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Frugal Traveler

Frugal Traveler: Affordable vacation options exist in Asheville, NC

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The outdoor spa at the Grove Park Inn, Asheville, North Carolina, at twilight.

None — Courtesy of Grove Park Inn

Gracing the North Carolina mountains with a hip urban vibe, noteworthy art scene and a growing circuit of artisan microbreweries is the city of Asheville. Phenomenal food and well-preserved historical buildings are also part of the travel itinerary for this destination. Here's how to make the most of your vacation dollars while visiting.

Appetites: Favor a big breakfast? The Corner Kitchen offers a variety of hearty options such as \$5 biscuits and gravy and \$2 grits. The most unexpected item on their breakfast menu, however, is their \$9 breakfast salad featuring bacon, eggs, fresh spinach leaves, pecans, blue cheese and your choice of toast. They also have veggie sausage available as a meatless substitution. Budget travelers who love tapas will find a safe and sexy dinner bet at Curate. It offers a modern atmosphere with an open kitchen and a nearly

bottomless tapas menu. Prices per plate start as low as \$4, with a wide variety of selections available for less than 10 bucks. While there's plenty available here for the carnivorous palate, vegetarian and gluten-free diners will also find lots to love. Of note are their sherry-sauteed mushrooms and fried eggplant accented with rosemary and mountain honey.

Got a sweet tooth? Head to the French Broad Chocolate Lounge, where baked yummys start as low as \$2, and come with access to a wine menu. Speaking of beverages, the city also has an extensive network of craft breweries. A fun one to try is the Lexington Avenue Brewery. It has a fun atmosphere, features regular drink specials with live entertainment and offers a selection of starters and desserts for as little as \$6 that first-time visitors can enjoy with a tasting flight. Authentic Italian cuisine can be experienced at Modesto, although those on a budget will definitely want to descend during lunch hours when the prices drop roughly 50 percent. Satisfying portions of \$7 vegetable gnocchi and mushroom carbonara are not unheard of, although an evening entree will cost you closer to 20 bucks.

Activities: The headquarters of Moog Music, known for making musical instruments for some of the top performers in the industry, is in Asheville. Free tours are available by appointment. Literature fans may want to check out the Thomas Wolfe Memorial, where for \$5 visitors can receive a guided tour of one of the author's former homes, see an informational video and have access to the memorial's exhibit hall.

If luxurious lounging is more your speed, consider an afternoon or evening at the Grove Park Inn's spa. With multiple waterfalls, fireside steam pools and more set inside a cave-like venue, it's a romantic must for couples. Day passes can cost as much as \$90 even for resort guests, but savvy savings are available by purchasing one of its twilight passes. Available from 5-9 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, these tickets allow evening access for \$60. The cost drops even more for resort guests.

Those on more of a penny-pinching budget who still have their hearts set on spending a bit of time in the historic section of the building should head to the bar area in the Grove Park Inn's main lobby to order one of their decadent signature mugs of hot cocoa. For \$5, you can enjoy a salt-dusted, chocolaty beverage topped with whipped cream and caramel sauce. This treat is scrumptious during any cold-weather month, but is particularly festive during the winter holidays when the resort hosts its annual gingerbread competition. (A Cary woman won the 2012 competition in December.)

Attractions: The downtown Grove Arcade offers a picturesque, period venue for shopping, dining and relaxing. A fun place to unwind after hitting the shops at this location is the Battery Park Book Exchange and Champagne Bar. It offers affordable wine pours, coffee selections and homemade baked treats in a canine-friendly environment suitable for magazine perusal and quiet conversation. Biltmore Estate is arguably the area's most iconic and elaborate attraction. High season rates for entry ring in at \$59 per adult ticket, but bargain hunters can save \$15 by purchasing entry passes seven days in advance.

Travelers trying to catch a glimpse of the city's indie scene will absolutely want to include a trip to the River Arts District on their list of things to do. Located in a section of Asheville significantly separated from the rest of the fray, it exudes a gritty authenticity that leaves you with no doubt that this is the real deal. Artists are carving out spaces for themselves in anything from old garage bays to rustic warehouse facilities. For a peek into an ancient art form few artists still specialize in, search out the gallery and encaustic painting studio of Constance Williams. Other fun finds include retail spaces for edgy scrap metal artists and the studios of a number of talented sculptors.

Myscha Theriault/McClatchy-Tribune News Service

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