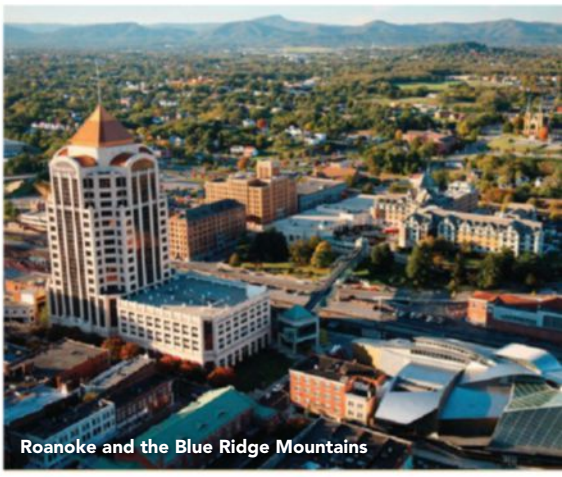
BREATH OF FRESH AIR

RELAX AND RECHARGE IN THE BEAUTIFUL VIRGINIA MOUNTAINS

BY NANCY MORELAND

Hotel Roanoke

City Market


Roanoke and the Blue Ridge Mountains

If places have personalities, then Roanoke is a most vivacious Virginia city. Situated in the Blue Ridge Mountains, its lively downtown is a suitable place to recover from last year's exhausting election season and the holiday craze. Day and night, Roanoke's pedestrian-friendly streets buzz with activity. Nineteenth-century buildings enjoy a second life as galleries, restaurants, and lofts. Yet, for all its industriousness, Roanoke is also beautifully balanced by nature. The Blue Ridge Parkway, Smith Mountain Lake, and two national forests are within easy reach.

From Jacksonville, Roanoke is a solid nine hour drive; First Coasters may prefer the 3.5 hour flight, with a short layover in Charlotte, instead. The centrally located Hotel Roanoke overlooks downtown and has been the place to stay since the 1800s. Its gracious Southern sensibility (picture chandeliers and waiters in white jackets) evoke a bygone era. Check into a spacious suite, then treat yourself to an on-site spa treatment followed by cocktails and dinner in the elegant Regency Room.

For a great view of the city, start at the Star. Roanoke's most recognized attraction, a 100-foot illuminated star, was erected in 1949 on the Mill Mountain overlook. It's responsible for Roanoke's nickname, "Star City of the South."

Back at street level, museums and galleries hide secrets of the city in plain sight. Roanoke's railroad origins are on full display at the Transportation Museum, home to more than 50 massive locomotives, rail-related displays, and a classic car collection. Nearby, the Railwalk offers an easy stroll through displays depicting the region's rail heritage and leads to City Market, Virginia's oldest continuously operated farmer's market.

Market Square Walkway gives visitors a bird's eye view of the omnipresent train tracks and access to Taubman Museum of Art, where folk art and Fabergé objects will be on display in January. Close by, a train station turned Visitor Information Center houses the O. Winston Link Museum, a compelling photography exhibit documenting the last days of the steam locomotive era.

Weekends, people gather at downtown restaurants for cuisine that spans the menu from multicultural to classic Southern. Venues featuring live entertainment are another draw. Country star Miranda Lambert plays Roanoke Civic Center January 19th; a Latin Dance Party at the Jefferson Center heats up the night of the 25th.

More at visitroanokeva.com. ✻

LuxeLife

The already luxurious, 119-room boutique hotel **Inn on Fifth** in Naples is shinier than ever, thanks to an $18 million expansion that included the addition of 32 club-level suites. The new suites range from 516 to 1,100 square feet, and all feature balconies with views of the city's downtown shopping district. In addition, guests are treated to a private rooftop lounging area with a hot tub, as well as a daily breakfast buffet, afternoon tea, and evening cocktails. More at innonfifth.com. ✻

BY JOHN O'MARA

To Go, Or Not To Go

Thinking of an exotic vacation destination for 2013? The travel website **WorldsGreatestTravelers.com** compiles an annual list of international locales for its "Go/noGo List." Among the places it considers hot or emerging travel spots are Cyprus, Borneo, Slovenia, Madagascar, Oman and Rio de Janeiro. Those destinations earning the "noGo" badge are Nigeria, Venezuela, Pakistan, Mali, Somalia, Moscow and Mexico-U.S. border towns. Details at WorldsGreatestTravelers.com. ✻

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