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## Find Your Happy in Charlottesville

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### **Escape from the new normal for some good times in Charlottesville.**

Tom Robbins, one of my favorite writers, once said, “It’s never too late to have a happy childhood.” As I grow older, this saying resonates more and more. Life should be fun, silly, spontaneous, and exciting—like back in the day when we were kids and could spend whole afternoons just playing and goofing around.

As the pandemic continues into the winter months, we all need a break from the storm and stress that cloaks us like an oppressive cloud. Leaving our cares behind for a short getaway can do wonders for our mood and remind us that life is about more than work and bills and scanning social media. It’s about enjoying life!

And where better to pursue a happy escape than Charlottesville, home of our third president, Thomas Jefferson, who penned the Declaration of Independence, promising all Americans the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

So, together with my friend Sue, I headed west last month to see what kind of fun awaited in this picturesque city nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Come join us for a romp through Charlottesville and environs.

## Ride Through Pastoral Landscape at Oakland Heights Farm

Then Play with Voodoo Dolls at IX Art Park



Our first stop was Gordonsville, about half an hour east of Charlottesville. On my last visit with hubby, Peter, we enjoyed an excellent horseback ride at Oakland Heights Farm with owner David Lamb. I couldn't wait to go for another ride on the farm's wooded trails and hear David share legends and lore.

Sue used to own horses, and, while she hadn't ridden in a while, was totally excited to get back in the saddle. I rode Speck, and she rode Sonny, and as we headed across a lush green meadow toward the woods, our horses kicked up their heels. With big smiles on our faces, we rode for an hour through primeval forests, far, far away from the bustling modern world. Even now when I close my eyes, I can still smell the piney woods and hear the clapping of our horse's hooves and the creaking of saddles.

More playing was in store in Charlottesville's IX (rhymes with mix) Art Park, once a textile factory that shut down in the late 1990s, now reborn as an indoor/outdoor arts destination. Outside a park offers interactive murals and sculptures and hosts festivals and a weekly farmers' market. Inside the former factory is event space and a new interactive exhibit called "The Looking Glass," for which timed tickets are available. Limited capacity, gloves, and masks ensure a safe experience for guests, and wow, what a fun place it was.

Thirteen local artists have created a wonderland of interactive art experiences incorporating a variety of art media, and everything is user friendly. You can swing among jellyfish-like tentacles hanging from the ceiling or slither through a cave like a caterpillar, emerging into a glowing neon space full of squiggles and secret words hidden in day-glo colors on a wall.

Then there are the strange life-sized metallic voodoo-like dolls that you can push over, but watch out! They bounce back to their upright position, so you have to jump out of the way. Each one emits a different sound when you touch it, so the experience is multi-sensory—and so fun. Next door is an elf's house, which you can crawl inside and learn about elf life. Sue and I both had a ball playing like kids at this exhibit—highly recommended.

Next up: a hike on the Saunders-Monticello Trails just outside of town. One thing I love about Charlottesville is how close everything is. Everywhere Sue and I went took 15 minutes or less by car or on foot from Downtown. The trails lead up to Monticello, a 4-mile roundtrip walk. We hiked about a mile up a gentle incline, and while the leaves weren't quite at their peak, we loved being in the woods, ambling along, inhaling the fresh air, and chatting about everything and nothing. Walking does wonders for your mood, and it's free!

Sue and I checked into our hotel, The Graduate, across from the University of Virginia campus. It's one of a growing chain of hip, trendy hotels located in college towns across the country and soon in the U.K. Each property "celebrates and commemorates the youthful optimism of school days." We loved our room with its collegiate vibe and remembered our own college days, that transitional chapter between youth and adulthood where having fun was equally as important as getting to class on time.

We dined that evening on the outdoor terrace at Maya Restaurant on Main Street, which specializes in seasonal Southern fare. Sue loved her cocktail, the Femme Fatale, which she described as "hot, sweet, and sour." I tried the Ted-tini, a gin martini with olives and onions, created by the bartender, who's name—wait for it—is Ted. He came by our table to see how we

liked our drinks. Our apps—fried green tomatoes and fried oysters—and entrees—hanger steak and crab cakes—were delicious, and we lingered until long after sundown enjoying our fabulous dinner before walking back to our hotel.

## Visiting Monticello is a Must-See

### Then Lunch on Southern Cooking at Michie Tavern



You can't go to Charlottesville without visiting Monticello. Sue had never been, so I was thrilled to show her around. It's different now with the pandemic, and instead of guided tours, guests are admitted in small groups to wander through Jefferson's stately home on their own. Q-codes link to websites with information about each of the rooms. My advice is to read up on all things Monticello before going, so you'll spend less time looking at your phone and more time enjoying the moment.

Jefferson once said, "Architecture is my delight." He learned about it through his reading and while traveling abroad, choosing finally a French neoclassical style for Monticello. The three-story house took 40 years to complete and features 11 rooms and 11,000 feet of living space. Everywhere you look in Monticello, you'll see items and artifacts that provide insight into Jefferson's curious mind.

One of the docents at Monticello confided that Jefferson came back from the dead, and we could go hear him talk under a nearby white tent. The reenactor dressed in 18th-century garb (plus a mask) talked for about 30 minutes and took questions from the audience. He expounded on principles like self-governance and compromise, concepts that seem to apply as much now as they did 200 years ago—maybe more. My favorite quote was, “I live in a four mile-an-hour world,” Jefferson once said, referring to the speed of a horse. Ahh, life in the slow lane.

After visiting Monticello, we were starving and headed to Michie Tavern for lunch. Conveniently located a few minutes from the entrance to Monticello, this historic tavern offers a glimpse of 18th-century life along with a fine spread of Southern cooking. The buffet was as good as I remembered it from my last visit: amazing fried chicken, pork BBQ, and sides aplenty. The Tavern is open year-round and offers cozy dining rooms with open-hearth fireplaces during the winter months. Nearby is Carter Mountain Orchard, where you can pick apples or enjoy one of their legendary apple cider doughnuts.

A new foodie destination in Charlottesville is The Wool Factory, a multi-purpose space in—you guessed it—an old brick factory on the edge of town. Home to a brewery, a coffee and wine shop, event space, and a soon-to-be-opened restaurant, The Wool Factory debuted this summer and, like all food-centric businesses, is looking forward to better days post-pandemic. Meanwhile, Sue and I sampled wine in the courtyard on a cozy couch underneath strings of lights that glowed as daylight faded into dusk.

After a quick refresh at the hotel, we walked about a mile to the Downtown Mall, one of my favorite destinations in Charlottesville. Lined with restaurants and shops, the brick-paved city blocks were once a street, but it was remodeled in 1976 into a pedestrian-only zone.

Today it's a booming district for outdoor dining, arts events, and more. Sue and I had reservations at Hamilton's at First & Main, which has been delighting diners since 1996. Chef Hannah Moster brings her culinary flair to the restaurant's contemporary American cuisine, and we couldn't wait to try the unique dishes.

For starters, Logan, our server, recommended we try the smorrebrød, open-faced rye sandwiches with roots in Scandinavia, so we ordered two. The first brimmed with aged bleu cheese, cherries, and arugula. On the second were thin layers of rare beef tenderloin with horseradish cream cheese, marinated shiitake, and smoked tomato vinaigrette. So flavorful.

We shared two of the restaurant's uncommon cocktails with our appetizers: one a frothy espresso drink and the other a multi-rum concoction. Both hit the spot. For our entrée, we shared a Cornish hen curry with persimmons, Brussel sprouts, slivered almonds, and basmati rice. It was spot on—sweet and savory. Luckily, we had a mile's walk back to the hotel since we definitely needed to burn some calories after that feast!

## Plenty of Foodie Finds in C'ville—Like Superette Saison Then Catch a Show at The Paramount Theater



Sue and I kept saying how lucky we were to visit Charlottesville on incredibly beautiful autumn days, and our last day was no exception. After a walk on the gorgeous UVA grounds, we headed to James Monroe's Highland, just south of Monticello. The house was closed to visitors, but we enjoyed exploring the farm before taking a hike on a lovely trail that meandered through meadows and woodlands.

Back in town, we dined on delicious fried schnitzel sandwiches at Superette Saison, a boutique wine store serving light lunches, part of a family of restaurants owned by Hunter Smith. Afterwards we met Maran, marketing director for the Paramount Theater, a classic movie palace that also hosts arts performances and acclaimed artists like Tony Bennett, Ralph Stanley, Joan

Baez, and YoYo Ma. The theater opened in 1931 and recently underwent a multi-million dollar renovation, restoring it to its neoclassical elegance. Marin says the theater is “an escape from reality,” something we all need desperately now. They are currently operating at limited capacity, showing movies on the big screen for \$5 a show. What a deal.

Our time in C’ville was up, but neither Sue nor I were ready to leave. We’d both fallen under Charlottesville’s spell, loving its walkable streets, cozy hometown vibe, and tons of fun just waiting to be had. Need to get happy? Head up to this gem of a city, have fun, and leave your worries behind. I’ll be right behind you!

For more information, please visit [www.visitcharlottesville.org](http://www.visitcharlottesville.org).

See Peggy dance with the voodoo dolls on our [Facebook page](#). Please like our page!

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