



HOLIDAY GETAWAY TO ROANOKE, STAR CITY OF THE MOUNTAINS

● **Story and photos by Robin Tierney**
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Where else can you bicycle up a mountain with ease and get rewarded with a giant star?

Roanoke earned the nickname “Star City of the South” for its 100-foot steel star built in 1949 atop Mill Mountain. This hike-, bike- and car-friendly peak beckons visitors year-round on the edge of town.

Along the way and at the summit await splendid views of the city and the Blue Ridge Mountains, a nature center, playground and the Star, which is illuminated at night. Wave greetings at Star-Cam -- tell the folks back home to tune in to Star Radio at roanokeva.gov.

Whether you want to escape into nature or stroll festive city streets during the holidays, Roanoke's ideal. Hidden in a mountain valley yet close to a major airport, this historic railroad town offers woodlands, charming neighborhoods, the scenic Roanoke River and a large yet quaint downtown all within a five-mile radius and easily reached on paved greenways.

Step way back in time in charming Grandin Village. The amazing vegan-friendly Happy Belly Deli is tucked in the back of Roanoke Natural Foods Co-op. It's Southern soul food (Creole yams!) is made with fresh ingredients, most from the co-op's own organic farm. In the winter, you'll want to order all



Roanoke is a bike-, hike-, car-, and veggie-friendly place to escape into nature or stroll festive city streets during the holiday season.







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of the vegan hot dishes and soups -- but also the creative sweet and savory salads. Craving kamut or quinoa, or maybe a nice Thai bowl with jalapenos parsley and unsalted peanuts? Carry-out or grab a window-side table to people-watch.

Heading back to downtown Roanoke, browse the seen-on-TV architectural wonderland Black Dog Salvage. You'll find plenty of unique holiday gifts and souvenirs.

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Ways to fill your day:

* **The Railwalk.** Any time, you can wonder this new, well-designed outdoor museum that displays fas-

cinating archival photos, text about railroad history, vintage equipment and buttons that let you ring huge bells and operate train horns and lights. The one-third-mile Railwalk runs along still-active downtown railroad lines and ends at the Virginia Transportation Museum.

* **Street art-spotting.** Rent a bike or stroll in search of art, the antique neon H&C Coffee sign and century-old "Dog-mouth" fountain. Three dozen public artworks include a huge comb, a dramatic fallen police officer statue, fantasy murals and cheerful animal sculptures.

* **City Market.** This daily farmer's market, operating since 1882, offers fresh veggies, fruits and crafts.

* **Center in the Square.** This recently renovated historic complex holds several museums and galleries.

* **New and expanded Greenway trails:** A great way to explore, burn holiday calories and enjoy the



scenery on foot and bike. The cool bridges and riverside spots are particularly pretty in the winter.

* **Mill Mountain.** One Greenway leads you quickly to the mountain, which is laced bottom to top with hike-bike trails (motorists can drive to the summit). One easy 3.5-mile round-trip trail passes sassafras, oak, maple, redbud and locust trees, mountain laurel and migratory and resident birds from warblers to swallowtails. The slope's a beloved secret of regional mountain bikers and part of the new 480-mile Virginia Mountain Bike Trail.

* **Holiday events:** Catch November's RIOT Rooster Indie Craft Fair -- a mecca of upcycled, recycled, "odd and useful" gifts and goods handmade by regional artists and makers. Other seasonal events include parades, festivals (Gingerbread, Children's and others), creative symphony performances, candlelight home tours and the longtime tradition "Dickens of a Christmas."

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Firefly Fare offers bargain-priced seasonal dishes using regional ingredients and zesty seasonings, a fresh juice bar, and house-baked desserts.

* Winter recreation: Named among America's top outdoor spots, Roanoke Valley's the place to ramble solo or join a guided morning or moonlight hike.

Veg dining? Yes!

Happy Belly Deli: A must-visit (see above). Plus it's located in Roanoke's historic community co-op, so you can pick up anything you need.

Firefly Fare: bargain-priced seasonal dishes using regional ingredients and zesty seasonings, a fresh juice bar, and house-baked desserts. Neat touches include vintage record album covers holding menus and firefly-shaped lights.

Little Green Hive: This indie coffee and smoothie bar serves phenomenal smoothies crafted with fresh and healthy ingredients, spicy chai, locally





roasted fair-trade organic Red Rooster coffee from Red Rooster Coffee Roasters (Floyd, VA), teas, handcrafted smoothies with fresh ingredients and health boosting supplements, spicy chai and vegan and gluten-free snacks and treats.

Old Southwest Grill: Pizza? This omnivore haven can make custom vegan pies in its wood-fired oven. I suggested they get vegan cheese; if they haven't, suggest again.

Yearning for a storybook home-for-the-holidays setting? You're always welcome in Roanoke.

PLANNING A VISIT?

Visitor Info:

visitroanokeva.com



About the Author

Robin Tierney is a travel, outdoors and food writer who gets her energy from an all plant-based diet. Her whole household is made up of vegan athletes, including their adopted American Pit Bull Terriers. Reach Robin at travelveg@live.com.

Photos also by Robin Tierney.