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Roanoke Skyline at night. Photo courtesy of Roanoke Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau

A Star Shines In Virginia's Blue Ridge Valley

Tucked away in scenic southwestern Virginia between the Shenandoah Valley, the Allegheny Mountains and the Blue Ridge Mountains, Roanoke is the perfect marriage of small-town charm and big-city sophistication. With several impressive art and history museums, professional opera and symphony orchestra companies, a plethora of dining options and a thriving downtown, Roanoke is a city that boasts the arts and culture scene usually found in locales twice its size.



Roanoke, incorporated in 1854, takes its name from the Algonquin Indian tribe's word for shell money. Its nickname, Star City of the South, can be attributed to the manmade metal and glass star that sits 1,045 feet above the city atop Mill Mountain. Erected in 1949 for that year's holiday season, the 88.5 foot, red, white and blue neon Mill Mountain Star has remained an icon of Roanoke ever since.

The Blue Ridge Valley region is recognized for its history as one of the great railroad centers of America and while it maintains that identity in many ways, the area, particularly downtown Roanoke, has reinvented itself and now has a bevy of exciting attractions to offer.

Evidence of Roanoke's railway history can be appreciated at the Virginia Museum of Transportation where visitors can climb aboard two of the most advanced steam locomotives in the world and learn first-hand about the history of transportation in Virginia and beyond. The museum is self-guided, and friendly, knowledgeable staff members are always on hand to accompany visitors as they explore. Don't forget to check out the museum's road exhibit and see its great collection of vintage automobiles.

Top Left: H & C Coffee, Photo by Cameron Davidson

Top Right: Hotel Roanoke, Photo courtesy of Roanoke Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau

Above Left: The Roanoke Star, Photo by Cameron Davidson

Above Right: Taubman Museum, Photo by Cameron Davidson

Train aficionados, as well as American art enthusiasts, will want to pay a visit to the O. Winston Link Museum located in the Roanoke Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau. O. Winston Link's black and white photographs dramatically capture the last days of America's steam locomotive culture in the 1950s. The museum holds the world's most extensive collection of Link's photographs and visitors can also view a short, well-researched documentary about the photographer's life and work.

If you're feeling hungry and still waxing nostalgic, a true taste of historic Roanoke can be found in the Regency Room at the elegant Hotel Roanoke. Appropriately nicknamed the Grand Old Lady, the hotel was built in 1882 and recently underwent a multi-million dollar restoration and renovation that updated the facility



without taking away any of its charm. The hotel's Regency Room is an award-winning restaurant that offers an elaborate lunch and dinner buffets as well as a la carte dishes. Be sure to sample the Spoonbread and the Peanut Soup, two dishes for which the Regency Room is renowned. After lunch, be sure to take a stroll around the hotel and revel in its beauty.

Now would be a great time to head into the 21st century with a visit to the Taubman Museum of Art. Completed in 2008, the eye-catching glass and metal structure's bold design reflects the surrounding mountain range and inside you'll find an impressive collection of mostly contemporary American art.

Currently, visitors can view the works of Sally Mann, Robert Riggs, Howard Finster and Judith Lieber, among others. There is also an amazing exhibit (through January 19, 2013) of one family's extensive collection of objects from the House of Fabergé. Past exhibits include a recent celebration of Depression-era photographer Dorothea Lange and an upcoming exhibit will feature the visual work of avant-garde artist John Cage.

Within a few blocks of the Taubman you can find more than 15 art galleries showcasing jewelry, pottery, paintings, sculptures, photographs and more—most of which is created by local artisans. On the first Friday of each month enjoy the free Art by Night event where downtown galleries extend their hours and host receptions, demonstrations and artist meet and greets. Directly across the street from the Taubman is Gallery 108 where on a recent Art by Night we met painter Betty Williamson who graciously answered questions and told us a bit about the gallery (an artists' cooperative retail space) and the artists involved. Just one short block away is another co-op gallery worth checking out, the Market Gallery, which also showcases original fine art by local artists.

Across from the Market Gallery is the venerable City Market Building. The current building, circa 1922, replaced the original market building which was erected in 1885. The city market has served as a community and retail venue for generations and today, after having received a \$7.9 million restoration, it is once again a destination for locals and tourists alike who can enjoy food and drinks from a variety of casual restaurants with sidewalk seating including Fork in the Market, Queso Southwestern Grill and Allsports Café. Space in the market building is also available for public and private events.

Roanoke's charming and very walkable downtown is not only filled with historic architecture, it offers many shopping options. Stroll around and discover such shops as chocolatepaper, where you'll find unique gifts, delectable chocolate truffles and other treats. The Binaba Shop sells handmade African art and handicrafts and those looking for one-of-a-kind clothing and jewelry will want to pay a visit to La De Da. Shoppers will also want

to check out the historic Roanoke City Market, an outdoor market managed by Downtown Roanoke, Inc. City Market opened in 1884 and is the oldest continuously running outdoor farmer's market in Virginia. Shoppers will not only find fresh fruit, vegetables and plants but jewelry, artwork, handmade soaps and other gift items are sold by independent vendors seven days a week.

Now would be a great time to enjoy some of the finer arts and entertainment that Roanoke has to offer. Opera Roanoke is a professional opera with a variety of programs for people of all ages and every performance is accompanied by the Roanoke Symphony Orchestra (RSO.) The RSO was founded in 1953 and is the largest professional orchestra in western Virginia.

Getting hungry again? With dozens of dining options in the downtown area, there is definitely something for everyone. Those looking for fine dining and a stylish atmosphere may want to try 202 Market, one of only two restaurants in the region given five stars by the *Roanoke Times*. 202 Market is known for its innovative small plates and entrees made from the freshest ingredients available.

A fun, causal place to go if you want to listen to some live music while enjoying fantastic barbecue is Blues BBQ Co. This family-friendly bar and grill takes barbecuing seriously and customers dig in to ribs, pulled pork, quesadillas and house-made pizzas. Acoustic bands play nightly.

Another good choice is Fork in the Alley. Roanoke's only "green" restaurant serves up elevated pizzas, burgers, sandwiches and entrees at reasonable prices. They also have a wide selection of beer and wine.

A local favorite is Nawab Indian Cuisine. Its fresh ingredients and warm service make this a mainstay among Roanokers out on the town. Those in the know swear by the Chicken Vindaloo and the Saag Paneer. After dinner, why not head over to Roanoke's "music row," Kirk Avenue, where The Kirk Avenue Music Hall features no-frills acoustic music from local and nationally known acts in an intimate setting? Past shows include Alejandro Escovedo, Richard Thompson, Tom Paxton and Kim Richey. Coming soon are Cheryl Wheeler, Dave Alvin and Tom Russell. On an interesting note, all proceeds from beer, wine, mixed-drinks and non-alcoholic beverages go to the Music Lab at Jefferson Center, which supports music education in the region.

Other downtown music venues of note include Martin's Bar and Grill and Blue 5.

Before calling it a night, why not grab a quick bite at the legendary Texas Tavern? This 24-hour diner may look like a hole-in-the-wall, but locals and celebrities have been chowing down on the world famous "chile" and "Cheesy Western" burgers since 1930. Just remember to ask for plenty of napkins.

So whether you have a passion for trains, a love of the arts, a taste for delicious food, an appreciation for unique shops or you just enjoy beautiful scenery, visitors to Virginia's Blue Ridge Valley are sure to find a shining star in Roanoke. 