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NORTH CAROLINA



A SHORT HIKE from the Blue Ridge Flat Rock overlook reveals a vista that captures the magic of autumn color.



CRAIG BERENGETT / IMAGES

CAROLINA

on my mind

FROM HISTORIC SITES TO HIKING TRAILS TO MOVIE-SET MOUNTAIN
VIEWS, FLAT ROCK, NORTH CAROLINA, IS PURE POETRY.

BY JENNY WISNIEWSKI



Blessed with fragrant orchards, lush forests and intriguing historic sites nearby, Flat Rock, North Carolina, personifies quaint charm. Its backdrop of gorgeous scenery and activities for all ages make this quiet community an alluring weekend getaway that invites you to slow down, enjoy nature and learn something new.

My memories of Flat Rock exist as a series of stored images over the course of 20 years. When my parents first moved to Flat Rock after retiring, there was just a post office, a gift shop and a deli attached to a gas station. A few other businesses have cropped up since then. Still, the town remains sleepy, and that's just the way residents like it.

This one-traffic-light town was settled first by Cherokee Indians and later by coastal South Carolinians who built homes in the mountains to escape the summer heat and humidity. One of the earliest of these wayfarers, Charles Baring of the English Baring brothers banking family, discovered Flat Rock in 1827, created his own 400-acre country estate and then sold property to other Charlestonians. Flat Rock came to be known as the "little Charleston of the

mountains." Some of those homes still stand today, and Flat Rock is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

TOUR THE TOWN

One of the most popular National Historic Sites, Connemara, was the beloved home of poet and biographer Carl Sandburg's family for 22 years. He and his wife, Lilian, arrived in 1945 with their three daughters, two grandchildren and 16,000 volumes of books. Their large but unassuming home perches on a hill overlooking a placid pond, with Big Glassy Mountain, the highest point in the area, standing sentinel in the distance. The main house has been preserved as the Sandburgs left it, the



“One of the greatest necessities in America is to discover creative solitude.”

— Carl Sandburg



poet's guitar propped on a chair, his library intact.

I recalled a tour guide in the Sandburg house explaining the rhythm of the Sandburgs' lives here at this 240-acre parcel of paradise in the mountains. Carl Sandburg's creative hours were from dusk and beyond. In the wee hours of the morning, he would pass his wife on the staircase as he headed to bed and she began her day, caring for her goats.

We visited the goat barn and learned about the breeding work begun by Lilian. My kids delighted in venturing through the pasture, feed slipping through their fingers as Chikaming goats surrounded them, knowing a snack was at hand.

Across the street from Connemara sits another iconic spot, the Flat Rock Playhouse. Opened in 1952 and designated the State Theatre of North Carolina, it stages comedies, dramas, youth theater, concerts and Broadway musicals for eight months of the year. With its rustic red barn-like exterior, it blends right into the small-town country setting.

Kitty-corner from the playhouse, several brightly painted shops called Little Rainbow Row beckon browsers. The anchor, The Wrinkled Egg, was built in 1891 and originally housed the town's general store. Behind the shops sits a courtyard with picnic tables and magnolia trees where townsfolk and visitors gather.

THE PEOPLE'S POET, Carl Sandburg, was inspired by the natural paradise (above) surrounding his home Connemara, where his wife raised goats. Today, visitors can feed the animals in the barn (far left).

After an afternoon of hiking, nothing beats enjoying pizza or barbecue, sharing conversation, and savoring the slowness of small-town southern life.

HIT THE TRAILS

A few years before my tour of Connemara, I visited what was then the 10,000-acre DuPont property, only 13 miles from Flat Rock. Back in the day, only organized hiking clubs were invited onto the lovely private property, and fortunately my parents belonged to one.

On the day of my DuPont visit, we hiked 6 miles round trip to Bridal Veil Falls, where water spills off an overhanging ledge, forming a vertical plane that crashes into the pool below. Its deafening roar and misty spray are all-immersive (probably the reason it was selected for a scene in the movie *The Last of the Mohicans*).

Featuring five waterfalls, the DuPont property was a bit of a mystery to most. I was pleased to learn that since my visit, it had been designated a State Recreational Forest, open to all. In addition to hiking

trails, biking and horseback riding, the park holds five lakes and nearly 18 miles of trout streams.

The last time I visited Flat Rock, I could practically hear the trail leading to the top of Big Glassy Mountain calling me. With my infant son strapped to my back, my older son running ahead and my dad at my side, we climbed the familiar trail. The hike is short enough for young feet—under 3 miles round trip—and the prize at the top is breathtaking. Standing on a large outcropping of sloped rock, we gazed out at an autumnal dreamscape of scarlet dogwood, saffron hickory and bright orange sassafras.

From this vantage point, it was as if all civilization had faded away. Soon my dad would stare at a different beauty—the pristine and monochromatic austerity of winter—and I would be swallowed back into civilization. But I would carry with me fond memories of fresh mountain air, small-town friendliness and precious time spent with family in the quiet, natural beauty of Flat Rock. ⚙

RAINBOW ROW lives up to its name with shops painted in vibrant hues.

The Wrinkled Egg, named for a Rhode Island Red hen who laid wrinkled eggs, is a general store that dates back to 1891.



AN EASY TRAIL leads hikers to Triple Falls and other cascades in DuPont State Recreational Forest.



IF YOU GO



GOOD EATS

The aroma alone will draw you in. Hubba Hubba Smokehouse slow-cooks its pork and beef brisket in a wood-fired pit. Remember to order southern sides like succotash, pimiento cheese grits and Henderson County apple slaw.

hubbahubbasmokehouse.squarespace.com/



RESORT IN THE WOODS

You could not find a more lovely setting than Highland Lake Inn and Resort. Nestled in the woods, this 26-acre resort offers a swimming pool and complimentary bikes, canoes, kayaks and paddleboats. Accommodations include rustic cabins, a historic inn and poolside cottages. **hliresort.com**



FALL FESTIVITY

Boasting 25 varieties of apples, the 100-acre Sky Top Orchard is a must-see during an autumn getaway. Take in the mountain views while enjoying a hayride. Pick your own apples or visit the pumpkin patch. Be sure to taste the famous apple cider donuts fresh from the fryer. **skyttoporchard.com/**



BIRD-WATCHING

Look for the golden-crowned kinglets, Blackburnian warblers or peregrine falcons (they return to the cliffs of nearby Pisgah National Forest every year).