

AND LARGER  
KEYS

TRAVEL

## Tune in to wide blue grass yonder

North Carolina's moonshine and music scene can make any visit go with a twang

Jamie Ball

Sunday March 15 2020, 12.01 am,  
The Sunday TimesThe Wide Open Bluegrass Festival in Raleigh  
ALAMYShare    Save 

It's feeding time in Mount Airy. At Snappy Lunch, Troy shuffles across the floor like a snail, inching towards lunch; at this rate he'll be there by dinner. Once seated, he croons: "You'll be happy at the Snappy when you have the fried-pork sandwich. At the Snappy you'll always be happy."

The waitress brings out a muffin with a candle in it and kisses Troy on the head. Staff gather round and ask how old he is today. "I'm only 93," he barks. "Heck, I've got at least 10 years left in me. Now quit your standin' around. Where's my fried-pork sandwich?"

Plenty of musicians attend the festival in Raleigh  
ALAMY

It's not hard to warm to North Carolina and its amiable, garrulous population. Almost twice the size of Ireland, this is a southern state without the connotations of the Deep South. It stretches from the sun-licked coastline of the Outer Banks in the east, to the wooded folds of the Appalachians 700km to the west. In between, there are rolling rural idylls with tree-lined rivers and lakes, and villages and towns with some of the finest live bluegrass, old time and roots music — plus festivals (see box, right) — you will hear.

Named in honour of King Charles I of England (Carolus is Latin for "Charles"), the Carolinas have isolated hill country where the Scots-Irish settled. These were mostly Presbyterian farmers and craftsmen fleeing the penal laws, and gave rise to the term "hillbilly". They passed down the gift of the gab, and now courteous descendants called Earl, Lowry, Herman, Horace, Grace, Mary Beth, Eula Mae and Melody can jabber with the best of them, their engaging and flowing conversation graced with chivalrous greetings and peppered with "yes, sir" and "no, ma'am".

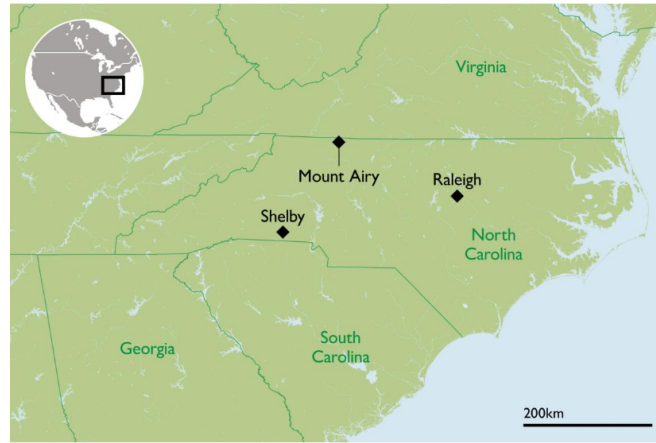
There is wicked humour, too. "How can you tell if the stage is level?" goes a joke in these parts. "See which side of the mouth the banjo player's drooling the most from."



Hills that once secluded small farmers and moonshiners now offer a panoply of

lands that once secured small farmers and moonshiners now offer a paucity of outdoor activities, but bluegrass is the principal obsession. At Mount Airy you can hear it live, seven nights a week — and that's where I learnt the difference between bluegrass and old time.

Kick off at the Earle Theatre ([surrycountymusic.com](http://surrycountymusic.com)), a downtown music hall built in 1935, and then tour WPaq ([wpag740.com](http://wpag740.com)), an Americana and bluegrass AM radio station that has run live broadcasts since 1948. Sample a craft beer in Thirsty Souls Community Brewing ([thirstysoulsbrewing.com](http://thirstysoulsbrewing.com)) before going to a “down-home” honky tonk bar where legions of punters and staff watch polo.



So, what is the difference between bluegrass and old time? The banjo originally crossed the Atlantic with west African slaves, and what is now called “old time” involved the “clawhammer” style, using thumb and finger. Earl Scruggs pioneered the “three-finger picking style” in the mid-1940s and gave birth to bluegrass, as I learnt at the Earl Scruggs Centre in the city of Shelby ([earlscruggscenter.org](http://earlscruggscenter.org)).

Next, it's on to Wilkes County, once known as the moonshine capital of the world. The county has a population of about 70,000 and what appears to be a similar number of churches. In April, it's home to Merlefest, a music festival running across 13 stages over four days ([merlefest.org](http://merlefest.org)).



The North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences  
ALAMY

US revenue officers once documented more than 50 illegal stills in North Carolina operating by the light of the moon. The moonshiners, true to their Irish bloodlines, thought it would be more of a craic to avoid the taxman. They modified their cars to outspeed police officers, and when that was no longer a contest, they raced each other. Thus Nascar (the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing) was born, with its first race in Wilkes County in 1948.

A tour of the Call Family Distillery in Wilkesboro ([callfamilydistillers.com](http://callfamilydistillers.com)) confirms as much. It is said to be where the original Jack Daniel learnt to distil, and its moonshine has been cheering spirits since 1868. The tour guide regularly intersperses her history lesson with the phrase “before we went legal”. Trying to work out whether she is referring to pre- or post-prohibition liquor laws, I interrupt to ask: “Sorry, just when did you go legal?”

“Oh,” muses the guide, stumped in her tracks. “Uh, about three years ago.”



The state capital of Raleigh  
ALAMY

Over to the east is the state capital of Raleigh, named after explorer Sir Walter. Its rolling, compact, tree-dotted city centre is a happy-go-lucky, cultured crossword of three-storied, ripened red bricks. Beneath gliding spirals of huge hawks, its switched-on, savvy citizens make great company.

In the cradle of this pedestrian-friendly city, I'd recommend giving at least an hour each to the North Carolina Museum of History ([ncmuseumofhistory.org](http://ncmuseumofhistory.org)) and the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences ([naturalsciences.org](http://naturalsciences.org)). Try a downtown trikke tour ([carolinatouring.com/trikke-tours/downtown-discovery-trikke-tour](http://carolinatouring.com/trikke-tours/downtown-discovery-trikke-tour)), which takes in some of the Raleigh's leafy inner suburbs with blocks of “painted ladies”: colourful, ornate, 19th-century wooden homes.



The city boasts a statue of Sir Walter in banjo mode  
ALAMY

Being home to the World of Bluegrass festival in the autumn, Raleigh is more than partial to live music. I test the theory, midweek, at the Raleigh Times bar's beer & banjo session, and hear musicians of such quality, it is hard to fathom the lack of an entry fee.

Above the Appalachian five-piece band, the brick walls have only one painting. Peering down on the chin-bopping musicians is an imperious portrait of WB Yeats. “Arise and go now,” he seems to declare, “to North Carolina.”

## WHERE TO HIT A PLUCKY STREAK

### Merlefest

Each April more than 80,000 music lovers descend on the small town of Wilkesboro in Wilkes County for Merlefest. Founded in 1988, the four-day, 13-stage, family-friendly musical melange ranges from folk, old-time and rock, to cajun, bluegrass and country swing — from late morning to late at night. All proceeds from the dry, volunteer-run event go to the local community and college.

This year's Merlefest runs on April 23-26 and features headline acts such as Willie Nelson, Alison Krauss, John Prine and Billy Strings. A four-day general admission ticket is \$207.25 (€183). [merlefest.org](http://merlefest.org)

### Raleigh

The Wide Open Bluegrass festival in Raleigh runs each autumn and entails eight free — yes, free — music stages across the downtown area. It showcases everyone, from Grammy award winners to emerging acts, as well as featuring a dance tent, workshops and instrument-laden exhibit hall. This year it takes place on October 2-3. [worldofbluegrass.org](http://worldofbluegrass.org)

### Mount Airy fiddlers' convention

Over the first weekend of June, revel in two full days of competition, jam sessions, and singing and dancing. Dedicated to old-time and bluegrass music,



and at just \$10 per day. [surryarts.org/mafiddlersconvention/index.html](http://surryarts.org/mafiddlersconvention/index.html)

### Blue Ridge Music Trails

Rather than being festival-focused, why not journey the mountains and foothills of western North Carolina, and experience outstanding, community-centred music. Plan your own route within an interactive map, following the suggested itineraries, at [blueridgemusicnc.com](http://blueridgemusicnc.com).

### THE LOWDOWN

#### Where to stay

**Raleigh** Guest House, doubles from €175; [guesthouseraleigh.com](http://guesthouseraleigh.com)

**Mount Airy** Hampton Inn Mount Airy hotel, doubles from €120; [hamptoninn3.hilton.com](http://hamptoninn3.hilton.com)

**Wilkes County** during Merlefest: stay at Wilkesboro campground, aka Sewerfest campsite, where there are impromptu folk/bluegrass jam sessions — and moonshine — each evening. Bring your banjo; [reserveamerica.com/explore/wilkesboro-campground](http://reserveamerica.com/explore/wilkesboro-campground)

#### Where to eat and drink

**Raleigh: The Raleigh Times restaurant and bar** (mains from €10.50); [raleightimesbar.com](http://raleightimesbar.com)

**Big Ed's City Market Restaurant** (burgers from €4.60); [bigedsnc.com](http://bigedsnc.com)

**Raleigh Beer Garden** (burgers from €9.60); [theraleighbeergarden.com](http://theraleighbeergarden.com)

**Morgan Street Food Hall** (multiple vendors); [morganfoodhall.com](http://morganfoodhall.com)

**Mount Airy: Snappy Lunch** (plates from €3); [thesnappylunch.com](http://thesnappylunch.com)

**Soho Bar & Grill** (mains from €8); [sohontairy.com](http://sohontairy.com)

#### When to go

Relative humidity scales up to 100% from June to early September, with temperatures in excess of 30C. The best times to visit are early April to the middle of June, or mid-September to late October.

### CAROLINA'S GREAT OUTDOORS

**Kayaking:** it's worth spending a morning kayaking down the Yadkin river, about 30 minutes' drive from Wilkesboro. On a leisurely float you'll see cottonwood trees arching over the river, languorous storks swooping overhead, and fluttering red cardinals (emblem of North Carolina) by the water's edge.

[foothillsoutdooradventures.com](http://foothillsoutdooradventures.com)

**Mountain biking:** just outside Wilkesboro, head to Kerr Scott dam reservoir, where a wide variety of flowing trails await — the Kerr Scott visitor centre by the entrance has the best information. Hire a bike from Cook's in Wilkesboro;

[cooks bikesandsports.com](http://cooks bikesandsports.com)

**Hiking:** fringing the north of Wilkes County, Stone Mountain state park is a must for hiking fans — trails range from two hours to two days. Tip: try the 7km loop trail. If the weather is even half-decent, do not miss this park. [ncparks.gov](http://ncparks.gov)

**Stand-up paddle boarding (SUP):** break up the 2½ hour drive between Raleigh and Wilkes County with an hour's SUP in Winston Salem.

[triadecoadventures.com](http://triadecoadventures.com)

Share    

Save 

▲ BACK TO TOP

## THE TIMES

### GET IN TOUCH

About us

Help

The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints

Display advertising

Contact us

The Times Editorial Complaints

Place an announcement

Classified advertising

The Times corrections

### MORE FROM THE TIMES AND THE SUNDAY TIMES

The Times e-paper

Times Print Gallery

Times+

Schools Guide

Sportswomen of the Year Awards

The Sunday Times e-paper

The Times Archive

The Sunday Times Rich List

Newsletters

Times Appointments

Times Currency Services

Times Crossword Club

Times Expert Traveller

Best Places to Live

Podcasts

The Sunday Times Wine Club

Sunday Times Driving

Good University Guide

Best Places to Stay

Times Money Monitor