary Panks, and a lavish spa makes this a good choice for retreats that are heavy on leisure time.

Rich in history and diversity, Greensboro was the site of the Woolworth's sit-ins, a series of nonviolent protests led by students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

beginning February 1, 1960. The protests led to integration of dining facilities throughout the South and is considered an iconic event in the civil rights movement. Today, visitors can learn about other pivotal events of the movement at the original site of the Woolworth's sit-ins, which is now the International Civil Rights Center and Museum.

Greensboro Science Center, an all-in-one aquarium, museum and zoo houses everything from penguins to meerkats to dinosaur skeletons. The Great Hall and aquarium are available for evening receptions.

HIGH POINT

High Point is one of North Carolina's most interesting cities, although it rarely gets the admiration it deserves. It's a blue-collar town, as witnessed by the historic train depot and many post-World War II factories and industrial areas around

town—but look closer and you can see glints of old and new money in plain sight, like the sprawling, gated campus of High Point University, the million-dollar homes in the Emerywood neighborhood and the Bentley dealership on Main Street.

High Point is known as North Carolina's "International City," and it's a fitting moniker. Not only does the university attract a large number of foreign students, the International Home Furnishings Market lures buyers and manufacturers from around the globe. High Point attracts 80,000 visitors during these twice-yearly trade shows, nearly doubling the city's size. The nickname is also reflected in a diverse and evolving food scene—many of the city's most popular restaurants are immigrant-owned and of course there is plenty of soul food and North Carolina-style barbecue.

High Point meeting venues do have limited capacity compared to neighboring Greensboro—its largest venue, the High Point Theatre, can accommodate 929 guests—but what they lack in size they make up for in character and Southern charm. Several hotels in town offer the standard business amenities and meeting spaces, but there are also nontraditional facilities like the Medieval-inspired Castle McCulloch, a former gold refinery turned forested oasis complete with a moat and stone tower, and J.H. Adams Inn, the former private residence of the John Hampton Adams family. This elegant mansion—which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places—is the perfect blend of southern living and technological advancements; 31 uniquely-designed guestrooms and attentive service make for an excellent team-bonding retreat.

High Point offers plenty of outdoor activities that may be popular post-COVID-19, particularly during summer. A shady greenway is popular with cyclists, runner and dog-walkers; City Lake Park has everything from mini golf to mini train rides for the kids; and Oak Hollow Festival Park hosts many outdoor celebrations including the annual John Coltrane International Jazz & Blues Festival, which honors the town's most famous resident.

Downtown is currently in the midst of a massive redevelopment as the city shifts emphasis from its manufacturing past to becoming a more modern trade and design center. In 2019, High Point got its own baseball team, the Rockers. If you like quirky roadside attractions, you won't want to miss the world's largest chest-of-drawers, a salute to the city's furniture manufacturing history.