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Photography by
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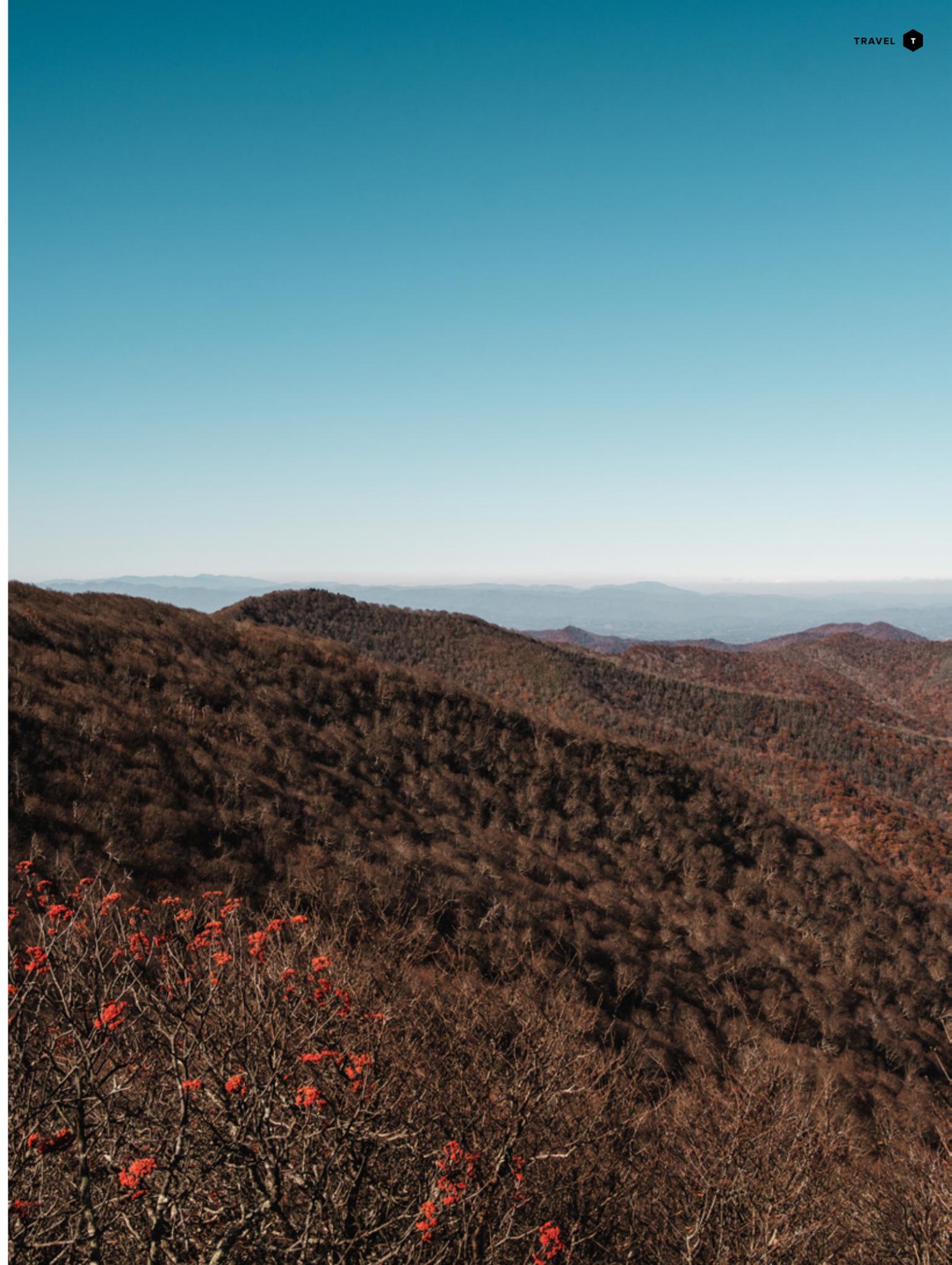
A SOCIALLY DISTANT GETAWAY IN ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

The CDC says road trips and rentals are the safest forms of COVID-19 travel. In need of a break from New York scenery, travel writer Lavanya Sunkara headed to Asheville, NC for a much-needed, nature-filled getaway.

The sky was a tapestry of pale orange, pink and blue, the smooth outlines of the mountains indigo blue. On the hillsides, trees stood silently, their bare branches slowly revealing themselves with the rising sun. A chilly gust swept past me as I welcomed the morning with my two dogs on the terrace of Blue Ridge Bliss, our vacation rental home in Asheville. The outdoor hot tub and open fire pit, surrounded by Adirondack chairs in the foreground of the magical dawn made for a picture-perfect panorama. As I captured it on my phone, I realized this moment was my antidote after months in New York City quarantine.

Sometimes, a change of scenery - when done safely - is all we need to feel rejuvenated.

Despite New York state's success in slowing the spread of COVID-19, my family and I stayed put. But, after months of hikes in the same state parks, and staring at the usual maple and birch trees outside the windows, I decided to take a road trip and stay in secluded vacation rentals. The CDC considers these options safer than flying or staying in hotels during the pandemic. Little did I know that a short getaway on wheels would bring me to paradise.



Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Asheville is a haven for nature lovers. The bohemian city is the gateway to the 469-mile Blue Ridge Parkway (that runs from Shenandoah National Park to the Great Smoky Mountains) and is home to the country's largest privately-owned home, the Biltmore Estate. The year-round destination is perfect for hiking, biking, skiing, and experiencing its thriving downtown.

I found our first vacation rental, Blue Ridge Bliss, through a local rental company, Greybeard Rentals, which was adhering to strict cleaning protocols. This gorgeous property, nestled in the mountains of Weaverville, is a short, 20-minute drive from Asheville. Set atop a hill, the private, three-bedroom luxury rental features a floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace, a large rustic-chic kitchen, and massive windows in the living and dining areas to take in incredible views of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The master bedroom with an ensuite bathroom opens to a patio with a hot tub adjacent to a stone fire pit and the expanse of the surrounding mountains.

Blue Ridge Bliss is situated just minutes from the Blue Ridge Parkway, which we drove on our first full day to the Folk Art Center (museum of Appalachian arts and crafts) that connected us to the MST (Mountains-to-Sea Trail) for a hearty hike with the dogs. We planned to continue along the scenic parkway to Craggy Gardens, an Asheville attraction drawing visitors to its whimsical, wind-carved trees that adorn the mountaintops. But, a road closure on the parkway (all too common in the winter months), changed our plans to an afternoon in downtown Asheville.

Asheville's pedestrian-friendly streets are lined with eateries, souvenir shops, bookstores, bars, and boutiques offering locally-crafted artwork and jewelry. Following an outdoor lunch of fresh fare at Nani's Rotisserie Chicken, my husband and I strolled through the area. With masks on, we popped briefly into stores on the main thoroughfares and within the Grove Arcade for local finds (hot sauce and handmade pottery and jewelry topped our

list). After a quick temperature check, we entered the Battery Park Book Exchange, an old-fashioned space with floor-to-ceiling shelves brimming with used and first-edition books alongside a bar serving champagne and cocktails. Before heading home, we made a few stops to secure dinner and drinks to enjoy back at the cabin: spicy Indian food from Chai Pani (the kale pakoras are a treat) and the "Spice Merchant" chai-flavored cider from the Noble Cider & Mead Taproom.

Before checking in to our next vacation rental in Black Mountain, we headed to the Biltmore Estate, the former home of the Vanderbilts. This French-chateau-style mansion is set on four acres and features 250 rooms. Even though ticketed patrons are allowed inside, we opted to walk the elaborate gardens with our dogs. After an invigorating amble on nearly empty paths, we returned to our second rental, tired but excited to see the home that awaited us.

Lakey Gap Lodge from the Carolina Mornings, a local rental company with enhanced cleaning and a 24-hour gap between guest stays, provided us with a wonderful experience. Located in Black Mountain, voted as one of the prettiest American small towns, the newly-built four-bedroom A-frame log cabin is just a short drive from Asheville. The soothing smell of pine filled our nostrils from the moment we entered. High interior ceilings with large windows bring the outside in. Despite neighbors in the vicinity, the neighborhood remained perfectly still. The wraparound porch, surrounded by hillsides, is ideal for lounging and dining. Black Mountain lived up to its accolades, sporting a lively main street with mom-and-pop shops and restaurants.

While our stay in Asheville was brief, we vowed to return. A road trip helped us to travel worry-free, and we had peace of mind knowing that everyone in the city and surrounding towns were adhering to safety protocols. Best of all, the getaway allowed us to stay in secluded vacation homes and enjoy the great outdoors, all the while keeping ourselves and others safe.

WHERE TO STAY:



BLUE RIDGE BLISS
Greybeard Rentals
Weaverville, NC
855-688-9574

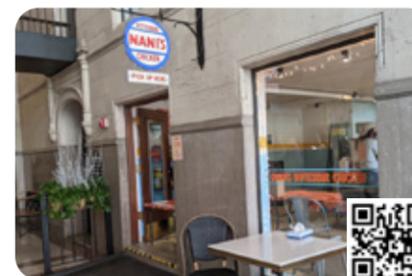


LAKEY GAP LODGE
Carolina Mornings
Black Mountain, NC
(855) 398-0712



HUDSON'S PEAK ON LEISURE MOUNTAIN
Greybeard Rentals
Fairview, NC
855-688-9574

WHERE TO EAT:



NANI'S ROTISSERIE CHICKEN
1 Page Ave, Suite 147
Asheville, NC 28801
(828) 515-1900



CHAI PANI
22 Battery Park Avenue
Asheville, NC 28801
(828) 254-4003



NOBLE CIDER & MEAD TAPROOM
49 Rankin Avenue
Asheville, NC 28801
(828) 412-5064

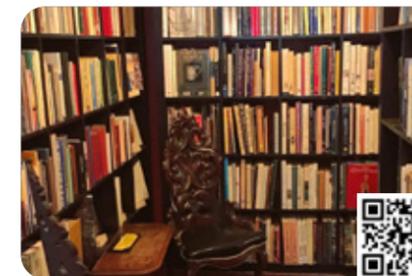
WHAT TO DO:



BILTMORE ESTATE
1 Lodge Street
Asheville, NC 28803
(800) 411-3812



Craggy Gardens
364 Blue Ridge Parkway
Black Mountain, NC 28711
(828) 298-0398



BATTERY PARK BOOK EXCHANGE
1 Page Avenue #101
Asheville, NC 28801
(828) 252-0020