

The Telegraph

Asheville Has Heart

By Peggy Newland - Correspondent | Dec 10, 2025



Zelda Dearest hotel in Asheville, N.C. Courtesy photo/Zelda Dearest Hotel

Everyone on the walking trail says hello to me. I'm in Asheville, North Carolina, rediscovering the vibrant culture, community, art scene, and of course, the outdoors of this special place that was hit so hard by Hurricane Helene.

"How's your day going?" a man asks me on the Reed Creek Greenway, an oasis of paved trails that wind through lush forest groves of elegant Montford District. Queen Anne, Arts and Craft, cozy bungalow houses line the curved, hilly streets and creek paths.

"Wonderful," I smile. The day is sunny, warm, and with late-season asters and occasional dahlias brightening the pathway in late autumn, it feels like a "weather" present. Pockets of downed trees are covered in fern and moss creating natural sculptures.

He tells me where to get good coffee and how to find parks that honor “literary folks that lived around here.”

I follow his advice and continue toward the botanical gardens and walking trails near UNC Asheville, stopping for coffee, and checking out the gravesite of Thomas Wolfe and historical markers highlighting Zelda Fitzgerald’s life. I discover a hotel nearby, Zelda Dearest, and have a Jazz Age cocktail in honor of her at their Parlour Bar. The bartender tells me that First Responders stayed there during the hurricane.



Artful Stay at the Radical Hilton Asheville in Asheville, N.C. Courtesy photo/The Radical Asheville

I’ve been in Asheville for three days and what strikes me the most is the sharing of stories in this welcoming community.

The first day, after checking into Embassy Suites by Hilton Asheville Downtown, I jump on LaZoom Comedy Bus for a jokey tour of “all the beauty zones” in Asheville, and hear about the revival of the cultural scene since the “storm”: concerts in city parks, drumming circles in the squares, rooftop gatherings of artists, open house studio tours, benefits throughout the city “for the people by the people.” I hear time and time again, “It’s all about building community here.” That night, at the hotel’s Soprana Rooftop Cucina (which just was included in the 2025 Michelin Guide American South), I share a

smorgasbord of brick oven bespoke pizzas at a group table. We nosh on “pies” covered in foraged mushrooms and greens, enjoy grilled mountain trout, panzanella salads with roasted vegetables, and “make-your-own” decorated cannoli. The waiter tells me how the Embassy Suites “jumped into action” during the storm and helped house “stuck in place” guests and staff, that “all hands were on deck” supporting those in need.

“We wanted to make this place a calming island for folks,” the waiter adds.

The Calm App is included in the stay for nighttime relaxation, but I find that the pillows and lush quilts are perfectly situated for lulling me to sleep each night. Staring out of the wraparound windows overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains is an even better relaxing experience.

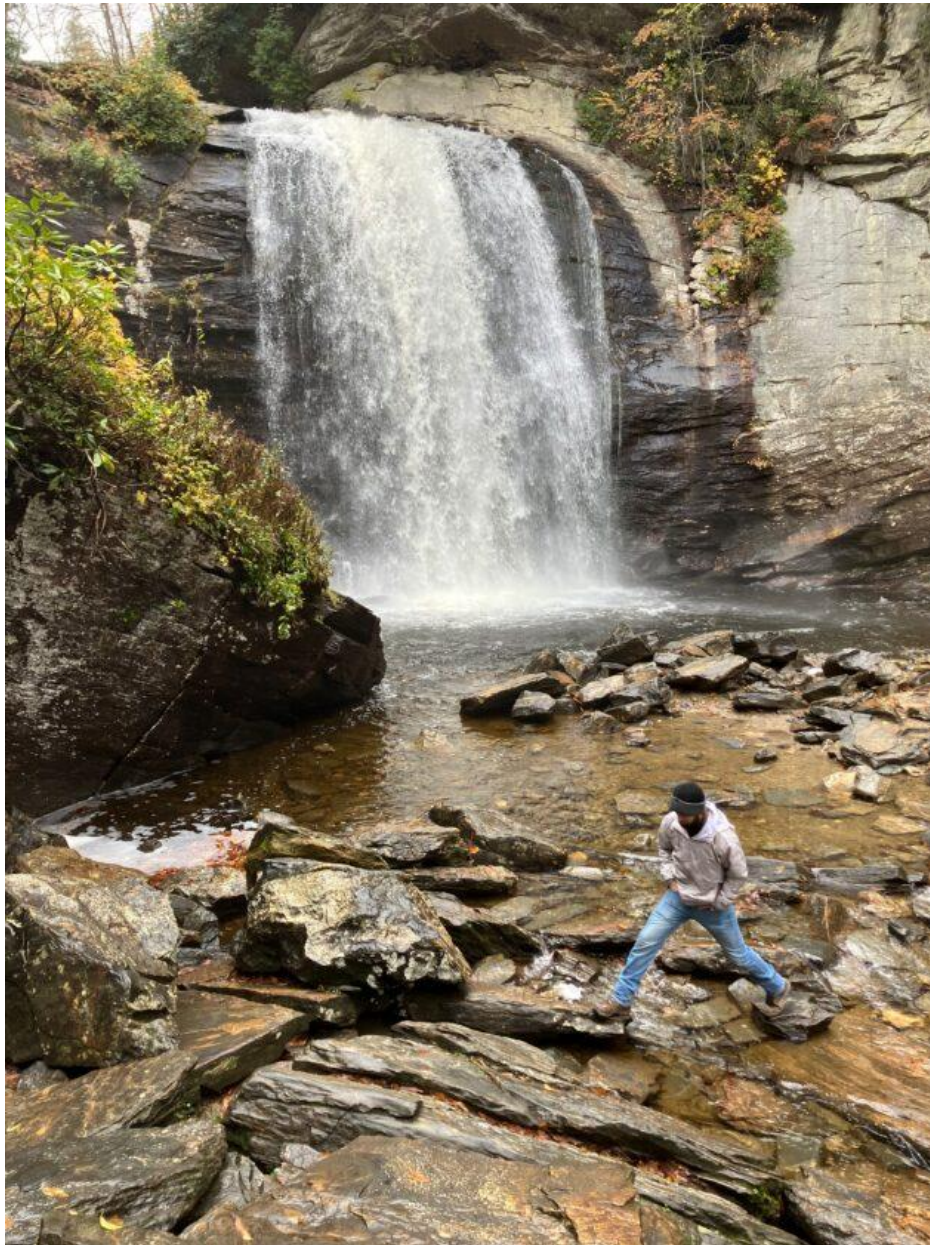
The next morning, after fresh fruit, made-to-order poached eggs on homemade toast, and tons of coffee, I head to the hills with Asheville Jeep Tours. We zip into Pisgah National Forest and hike to hidden waterfalls, and past trees lit up in orange and yellow and red—a fall foliage parade of color. Then we enjoy an Asheville Luxury Picnic at Autocamp’s Clubhouse that sits like a mountain gem on the French Broad River. Hit by the hurricane and totally rebuilt, all vamped-up Airstream trailers are grouped on the picturesque ledges with views over the rolling ridges. The picnic is foraged and the beef and cheese on the sandwiches comes from local farms.

To keep up the relaxed vibe, we continue that evening to Hi-Wire Brewing South Slope for tastings paired with funkster-themed hot dogs. Then, we check out the “secret speakeasy out back” called Tiki Easy Bar for themed cocktails and some danceable soundtracks. We finish the night at the trendy Burial Brewery for more comfort snacks and ales. “Breweries all helped other breweries during the storm. To keep going,” the bartender says.

The next early morning, I walk along the quiet Urban Trail and explore Art Deco buildings, an Appalachian concert stage, and unique sculpture path. I love each of the thirty historic and quirky sculptural creations like rampaging pigs, shoes, giant iron, skeletal shoppers, and bluegrass band. Upon return, I join up with a group heading to the Biltmore Estate.

We traipse through the “largest home in America” and it’s three floors of Gilded Age opulence, with a unique “basement” that houses a speakeasy space, indoor pool, bowling alley, exercise/dressing rooms, and servant quarters. The Vanderbilt Family estate offers views into a book-lined library, breakfast room, banquet halls, and themed rooms: Louis XV, Tyrolean, Claude, Damask, Billiard, and gorgeous Winter Garden. Hallways

and rooms are “decorated” with original Monet and Renoir paintings, ebony cabinets, tapestries, Ming porcelain, gold clocks, ivory chess previously owned by Napoleon Bonaparte, and other collected treasures. The 8,000-acre grounds (designed by Frederick Olmstead) include a conservatory, ponds, winery, various gardens, and all overlook the Blue Ridge Mountains. During the hurricane, the Biltmore Estate established the Biltmore Relief Fund/WNC for the community.



Pisgah National Forest in Asheville in Asheville, N.C. Courtesy photo

After the tour, we “take lunch” at the Corner Kitchen, a lovely 120-year old house that serves up elegant southern cuisine in the Biltmore Village near the Estate. I go for the pimento cheese tots, and “red eye” shrimp and grits, along with some homemade

biscuits. Then it's off for an afternoon printmaking class in the River Arts District (RAD) Rendezvous Studio. We tour all the studios, spotlighting local artists "hit real hard" during the storm. Many of the artists in this area lost full studios "to the flooding." There's amazing talent, room after room, in this special studio, and it makes it hard to try to create art myself. But I don an apron and make a mess with paint.

That last night, I stay in The Radical, which is center stage to the River Arts District.

"I feel like I'm inside a modern art museum," I tell the concierge, because this hotel is "happening." With industrial chic spray-painted murals and trendy-edged walls of pulsed color, I feel like I'm hanging with the cool kids in town. My room sports a flashy king bed and wildly decorated walls, and I have a huge sitting area with views over the arts district.

Our group heads to the Roof for cocktails as the sun sets over the mountains and across the French Broad River. We dine at Golden Hour (included in 2025 Michelin Guide American South) and it's an experience to memorize. Plate after plate of gorgeously prepared art: lamb kebobs with curried yogurt, warm fall bean salad with hoe cakes, ash roasted beets with fried peanuts, cornbread with house made butters, wood grilled whole trout, hanger steak with chimichurri.

For sunrise, I take a jog along the French Broad River trails. I imagine this river rising almost 25 feet during Helene and then note the muraled buildings, the newly built studios, the river parks lining this new pathway, and I can't think of a better place and community to visit. Next time, I'll bring my bicycle.

The Embassy Suites by Hilton Asheville Downtown. www.hilton.com. Close to downtown walking trails, sculpture parks, and river pathways. Don't miss Soprana Rooftop Cucina for Blue Ridge Mountain views and amazing pizzas. Free social hour nightly and made-to-order daily breakfast buffet.

The Radical Asheville, Tapestry Collection by Hilton. www.theradicalavl.com. Inside the River Arts District with walkable trails to artist studios and amazing coffee shops. Don't miss the Roof and Golden Hour for artful cuisine and cocktails.