



ROANOKE

HOW TO BE A VISITOR IN YOUR OWN TOWN

Story and photos by
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IT'S NOT EVERY CITY THAT LENDS ITSELF AS READILY AS ROANOKE TO A LONG-TIME RESIDENT'S STEPPING OUT INTO IT AS A VISITOR. OUR EDITOR AT LARGE GOT TO VISIT TREASURES SHE'S ENJOYED FOR 16 YEARS, AND CAN'T WAIT TO RECOMMEND.

SIXTEEN YEARS AGO, I moved to Roanoke, Virginia, from Harrisonburg, in the Shenandoah Valley. I knew two people. One was a fellow music major at James Madison University – she had grown up in Salem. Also a pianist, she introduced me to several musicians (who became long-lasting friends) and then almost immediately moved to Memphis, Tennessee for two years of graduate school. The other was Kurt Rheinheimer, editor of this magazine, whose accent was startlingly strong during my internship interview, and then blended into the southern soundtrack that would become familiar to me.

I was in my 20s, freshly graduated from college, and Roanoke was a bigger place than I had ever lived in (save

for a semester abroad in London), a city with a growing downtown, deep history, kind people. I found an apartment just up from Grandin Village and loved that I could walk a few short blocks to the post office, the bank, a natural foods co-op, an independent hardware store, a vintage movie theater, an Italian restaurant, a used bookstore and a pub. My apartment was small, nothing fancy, half-basement, in a blocky brick building on a tree-shaded street. I moved in an upright piano (there was room for either that or a sofa), a computer desk I bought at a yard sale, the bed from my college apartment and chairs donated by my parents.

This summer, I'm the one flying to Memphis, to a new and inspiring job that, in mid-August, took

Roanoke's architecture reflects its personality: brick marked with the patina of years, neighbors to contemporary glass asymmetry, all reflecting and surrounded by the green of trees and mountains.



Left: Dogwoods bloom in spring just below one of the overlooks on Mill Mountain, which offers a panoramic view of the city and the mountains beyond. (See pages 48-49 for identification of the mountains.)

Right: The trails of the area, including those on Mill Mountain where Johanna strikes a pose, are a major attraction for outdoor lovers.



THE GREENWAY WINDS UNDER A TRAIN TRESTLE AND PAST TALL GLASS AND BRICK BUILDINGS, BUT ROUND ANOTHER CORNER AND THE VIEW IS GREEN LEAVES, WATER AND MOUNTAINS.

me away from Roanoke full-time for a year. I love exploring my new, bigger city along the Mississippi River, with its kind people, its deep history, its different variation on a southern lilt. This summer, I'm spending two weeks there, three weeks here, alternating. On one of my return trips, when the U.S. Airways flight curves back into the valley, crossing green-covered mountains and the winding Roanoke River reflecting the evening light, I find myself wiping my eyes and hoping the man napping in the next seat doesn't notice.

SO THIS CITY, a stranger to me in 1998, has become home. I still live in walking distance of Grandin Village, though it's a 20-minute walk rather than a five-minute one. The pub, the hardware store and the Italian restaurant have closed, and there's now a yoga studio, a ballet studio, a dress shop and a bunch of other restaurants ranging from Mediterranean to locavore.

The proprietor of CUPS, the coffee shop, keeps individual mugs for patrons (mine's there). The wait-

resses in Morrow's Community Inn (owned by the same family since 1977) know how my husband and I like our burgers (single, with pickles, mustard, lettuce and fries for me; double, with mayonnaise, tomato and fries for him). I've seen a lot of movies in that theater, which over the years closed, seemingly permanently, and then re-opened, community-supported – everything from a midnight showing of "The Shining" to screenings of low-budget indie films to the recent "Hunger Games" blockbusters. Pop's (which, as does CUPS, has a tall bookshelf filled with board games) serves Homestead Creamery ice cream from neighboring Franklin County. The husband of the couple that co-owns Pop's plays bagpipes, and one summer night a few years ago I enjoyed an impromptu outdoor performance, following the sound of the music down the street and around the corner, where neighbors stood and listened while he and a few other musicians brought some of the Scottish highlands to the Virginia highlands.

Roanokers complain about the valley in the spring – we're a city in a bowl in the middle of mountains, and the pollen settles in and make us sneeze for weeks on end – but at the same time, I'm not sure we'd want the valley to be any other way. For instance, there is nowhere in the city you can go and not see mountains in another moment. There are times when I top a hill on the way to work or the grocery store and catch a view of the slopes just beyond the city, with the evening light hitting them or the shadows of the clouds resting on them or a dusting of early winter snow deepening the texture of the trees, and am brought up short by the beauty of where this city sits. A short drive and I can be out of town and climbing – U.S. 221 to Floyd and its mountain music, or Va. 311 toward McAfee Knob and four mountain ridges and West Virginia, or U.S. 220 to Roaring Run, or the Walnut Avenue bridge up to our stretch of the 469-mile Blue Ridge Parkway.

And being in the city isn't that different from being outside the city. Roanoke's neighborhoods are tree-

filled, and plenty of parks of all sizes are scattered throughout. Twenty-six miles of greenways (with more in development) lace the city. A few weekends ago, Phil and I headed out on the Roanoke River greenway off Wiley Drive, following the flow of the water. We walked past Carilion Clinic and the lovely healing garden on the riverbank just below (built in collaboration with the city, in honor of the late Dr. Robert L. A. Keeley), folks jogging, walking dogs, riding bikes.

The greenway winds under a train trestle and past tall glass and brick buildings, but round another corner and the view is green leaves, water and mountains. Walk a little farther, under the Walnut Street bridge, and a path climbs up the hill and ends at a neighborhood ice cream parlor, HITS (Homemade Ice Cream, Treats, Smoothies and Shaved Ice), whose owners make their own treats. (Flavors run from the chocolate-vanilla-strawberry standbys to ginger peach and Mexican chocolate, with a bit of heat.) That afternoon, we climbed the hill and enjoyed bowls of ice cream on the little deck overlooking the river and greenway, and then (I'm sure) walked the calories off, finishing up our two and a half miles.

Almost as walkable as the greenway is the city's Old Southwest neighborhood, a community marked by historic homes and an artistic community, not too many blocks from Roanoke's downtown. We're sitting outside a restaurant on 4th Street. The sunlight is fading, and the light spilling from inside the restaurant, through stained glass hung inside and through the clear glass of the window, is cozy. In between tomato cheddar soup, fresh salad, grilled cheese and a summery white wine, we've said hello to various acquaintances also out for dinner. Then a rooster crows. And crows again. A small dog barks back.

Where is the rooster? I ask the waitress. Which one? she replies. I gesture in the general direction of the sound, and she confirms the fenced-in backyard of a Victorian house across the street. Sometimes the rooster hops the fence, she says, and the staff of Wildflour Cafe scatters out into the street to catch him and return him home.

That is old Southwest.

The Blue Ridge Mountains are 400 million years old.
It's OK if you make time stand still for a moment.



The opportunities for outdoor recreation are endless in the Roanoke Valley. There are hundreds of miles of scenic trails for hiking, biking, running and horseback riding. The famous Appalachian Trail follows a mountain ridge through the region, while a beautiful urban greenway winds through the heart of the valley. **Follow a trail to happiness in Virginia's Blue Ridge.**

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YOU DON'T NEED TO LEAVE THE CITY TO GET TO THE MOUNTAINS—AN ENTIRE MOUNTAIN, MILL MOUNTAIN, EXISTS WITHIN THE CITY LIMITS.

BESIDES ALL THAT, you don't need to leave the city to get to the mountains – an entire mountain, Mill Mountain, exists within the city limits. Its giant neon star, erected in 1949 as, essentially, a Christmas decoration, has become a symbol of the city – yes, over-the-top (1,045 feet over the top – of the city), but also a comforting beacon from the road or the air that tells us we've come home again.

We often say that when we live in a place, we take it for granted, and perhaps sometimes I do, but not too often. There are too many moments, every day, like those glimpses of mountains, that remind me, or that surprise me.

Downtown is full of those glimpses and surprises. It is a bit of a cross-section of the city – its history, its challenges, its future. The farmers market is still a farmers market, and every day (and even more on weekends) you'll find local farmers, gardeners, bakers and artists selling produce, herbs, jewelry, candles, carved wood, pies, soap. At Halloween, pumpkins; at Christmas, trees and greenery. The old storefronts are new storefronts – gift shops, a dry cleaner, a couple bakeries, a deli, a hookah bar – coffee, candy, hiking boots, copper pots, overalls – seafood, Indian food, Japanese, Thai, Cajun. Mill Mountain Theatre (where I've experienced the magic vicariously, playing six

shows a week in the orchestra pit) auditions its actors in New York City; the Roanoke Symphony, Opera Roanoke, Jefferson Center, several ballet companies and numerous concert series in churches and other venues fill the calendar with inspired performances.

The downtown blends old and new, commercial and artistic. Art galleries, architecture firms, condos, restaurants, a bed and breakfast have all moved into old buildings, maintaining exposed brick and tin ceilings. The Hotel Roanoke is a balance of antique neo-Tudor and 20th-century conference center. The old city market building, recently renovated, is home to eateries and special event space. The Taubman Museum, designed by Frank Gehry protege Randall Stout, raises its asymmetrical glass and metal rooftop next door to an antique letterpress business. Old Norfolk & Western (now Norfolk Southern) buildings have been reincarnated as the Roanoke Higher Education Center and an apartment building.

Railroads built Roanoke, and the Norfolk Southern rails run straight through it, a working downtown world of freight and coal transport. The heavy cars and locomotives roll through the Norfolk Southern shops – many evenings, I can hear from my front porch the clank of freight cars coupling. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial pedestrian bridge and the glass walkway from downtown to the Hotel Roanoke are my favorite places to watch the trains. The O. Winston Link Museum (the site of our wedding reception) and the Virginia Museum of Transportation (one of my four-year-old niece's, six-year-old nephew's and 74-year-old father's favorite places to visit) are also reincarnations: The former was Roanoke's old passenger station (there is more and more talk of passenger service returning in the next few years) and the latter, a 1918 N&W freight station that Norfolk Southern

AN INSIDER'S TOP 10 FOR ROANOKE

What Not to Miss on your Visit

This is by no means a comprehensive list, but some of my favorite places in Roanoke, and in no particular order.

In Roanoke...

1. THE MILL MOUNTAIN STAR. This is on everyone's list, I realize, but with good reason. It's 88 and a half feet tall, more than 1,000 feet above the city and more than 1,800 feet above sea level. I look for its white (and sometimes red, white and blue) glow from the airplane, from the highway and love catching glimpses from neighborhood streets. The view from the star is stunning, day or night. The Mill Mountain Zoo, Blue Ridge Parkway and Mill Mountain Discovery Center are all up there too.

2. JEFFERSON CENTER. A former high school was renovated into a performing arts center and offices, classroom and meeting spaces. Jefferson Center's calendar includes jazz, Americana, bluegrass and opera. jeffcenter.org

3. THE GRANDIN THEATRE. This 1932 cinema shows films on four screens. The snack counter includes excellent popcorn. A half dozen restaurants within a block or two are great places to enjoy a meal, coffee, dessert or drinks before or after the show. grandintheatre.com

4. THE ROANOKE ANTIQUE MALL. It's easy to lose yourself for hours in this place, crowded with the collected history of the region, from china and furniture to jewelry and vintage dresses. roanokeantiques.com

5. THE COFFEE SHOPS. Mill Mountain Coffee has been around since 1990. Two of its five locations are in Roanoke, and the downtown one has been my caffeine source for years (especially during Mill Mountain Theatre runs). On Grandin Road, CUPS is my go-to place. The bumper stickers are fitting: "My other office is at CUPS." millmountaincoffee.com, cupscoffeeandtea.com

6. HOLLINS UNIVERSITY. Its historic campus has educated writers such as Annie Dillard and U.S. Poet Laureate (2012-2014) Natasha Trethewey. In particular, its music program, playwriting MFA (catch No Shame Theatre during the summer months), summer writers workshops and special events series bring together great talent. The architecture and trees are beautiful. hollins.edu

7. DICKENS OF A CHRISTMAS. For three weekends every December, downtown celebrates with costumed characters, kettle corn, music, carriage rides and more: magical evenings in the winter season, and just one of a host of festivals Roanoke hosts year-round. downtownroanoke.org

...and among the wonders a short drive away:

8. THE TRAILS FROM CATAWBA. The Appalachian Trail crosses Va. 311 (a beautiful drive that will take you to New Castle; several side roads lead to Blacksburg. Go south and hike to Dragon's Tooth, go north and you'll end up at McAfee Knob, two gorgeous spots.

9. FLOYD COUNTY. Bluegrass music, country dancing, potters, painters and the parkway. The tiny town hosts a talented community of artists, and we head up there every year to find a white pine for our Christmas tree. visitfloyd.com

10. ROARING RUN. In Botetourt County, a recreational site with National Historic Register stone furnaces, beautiful forested hiking, trout fishing and a picnic area along Roaring Run Creek, all in a short walk. For a longer one nearby: Hoop Hole Loop trails.

—CEM

HIKE TO THE COVER VIEW. From Roanoke, west on Va. 311 to left (north) on Va. 779 for 7.5 miles to small parking lot at the Andy Layne Trail. Hike 3.1 miles to Appalachian Trail, then .5 mile on AT to Tinker Cliffs outcropping with the view south of the Catawba Valley (cover view), and west into West Virginia.

Facing page left: The Roanoke Symphony's space in the heart of downtown has become a venue for more intimate performances, including jazz.

Facing page right: The Mill Mountain Star has been a beacon and attraction since 1949.

Above left: The Roanoke River Greenway, here near Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital, now stretches for nearly 10 miles and connects to several other greenways.

Above right: McAfee Knob, among the most-photographed spots on the 2,180-mile Appalachian Trail, is a 20-minute drive/3.7-mile hike from downtown Roanoke.



RAILROADS BUILT ROANOKE, AND THE NORFOLK SOUTHERN RAILS RUN STRAIGHT THROUGH IT, A WORKING DOWNTOWN WORLD OF FREIGHT AND COAL TRANSPORT.

The rooftop gardens of the newly renovated Center in the Square museum center overlook downtown Roanoke and on to Read Mountain.

donated after the Roanoke flood of 1985.

Just this year, Roanoke has re-visioned downtown's Elmwood Park with a new amphitheater shell, hillside seating and fountains. A few blocks away, the newly renovated Center in the Square. Formerly a furniture warehouse, it was first renovated in the 1980s to house the theater, a planetarium, art, history and science museums, offices and classrooms, signaling the shift in downtown from red light district to arts and business district. Last year, Center in the Square re-opened following another major renovation (\$27 million). Downstairs, fish glide in brilliant blue aquariums in the lobby; upstairs, butterflies dance in their own protected garden, and the terraced rooftop includes a koi pond and plants. The view from the top: Roanoke, a city transformed and transforming, against a backdrop of deep blue mountains beyond. ❧