

# Greenville, South Carolina

SMALL TOWN CHARM, BIG CITY OFFERINGS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MARLA HARDEE MILLING

**I**t may be hard to think of a place outside of New York City to catch a first-rate Broadway show like *Hamilton*, *Wicked* and *Dear Evan Hansen*, dine in high-caliber restaurants serving up everything from antelope and kangaroo to vegan fare to Mediterranean, Indian, Mexican, American and Asian cuisines, take part in a lively entertainment scene, and stroll through a vibrant downtown.

But such a place does exist.

Greenville, South Carolina, definitely fits the bill. If I had to do an elevator speech of sorts to extoll the virtues of Greenville, I'd simply describe it this way: Greenville has a big-city feel wrapped in southern hospitality and small-town charm.

This historic textile town—there were 18 mills here at its peak, including 16 cotton mills—is now home to more than 650 manufacturers and 40 Fortune 500 companies. In 1986, French tire maker Michelin created its North American headquarters in Greenville, and German automaker BMW established its presence in the 1990s. Check out BMW's performance driving school.

Greenville has morphed into a place sought out by young professionals, families with school-age children and retirees alike. It's ripe with outdoor adventure opportunities, a thriving, safe, walkable downtown, an eclectic mix of public art and museums, the renowned Peace Center, which hosts concerts, special events, and those sought-after Broadway shows, rooftop bars, free street festivals and music, foodie tours, a wide array of shops and boutiques, and more than 1,000 hotel rooms downtown and more than 9,000 rooms in Greenville County.

And if you stay in one of those downtown hotels, you'll be in walking distance of more than 110 restaurants. That's pretty amazing for a small town. The population of Greenville is 68,219. That



number grows to 491,000 for Greenville County. With other towns named Greenville in the region, it's easy to see why the town's marketing campaign slogan is #yeahTHAT-Greenville.

## GETTING THE LAY OF THE LAND

Signing up for a foodie tour is a wonderful introduction to Greenville, its history, and its food. I can personally recommend several of the tours, including At the Chef's Table Culinary Tour and the Greenville BBQ Trail Tour offered by John Nolan at Greenville History Tours. John is the author of *A Guide to Historic Greenville, South Carolina* and expertly weaves nuggets of history into the tour. Take along a cooler if you're heading out of town after the BBQ tour—most likely you will have boxes of leftovers to enjoy later.

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I also highly recommend the Saturday morning breakfast tour offered by Rose Woelker at Foothill Foodie Tours.

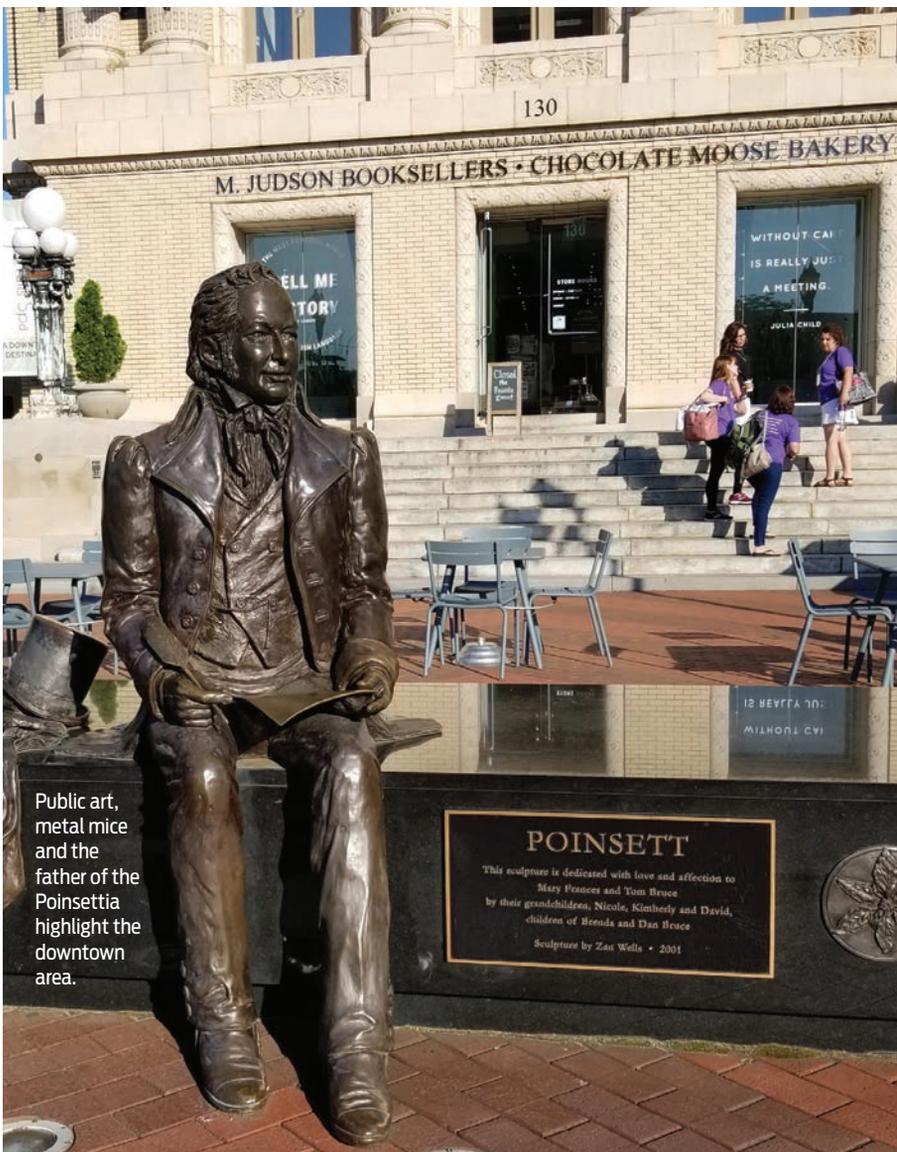
The great benefit of these tours is that you have an opportunity to walk around downtown Greenville (although you ride among BBQ restaurants on a tour van), find out about the history of the place, and eat enough food to cover you for most of the day. The tours are seriously a tremendous value.

On a recent Saturday morning, my kids (ages 19 and 21) and I strolled through the TD Saturday Market on Main Street. It's a thriving farmer's market that runs from 8 a.m. to noon on Saturdays May through October. More than 75 vendors, comprised of local farms and businesses, set up booths featuring fresh vegetables, plants, specialty products, fruits and more. I noticed that while all the booths had a lot of activity, one booth had an impossibly long line stretched down the sidewalk. Apparently the Bake Room has built a core following and people get in line early for hopes of getting the fresh breads and pastries before they run out.

We soon met up with Rose Woelker outside of Crepe du Jour to begin the breakfast tour. While Rose is relatively new to Greenville, having moved to town about nine years ago, she has

A thriving farmer's market and frequent food tours are must-sees in downtown Greenville.





Public art, metal mice and the father of the Poinsettia highlight the downtown area.

studied up on area history to make the journey interesting on the walks between meals.

And yes, these food tours offer full meals.

Participants receive three full sit-down breakfasts to enjoy as they wander around downtown. First stop: a cream-filled crepe topped with strawberries and served with scrambled eggs, bacon, mimosas or coffee. Next stop: Maple Street Biscuit Company where staff served up overflowing plates with a huge biscuit covered with sausage gravy and topped with scrambled eggs and bacon, plus coffee or fountain drinks. The third stop took us to Roost, located on NOMA (short for North Main) Square. We enjoyed French toast (regional bread soaked in milk from Happy Cow Creamery in Pelzer and local eggs, and then seared on the flat top grill) topped with

strawberries/blueberries/blackberries, dusted with powdered sugar, and served with the best sausage link I've ever tasted, along with mimosas or coffee.

Daniel Dobbs, the chef at Roost, defines his menu concept as "soil to city"—his cutting-edge term for the more passé "farm to table."

"The cool thing for me is I grew up baling hay for Greenbrier Farms [in Easley] in high school, so I still have a great relationship with them," Dobbs said. "It's pretty neat that this company lets me bring in people I grew up with and family friends. The guy who makes our pasta, I grew up with him and played baseball with him. It's neat to keep the money in Greenville and keep it going to people I grew up with who are trying to make a name for themselves in Greenville."

## ANYTHING BUT ORDINARY

Dobbs also says he likes to surprise diners: "At night we have some things on the menu that other people don't. We have bison from Asheville and rabbit from right outside of Asheville. Come have some rabbit and grits."

Over at Saskatoon Lodge, just outside of downtown near Haywood Mall, the menu is equally exotic. Our waiter told us the specials that night were kangaroo and alligator. While we did sample a trio appetizer plate of antelope, venison and bison, we ended up selecting more traditional choices—wild salmon, shrimp & scallops and NY strip steak.

Sasakatoon Lodge has a long history in Greenville. It operated for 25 years at a location

on Haywood Road before owners Edmund and Renee Woo moved the restaurant in 2017 to an expansive 7,500-square-foot structure located on nine acres on Halton Road. The comfortable rustic surroundings lend themselves to a lengthy, upscale dinner—this is often the place people go to dine for milestone celebrations: birthdays, anniversaries and graduations.

Because there are so many great restaurants in town, the biggest hurdle is narrowing down your choice, but through the years I've built my own list of personal favorites. The Lazy Goat ranks superb in my book with its inventive Mediterranean menu—seriously some of the best food I've eaten in Greenville has emerged from its kitchen. But on a recent visit, Up on the Roof moved into serious first place contention.

We headed to this spot since it was simply floors above us as we stayed at the Embassy Suites at Riverplace (perfect location, I might

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add, for anything we wanted to do).

Up on the Roof offers superb views and a great menu. It's also a popular late night spot for friends to gather. Here, I had the best pan-fried trout of my life. My daughter had a breakfast poutine and my son opted for a hangover burger. We all agreed—it was the best food we enjoyed on our trip. That's a high honor as everything we ate in Greenville was wonderful.

We also found our favorites in the way of snacks and beverages: exquisite hand-popped gourmet popcorn in a variety of flavors at Poppington's Gourmet Popcorn and bubble tea at O-Cha Tea Bar and Cosmic Rabbits Tea Co. It was actually called Chasing Rabbits when we visited, but a trademark challenge from a company in California forced the mother and daughter owners to make a change.

Rose Augustyn, who operates Poppington's Popcorn with her husband, Bob, quickly offered samples—a wise move since tasting the freshly popped corn leads to potential customers wanting more. Once you taste their fresh popped corn (all made in-house), you really don't want to go back to other varieties. For those with food allergies, this is a peanut-free production facility. They use non-GMO corn and coconut oil for popping, and also offer gluten-free and vegan options.

They started with six flavors and now have

dozens. Salted Caramel remains the number-one favorite. They also have the capability to create custom flavors for customers. "We have popped over 25 tons of corn since we opened in 2012," Rose said.

She exemplifies the kindness that seems pervasive in Greenville. Even though the store was crowded and the atmosphere hectic on a busy Saturday afternoon, she never missed a beat in offering personal attention and helpful conversation.

We also noticed how clean the downtown area is—a testament to the pride that residents and business owners take in their community. It's truly an inviting place.

## EVERYTHING'S COMING UP LAVENDER

We also sampled the lavender chocolate, and made a purchase of culinary lavender, at a new store on Main Street—Pelindaba Lavender.

Owners Matt and Jaime Hill had been looking for franchises and keyed in on Pelindaba Lavender when they returned to Washington State to visit Jaime's family. There they visited the Pelindaba Lavender Farm on the San Juan Islands and Jaime was hooked.

"Whenever we got back home, she ordered an irresponsible amount of product over the next couple of months," Matt says with a laugh. "By mid-summer I started looking for a job. I was working for a non-profit that wasn't going to be sustainable anymore. So Jaime said, 'Do you want to quit your job, cash in our retirement and build one of those stores?'" His answer was yes.

The couple lives in Augusta, Georgia, but during a conference trip, Matt and Jaime explored the downtown area and quickly decided it would be a great spot for their new store.

"We walked the city three times," Matt said. "This space had just become available. It was the smallest thing available. There were other spaces available twice the size. We were able to get the commercial real estate agent out on a Saturday evening. We walked into the store and said 'Yes, we're going to do it.'" They signed the lease in September 2018 and opened their doors in February 2019.

Founded by Stephen Robins, Pelindaba currently only has six franchisees. He named his lavender farm Pelindaba after a Zulu word from his native South Africa. The word means "a place of great gatherings."

"We're all about for-profit for good," Matt said. "Non-profits are great, but sometimes they can't keep the cash flow to keep doing

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One of Greenville's greatest attractions is its system of urban parks, including Falls Park at Reedy River.

## Greenville Signature Events

**T**here are many events throughout the year that draw people to Greenville, but the town also hosts what it calls "signature events." Here's a quick look at what's on tap.

### **EUPHORIA, SEPTEMBER 19-22, 2019**

The tagline for this event is "eat. sip. listen." It showcases culinary and musical excellence in Greenville with more than 100 chefs and beverage professionals, 15 live music performances, and 39 special events. Proceeds from this non-profit festival are distributed through annual grants to local charities. [euphoriagreenville.com](http://euphoriagreenville.com).

### **FALL FOR GREENVILLE, OCTOBER 11-13, 2019**

This popular weekend event brings a lot of energy to Greenville's Main Street with almost

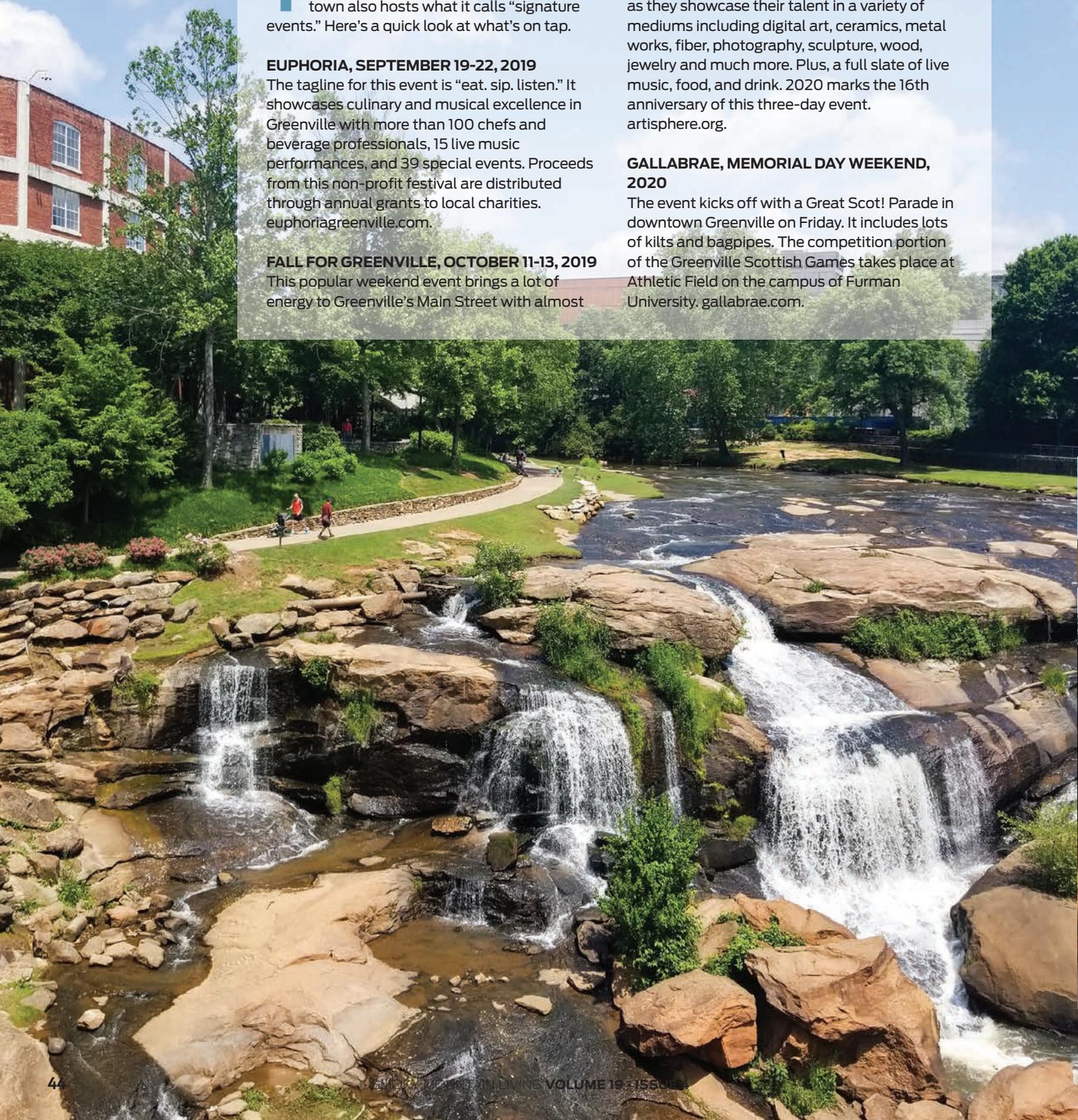
50 restaurants taking part and seven stages of free entertainment. There are also culinary demonstrations, kids' activities, and plenty of beer and wine. [fallforgreenville.net](http://fallforgreenville.net).

### **ARTISPHERE, MAY 8-10, 2020**

Artists will converge on Greenville's Main Street as they showcase their talent in a variety of mediums including digital art, ceramics, metal works, fiber, photography, sculpture, wood, jewelry and much more. Plus, a full slate of live music, food, and drink. 2020 marks the 16th anniversary of this three-day event. [artisphere.org](http://artisphere.org).

### **GALLABRAE, MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND, 2020**

The event kicks off with a Great Scot! Parade in downtown Greenville on Friday. It includes lots of kilts and bagpipes. The competition portion of the Greenville Scottish Games takes place at Athletic Field on the campus of Furman University. [gallabrae.com](http://gallabrae.com).



something. The overall capital venture of Pelindaba is focused based on land preservation to make sure that our farm, that is a park, stays there for residents of the island indefinitely.”

The store is loaded with everything lavender—from lotions and soaps to hot chocolate and tea to pet grooming products. It’s worth it just to walk in and savor the lavender aroma.

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### ART IS EVERYWHERE

Finding art can be easy as well as challenging in Greenville. You’ll spot it everywhere—on street corners and in museums, but some works of art are so small they might go unnoticed by a random person passing by. There are nine bronze mice displayed around Main Street that provide great fodder for scavenger hunt lists.

The easiest one to find is near NOMA Square on North Main Street. The bronze mouse is on a rock, appearing to read a bronze copy of the well-loved children’s book, “Goodnight Moon.”

Mice on Main was the senior project creation of a Christ Church Episcopal School stu-

dent named Jim Ryan in 2000. He got the idea of placing nine mice around town from the “Goodnight Moon” book, which has nine mice featured in the text. The mice were created by Greenville sculptor Zan Wells.

Rose Woelker pointed out one of the mice, crouched on a railing above our heads, as we passed along our food tour journey.

Before trying to track all nine down, you can download a list of scavenger hunt clues to find them: [bit.ly/2HZ8Ifi](http://bit.ly/2HZ8Ifi).

There are several statues around town giving nod to significant historic figures. One of my favorites is a statue of Joel Poinsett. The likeness of Poinsett is seated on a bench adjacent to the Poinsett Hotel and in front of a building housing M. Judson Booksellers and Chocolate Moose Bakery. One of the reasons it’s my favorite is that he has a pen in his hand. There’s also a top hat and coat draped beside him.

Poinsett had a remarkable political career and served as Secretary of War from 1837 to 1841, but his greatest claim to fame might be the red plant he brought to South Carolina from Mexico after serving as minister to Mexico. That plant was named for him—it’s the poinsettia, especially popular in the holiday season.

There are many other statues around town including children at play, Sterling High School students, a Cherokee Indian, Vardry McBee,

known as “The Father of Greenville,” and Shoeless Joe Jackson, who began his baseball career in Greenville and went on to play for the Chicago White Sox. In 2017, Greenville moved the Jackson statue from its spot on the West End Plaza to the Greenville Drive stadium. The Greenville Drive is a minor league team that plays in the South Atlantic League. They are a Class A affiliate of the Boston Red Sox.

The mix of art downtown includes murals, fountains, brick reliefs sculpted with historic scenes and depictions of current-day and future Greenville, and modern sculptures such as the Paradigm Pathway, at the entrance to the bridge at Riverplace. It’s especially colorful at night, as well as the exteriors of surrounding hotels illuminated with changing colors that rotate among hues of pinks, blues and greens. It’s especially beautiful at the waterfall outside of the Lazy Goat restaurant, with a rainbow of colors shining out of spotlights.

Other notable public art is found within the Falls Park on the Reedy River. There’s a stunning “Rose Crystal Tower” created by glass artist Dale Chihuly, a sculpture by internationally-recognized artist Bryan Hunt, “Sunflower Fountain” by Ed Zeigler, Charles Gunning and Robert Brown, and a tall, red untitled sculpture by Joel Shapiro that’s often called the “dancing” or “running sculpture.”



Theatergoers can enjoy popular shows downtown. At right, Heather Soto sells a variety of pasta at the Rio Bertolini booth at Greenville’s TD Saturday Market.



Jackie Watson at Piney Mountain Bike Lounge. “We’re lucky to have some of the best places to ride in the country,” she said. The Liberty Bridge offers an elevated view of flowing waters in downtown Greenville.



During our stay, we took a brief reprieve from the heat by entering the Greenville County Museum of Art, located next to The Children’s Museum of the Upstate. I was surprised to find out this museum, filled with three floors of incredible art, is open to the public free of charge. Of special note here—this space contains the world’s largest public collection of Andrew Wyeth watercolors.

We also enjoyed visiting the Art Crossing at RiverPlace and having a chance to talk with working artists about their inspiration.

## CULTURAL AND SPECIAL EVENTS

The Peace Center has emerged as the hub of cultural life in Upstate South Carolina. It’s prominently located on South Main Street adjacent to Falls Park. It’s gained a stellar reputation by offering an incredible lineup of Broadway shows, concerts, summer camps and more. The 2019/2020 Broadway season at The Peace Center includes shows such as *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, *Cats*, *Aladdin*, *Les Misérables* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

Their website already contains hints of a blockbuster 2020-2021 season with the return of *Hamilton* and *Wicked*.

There are also concerts and special events galore at the Bon Secours Wellness Arena and at the Spectrum Center. Some of the upcoming performances include Willie Nelson & Family and Alison Krauss, Disney on Ice and Jurassic World at Bon Secours and Queen + Adam Lambert on August 23 at the Spectrum Center, along with a steady lineup of entertainers through 2019/2020 including Elton John’s Farewell Yellow Brick Road Tour, the Jonas Brothers, and the Celine Dion.

Then there are the plentiful free special events hosted by the City of Greenville. While we were in town, we stopped in at Cantina 76 for a fun Friday night meal and then followed the sound of music. At NOMA Square, people were dancing, others filled chairs, while a crowd mingled with friends on the street, enjoying the camaraderie of a beautiful weekend evening. It was all part of the family-friendly Main Street Friday Night music series, which runs from mid-March through the end of September.

## LOTS OF ROOM TO ROAM

Taking a stroll on the Liberty Bridge at Falls Park is a definite “must do” during a trip to Greenville. It’s a work all in itself as it curves

above the Reedy River waterfall. The bridge is 345 feet long and 12 feet wide. It was designed by architect Miguel Rosales and appears to float in the air.

Falls Park encompasses 20-acres and features landscaped gardens, trails, areas where you can picnic with family, and even excavated mill ruins. It’s free to visit and is open daily from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. It’s a bustling place with kids running around, people biking through, people walking across the Liberty Bridge and stopping to pose for group photos or selfies, and others dining at outdoor cafes surrounding the park.

A fun way to explore is by hopping on the Swamp Rabbit Trail, a 22-mile multi-use greenway. You can walk or bike here as the path runs beside the Reedy River.

The staff at Piney Mountain Bike Lounge have extensive knowledge about trails in the area, including the Swamp Rabbit Trail and those at nearby Paris Mountain State Park and other locales. If you’re in the market for a mountain bike, you can rent a demo for a day to try it out. If you decide to buy a bike, they’ll subtract the demo fee from your purchase price.

“My husband and I have both been into mountain biking for 25+ years,” says owner Jackie Batson. “I spent a good amount of time

mountain bike racing as well as road racing. We were always taking our bikes to different shops around town and over time we felt there wasn't one shop that really catered to mountain bikers and provided the type of community that we felt there was a demand for. We knew there were other places around the country combining beer with a bike shop, so we decided to give it a go."

In the process of brainstorming the business, she noticed that a building became empty after an old landscaping business closed. They

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worked out a deal with the owner to lease for a month and see how it worked. It then took on a momentum of its own.

Along with the multitude of bikes for sale, they have a full-service shop. They'll work on any type of bike as well as provide custom builds. "It's one of our favorite things to do—build up a bike that's unique for an individual," Jackie said. "We also like to spend time with our customers outside of the shop. We lead a shop

ride once a month. We meet here and caravan to one of the ride areas. We're lucky to have some of the best places to ride in the country."

The bar is a prominent feature with multi-colored bar stools and brews on tap reflecting the growing craft beer industry in Greenville. A recent study rated Greenville among the top 10 beer producers in the country. Portland ranked first with Asheville coming in second, but Greenville is not that far behind.

It's kid friendly, dog friendly, and a place where you can kick back with a cold one, play a game of pool or take a spin on the pump track out back.

Close to downtown, the Greenville Zoo offers another alternative for enjoying time outdoors, but it closes daily at 5 p.m. The last tickets are sold at 4:15 p.m. It's relatively small—encompassing just 14 acres—but there is plenty to see, including a family of giraffes, monkeys, snakes, flamingos, and more.

### RETAIL THERAPY

In between activities, events, and time spent outdoors, Greenville also has an eclectic mix of shops and stores including the North Carolina-

based Mast General Store with its trademark squeaky wooden floors and bounty of clothing, camping gear, household items, and bins filled with candies.

A sweet aroma attracted us into Magnolia Scents by Design, where they make all of their soy candles and other items in house. And another North Carolina-based store, O.P. Taylor's, also made its way to Greenville. It's packed floor to ceiling with all kinds of toys from modern inventions to vintage items.

The Greenville Gemstone Mine is a family favorite as we enjoy going in to look at the variety of gems, rocks, fossils, and jewelry. They even have a flume right in the store on Main Street, where you can dig through a bucket of dirt to see if you find a treasure. There's also a location at the Haywood Mall, located about four and a half miles from downtown. The mall has all the typical stores, with the anchors of Dillard's, J.C. Penney, Macy's, Belk and Sears.

Even after a full weekend of exploring Greenville, taking part in its activities and dining at amazing restaurants, it feels as though we've only just begun to scratch the surface of what makes this town so energizing and welcoming.

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