

Rally in Raleigh

Amid an economic boom, Raleigh, North Carolina, has kept its small-town vibe while offering big-city amenities and experiences.

By Parrish Walton

Raleigh, North Carolina, is one of the most burgeoning cities in the country, propelled by Research Triangle Park and the medical and technology boom that comes with it.

As North Carolina's capital, Raleigh is also the governmental hub of one of the fastest-growing states in the country. It's not only for technology hounds and medical professionals, however. The city plays host to hundreds of meetings and events annually, including many of the faith-based youth variety, due to what it offers planners and attendees.

"With so many free or low-cost things to do, there are wonderful activities for youth participation," says Ryan Smith, director of communications for Visit Raleigh. "We have more than 40 free attractions and are often called the Smithsonian of the South due to our concentration of world-class, free museums including Museum of Natural Sciences, Nature Research Center, Museum of History and Museum of Art." Read on to discover more.

Boom Town

With great cash flow comes great responsibility—to build. Raleigh is in the midst of a hotel boom thanks to its bustling economy. Whether planners are looking for trendy hotels, like the 135-room Aloft Raleigh opening in August, or parent-approved offerings, like the Hilton Garden Inn, Courtyard and Residence Inn, there are plenty of options for all comers seeking new digs. For more established properties, check out Raleigh Marriott City Center and Sheraton Raleigh Hotel, both next to (or connected to, in the case of the Marriott) Raleigh Convention Center.

Dr. Douglas Witherup, executive director of Church Ministries, helps organize the North Carolina District of the Assemblies of God Youth Convention, bringing more than 1,000 teens to Raleigh each year for the past three years and returning for the fourth time this November. Some hotels would worry about many teens filling room blocks, but Witherup says that's not the case here.

"They're very welcoming and accommodating," says Witherup. "I'm not aware in the three years we've been there of any major problems."

The growth isn't relegated to hotels alone. Raleigh and the nearby area will welcome several new attractions in 2015 including the North Main Athletic Complex, which completed phase two in May and features a multisport stadium to go along with its lighted, synthetic-turf fields and tennis courts. Holding youth events can require letting kids run off some energy, and the new complex allows for exactly that.

A World of Knowledge

In the heart of downtown is **Marbles Kids Museum**, which opened in 2007 after combining two previously existing museums into one. The play-based learning museum, designed for children 10 and under, has nine interactive rooms as well as an IMAX theater. If you've ever been to a children's museum like the one in Atlanta, Marbles will feel familiar. It's a place where kids can learn by playing in open, safe spaces—something every youth planner will applaud.

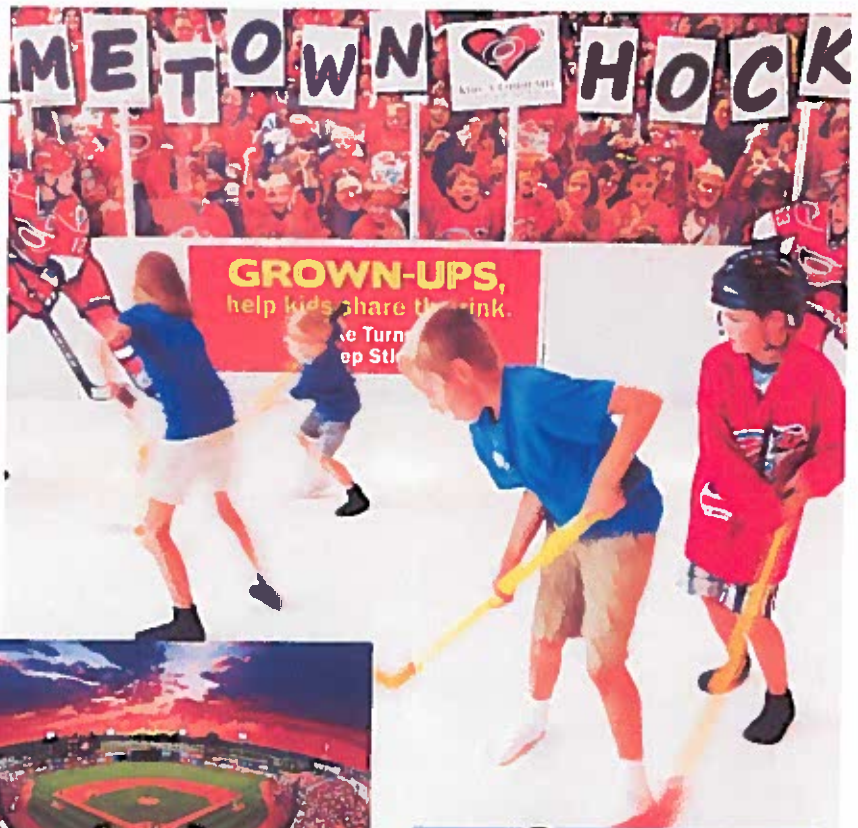
Take Me Out to the Ball Game

Raleigh and its surrounding metro area are loaded with affordable options for sports outings. Work out a package deal with the nearby Durham Bulls, MLB's most famous minor league affiliate, or hit the ice and check out a Carolina Hurricanes game. If you want to stay in Raleigh, the hometown Carolina Mudcats, another minor league affiliate, has discount tickets for large groups at **Five County Stadium**.

Raleigh is also home to the Carolina RailHawks soccer team, Capital City BMX and many collegiate events, including major conference football and basketball, as North Carolina State University calls Raleigh home.

Stress-Free Dining

Taking kids out to eat can be daunting. Luckily for planners, Raleigh has many tot-friendly eateries that are both affordable and open to kids being kids, so parents and chaperones don't have to worry about losing their minds at dinner. **Tasty 8's Gourmet Hot Dog Co.** serves up all-natural beef hot dogs with epicurean twists—like the Southern Comfort dog with blue cheese slaw and chili—all on fresh buns from local bakery Neomonde. For pizza lovers, **Zpizza** has many selections for youth and adults alike, including vegan options, and conference attendees can soak in the great outdoors at



Jimmy V's Osteria and Bar at the Sheraton, with both inside and outside dining spaces for groups. In Raleigh's City Plaza, fast-casual restaurants like **Jimmy John's** are easy choices for kids, while the health-conscious set will appreciate **Happy and Hale**, serving protein-rich salads and breakfast bowls.

Good Vibes

One consistent sentiment among residents and visitors is how much they enjoy the vibe within Raleigh. That can be partly attributed to Research Triangle Park, which provides a homegrown base of young, intelligent professionals. Career website **Glassdoor** recently named Raleigh the best city in America for jobs. What that brings is a robust economy and new ideas, and it also gives the government the backing from the public, as well as elected officials a reason to keep the city in top shape.

"Raleigh is growing socially; it's active and it's clean," says Raleigh resident and banker **Hunter Sellinger**. "Raleigh provides big-city entertainment, restaurants, concerts and festivals without being overwhelmed by traffic and people."

Wetherup echoes that sentiment. "What I love about the city is the cleanliness and the green space," he says. "It's a beautiful city with good infrastructure, and they seem to be very forward-thinking in their planning."

Local Favorites

Dr. David Forbes, dean of the Raleigh-based **Shaw University Divinity School**, shares the top spots around his hometown:

Hotel: Raleigh Marriott City Center
Meeting Venue: Raleigh Convention Center
Restaurant: Angus Barn
Treat Spot: Goodberry's Frozen Custard
Hidden Gems: Guided tours of Saint Augustine's University and Shaw University Divinity School

