



TRAVEL

The essential guide to visiting North Carolina

Here's everything you need to know about exploring the Tar Heel State—when to go, where to stay, what to do, and how to get around.

An aerial view of the countryside near Asheville, North Carolina, showcases the region's verdant mountain landscape.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTA ROSSOW, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

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FAST FACTS

Statehood: November 21, 1789

Capital: Raleigh

Time zone: Eastern United States (GMT-4 Daylight Savings / GMT-5 Standard)

Main airports: [Charlotte Douglas International \(CLT\)](#), [Raleigh-Durham International \(RDU\)](#), and [Asheville Regional Airport \(AVL\)](#).

Fun fact: North Carolina's nickname, "the Tar Heel State" comes from a Civil War era insult to describe locals who distilled the tar and pitch used on ship hulls.

Why you should visit North Carolina

Vinegery whole-hog barbecue and the beauty of the **Blue Ridge Mountains**. Indigenous Cherokee culture and colonial history, plus some of the East Coast's best beaches along the **Outer Banks**.

Best time to visit North Carolina

Spring: Spring is colorful in North Carolina. Buttercups paint the Blue Ridge yellow by late March, and in May, the peaks are blanketed in ethereal pink mountain laurels. Find other seasonal blooms at the waterside Elizabethan Gardens on Roanoke Island. At Biltmore estate near **Asheville**, roses and azaleas brighten extensive grounds designed by Frederick Law Olmsted.

Summer: On North Carolina's Outer Banks, the summer months of June through August draw families and groups of friends to rental houses and waterfront hotels. The surf and sand offer swimming, kayaking, fishing, and shoreline walks.

Autumn: Explore the mountains from late September to early November when fiery foliage displays and cool temperatures attract hikers and campers. Canopy tours and ziplines are plentiful, offering a thrilling way to see the colors.

Winter: Elevation differences in NC mean weather ranges from mild (average high temperatures on the Outer Banks hover in the 50s) to chilly and, occasionally, snowy in the western peaks, where **Beech Mountain** and **Blowing Rock** have ski resorts. Come December, holiday lights sparkle inside the Biltmore and at the North Carolina Botanical Garden in Asheville. At NASCAR's Charlotte Motor Speedway, the car-racing oval hosts a glittering drive-thru display.

Zoom in for more detail.





Left: Asheville's Biltmore house is a 175,000-square-foot mansion built by the Vanderbilt family during the Gilded Age. Guided tours take in its collection of antiques and grand spaces, such as the indoor swimming pool.
PHOTOGRAPH BY MELISSA FARLOW, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION



Right: Designed to wow visitors, Biltmore's Winter Garden atrium hosts events such as chamber music concerts.
PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTA ROSSOW, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

Lay of the land

Cities: Appealing to speed lovers of all sorts, **Charlotte** offers prime rafting and kayaking at the [National Whitewater Center](#), plus the [NASCAR Hall of Fame](#), with exhibits on car racing. **Raleigh**, the state capital, is home to storied universities (**Duke**, the **University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**) as well as the [North Carolina Museum of Art](#), which has a large collection of work by August Rodin and a jumbo outdoor sculpture garden.

Mountains: The Blue Ridge Mountains and [Great Smoky Mountains National Park](#) (which extends into Tennessee) offer up scenic drives and great hiking trails. The **Pisgah** and **Nantahala National Forests** also contain hundreds of miles of trails, and the **New River**—one of the world's oldest rivers—appeals to kayakers, campers, and anglers.

Coastal plain: Bliss out along North Carolina's 301-mile-long Atlantic coastline, which includes [Cape Hatteras National Seashore](#) on the Outer Banks with its unspoiled barrier island beaches. Come summer, beaches like **Kitty Hawk** and **Corolla** draw legions of swimmers, surfers, and sunbathers.



Beach houses—many for rent by the week—line North Carolina's Outer Banks, including this stretch of Hatteras Island.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE THEISS, NAT GEO
IMAGE COLLECTION

Getting in and around North Carolina

By plane: The state's two largest airports are **Charlotte Douglas International (CLT)** and **Raleigh-Durham International (RDU)**; both have connections to major cities across the United States and internationally. The **Asheville Regional Airport (AVL)** gives easy access to this artsy mountain city.

By car: North Carolina is easily accessible via several major interstates including I-40, I-85, and I-95. Two of the best road trips are the 252-mile section of the **Blue Ridge Parkway**, with breathtaking views of the **Appalachian Mountains**, and the **Outer Banks National Scenic Byway**. The latter begins in **Nags Head**, then winds along the barrier islands past charming beach towns, storied lighthouses and even on two ferries before ending near **Beaufort**.

By train: Service to North Carolina is available aboard **Amtrak's Crescent** (from New York to New Orleans) and **Silver Meteor** (New York to Miami) among other routes.

By bus: **Piedmont Authority for Regional Transportation** provides express bus and shuttle service to major cities such as **Greensboro**, **High Point**, and **Winston-Salem**.

In town: Winston-Salem and Asheville both have bus systems, and Raleigh has a bike-share program. Charlotte's **LYNX light rail** has 26 stations, a few of which stop near tourist attractions such as **Discovery Place Science**.

Know before you go

Cultural history: This is the ancestral homeland of the Cherokee people, a number of whom still live in the town of **Cherokee**, where you can visit a traditional crafts center and the **Oconaluftee Indian Village**. Here, reenactors recreate a 1760s settlement.

English settlers arrived in 1587, and North Carolina became one of the first 13 American colonies in 1729. Learn about colonial life at **Tyron Palace**, a circa-1767 brick manse where George Washington once attended a ball. In Winston-Salem, **Old Salem** is a 18th- to 19th-century Moravian settlement that uses historic interpreters to share narratives from the past.

On the Outer Banks, the **Wright Brothers National Monument** in **Kill Devil Hills** pays tribute to the sibling inventors who launched the world's first flight here in 1903.

Festivals: North Carolina is a southern state, meaning it loves a party. A few of the biggest? The **North Carolina State Fair** in Raleigh, with its down-home blend of agricultural displays, carnival rides, and live music. The **Wilmington Azalea Festival**, held in April, fetes the blooming bushes with garden tours, a colorful parade, and outdoor concerts. In May, **Asheville Beer Week** showcases the mountain city's brewing scene with tastings and other events. One of the state's biggest annual happenings is May's **Coca-Cola 600 NASCAR race** that sees revved-up stock cars racing around the Charlotte Motor Speedway.

Cuisine: North Carolina wins raves for its pork barbecue, which stars a whole hog that's been pit-roasted, pulled off the bone, and mixed with a tangy vinegar sauce—it's best eaten on a sandwich with coleslaw. Other homegrown fare includes **Krispy Kreme Donuts** and **Cheerwine**, a cherry-flavored soda made in Salisbury since 1917.

LGBTQ+: North Carolina ranked 33rd in a [2020 24/7 Wall St. report](#) of the most LGBTQ+-friendly states in the U.S. Despite NC's relatively conservative politics, cities such as **Carrboro**, **Chapel Hill**, and **Winston-Salem** get high marks on the [Human Rights Campaign 2022 Municipal Equality Index](#) scorecard.



Wedge Brewing Company is one of dozens of microbreweries operating in Asheville, North Carolina. PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTA ROSSOW, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

How to visit North Carolina sustainably

Outdoors: Help preserve habitat by keeping on designated trails, roads, or marked spurs. Search out and support sustainable tourism businesses like eco-tours, farm stays, and wildlife refuges. The [113-page NC Guide to Sustainability Resources](#) lists many travel-related businesses that go easy on the environment.

Dining: Look for restaurants that source food from local farmers, which helps to support the nearby economy and reduce waste. Good options? Asheville's [Farmhouse Burger](#), where you can get a grass-fed-beef patty topped with pimento cheese, a spicy North Carolina spread, and the [Lantern Restaurant](#) in Chapel Hill, which puts Southeast Asian spins on homegrown ingredients such as pork and oysters.

Foraging tours with Asheville's [No Taste Like Home](#) venture into the surrounding countryside in search of edible greens, berries, mushrooms, and flowers.

Lodging: The state-sponsored [NCGreenTravel](#) lists sustainable hotels and ranks them via a clever one-to-three dogwood blossom rating system. Some to investigate include the [Solar Farmhouse](#) in **Boone County** and the [Umstead Hotel and Spa](#) in **Cary** with its locavore restaurant and extensive recycling program.

What to read

[Cold Mountain](#), by Charles Frazier. Homer's *Oydssey* gets reset in Civil War-era North Carolina in this epic, atmospheric tale of a soldier's long journey home.

The Last Castle: The Epic Story of Love, Loss, and American Royalty in the Nation's Largest Home, by Denise Kiernan. A juicy historic romp through the construction of Asheville's Biltmore mansion gives details on the wealthy Vanderbilt clan that built it, as well as the celebs and servants that frequented its grand, Gilded Age halls.

(For more tips on what to do in North Carolina, see our [Explorer's Guide](#).)

Andrew Nelson writes frequently on travel for National Geographic and other national outlets. Follow him on [Instagram](#).



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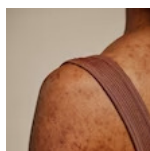
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