



Old meets new as the Norfolk Southern railcars rumble by the Taubman Museum of Art.

# ROANOKE

## Blue Ridge Hospitality with Sophistication

by  
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**R**oanoke was originally named Big Lick because of local salt marshes that had attracted elk, deer, and bear for eons. The area served as a vital hunting ground for local Indian tribes. The Tutelo Indians inhabited the region and used shell beads for currency – or in their native tongue, *rawrenock*.

In the 1850s, Big Lick became a stop on the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad (V&T) which linked the Piedmont with southwest Virginia and east Tennessee. After the Civil War, the V&T and two other rail lines merged to form the Atlantic,

Mississippi, & Ohio Railroad (AM&O). The financial scare of 1873 resulted in AM&O going into receivership and in 1882, after several years of frustration and indecision, AM&O was purchased by a Philadelphia bank and renamed the Norfolk & Western Railway (N&W). The new company selected Big Lick as its headquarters and promptly renamed the city Roanoke – appropriating the Indian *rawrenock* as a term more befitting a place where industry, commerce, and transportation converge.

During the late 1800s, the N&W Railroad expanded into the coal-rich

regions of West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and southwest Virginia. The N&W opened up the lucrative bituminous Pocahontas coal seam, which once powered half the world's navies and still fuels steel mills all over the globe. Roanoke not only served as the N&W headquarters, but the N&W shops, as they are termed in the railroad business, built and serviced locomotives that became the workhorses of the industry. In the early 1960s the N&W became the last major railroad to convert from steam to diesel. By then, Roanoke's rail history had solidified its stature as an economic and

transportation center. Even today, guests can see Norfolk Southern diesel engines and shops when visiting downtown. One does not have to venture far in Roanoke to understand the role the railroad has played in the city's 126-year history.

### Star City of the South

Roanoke got its local moniker, Star City of the South, almost 60 years ago. In 1949 the Roanoke Merchants Association built a giant star on Mill Mountain overlooking the city. It was first illuminated the night before Thanksgiving that year to start the holiday-shopping season. The 88-foot star can be seen from

60 miles away, and with more than 2,000 feet of neon tubing, there is no mystery why. When you visit the star, day or night, the expansive view of the Roanoke Valley is spectacular.

No trip to Roanoke would be complete without a stroll through its vibrant Farmer's Market. Mark Woods is a fourth-generation Roanoke farmer and a descendant of Civil War-era settlers. You only need to spend a few moments with Mark to understand why he loves Roanoke and the market. While watching Mark work his magic with the Saturday morning crowd, I was amazed to see that not one name or individual eluded him. He knew

them all. Mark could simply size up the customers from across the floor and know exactly what fruit or vegetable they were after.

The market is open year round, but the seasonal fruits and vegetables are its mainstay. You can also find a wide variety of annuals, perennials, and bedding plants as well as arts and crafts. When I asked Mark what makes the market so special he answered, "It brings country charm to the city and breaks up the rat race." Makes sense to me.

Maybe the best-kept secret of visiting Roanoke is not the city itself but the best way to get there. Whether you are



The star illuminated atop Mill Mountain  
(Photo courtesy of Roanoke Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau)

The historic Woods' Brothers H&C plaque telling the history of the sign



The historic Dr. Pepper and H&C Coffee signs stand guard while the star atop Mill Mountain looks on.





Mark Woods attends to a customer's request.

The Hotel Roanoke with the cathedral in the distance and the Blue Ridge as a backdrop (Photo courtesy of Roanoke Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau)



coming from the mountains of North Carolina or the Virginia Piedmont, if you can afford the time to meander the Blue Ridge Parkway, the drive will not be disappointing. The parkway will be celebrating its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2010. It stretches for 469 scenic miles through the Virginia and North Carolina Appalachians, offering more than 350 miles of hiking trails and scenic overlooks. The world's longest and narrowest national park, its designation as America's Favorite Drive is well earned, and both the fall foliage and summer rhododendron and azalea blooms leading into Roanoke are as dazzling as anywhere along the parkway.

### Cuisine and Lodging

Roanoke offers a wide variety of dining experiences. Whether it's a quick meal or an elegant dinner, Roanoke's got it all downtown! Start your day off with breakfast at The Roanoker. Renowned for its biscuits and gravy, The Roanoker will provide you with that much-needed boost for your first full day in the Star City, or to recharge your batteries after a full night of live music downtown. However, don't interrupt the multimillion-dollar transaction that's getting worked out on a napkin over biscuits and redeye gravy in the next booth. For lunch on the go, try Zorba, located in the 1922 Market Building. Zorba offers the

best gyro this side of the Blue Ridge. Also, the Wiener Stand, established in 1916, is a Roanoke institution. Make sure to specify you want your dog "all the way." If you want to just take it all in and revitalize yourself after a busy morning, sit down outside the Metro Restaurant and watch life pass you by on East Campbell Avenue. The Metro offers a relaxed but upscale dining experience and promises only the best sashimi-grade fish from world-renowned fish suppliers. At the end of the day, slide over to Frankie Rowland's for the best cut of beef in town. With more than 120 different wines and cigars, Rowland's provides a great way to cap off your day.

After a full day in Roanoke, count on staying at the historic Hotel Roanoke. Built in 1882 to house railroad passengers as well as the Norfolk & Western Railroad executive offices, it now serves as a luxurious stay for the weary traveler or veteran tourist. The Hotel Roanoke features luxe accommodations, superb Southern hospitality, and its signature peanut soup. The only problem with staying at the Hotel Roanoke is that you will not want to check out.

### The Arts

The art scene in Roanoke has exploded. Over the last decade, city leaders and planners have turned the Star City upside down to lift the Art Museum of Western Virginia from a regional attraction to a national exhibition. With the new 81,000-square-foot Taubman Museum of Art set to open in November, Roanoke conveys an audacious message to both the art community and the local citizenry. Although its futuristic design of glass and steel did not arrive without controversy in this Southern railroad town, the immense structure's flowing, layered form does seek to blend into its mountain backdrop. The museum was designed by Los Angeles architect Randall Stout and is named for U.S. Ambassador to Romania and Roanoke native Nicholas F. Taubman and his wife

Jenny, who provided more than \$15 million for the museum's construction.

The Taubman Museum of Art will offer a vast array of artistic and educational opportunities to the entire region. Its collection will feature international art exhibits of a scope and quality that could previously be seen no closer than Washington or New York. The museum will encompass art studios and education spaces as well as a multi-purpose auditorium.

More importantly, the museum represents a transition from the traditional to the avant-garde. When you look down at Roanoke's skyline from I-581, you see the foundation and threads of a proud and vibrant community, and with the museum at its heart, you see that Roanoke refuses to stand still. However incongruous to some, as it looms over the N&W shops and vintage H&C Coffee and Dr. Pepper billboards, the museum makes a bold statement: Roanoke has blazed yet another new trail as the railroads did over 100 years ago and as pioneers did before them.

While the Taubman represents the future, the O. Winston Link Museum honors Roanoke's foundation – railroads and transportation. Prior to my latest trip to Roanoke, I had never come across the name O. Winston Link. Well, after spending an afternoon in the O. Winston Link Museum, I readily joined the ranks of those who both admire his genius and are astounded by his dedication. There are only two museums in the U.S. dedicated to a single photographer, one to Ansel Adams and this to O. Winston Link. Link had a singular vision and made it his life's mission to capture the end of the steam-locomotive era. From 1955 until 1960, Link photographed these dinosaurs as they marched their way through the Tidewater, Piedmont, Appalachia, and Midwest before fading with the setting sun. He knew Americans would want to look back and remember a simpler time in our history when the railroads defined our country. Today, with \$4.00-a-gallon gas and Amtrak ticket sales up 25%, I'm sure



The Taubman Museum of Art soars from its foundation in downtown Roanoke.

Link is enjoying a good laugh.

Another popular attraction is the Mill Mountain Theatre. In 1964 the theater was born in a vacant resort inn on Mill Mountain. After 20 years and after several hundred productions, the theater eventually relocated in downtown Roanoke's cultural hub, Center in the Square. Over the last 44 years the theater has staged more than 400 productions and will present a full slate of shows this fall including *Driving Miss Daisy* and *A Simple Gift*.

### From College Campuses to Vineyards

The wine industry is bustling in Virginia and alive in Roanoke. The Peaks of Otter Winery is celebrating 90 years of viticulture. And while the Peaks of Otter Winery makes great wine, it has also led the way in conserving the land and wildlife we cherish. In 2007, the Peaks was recognized by its district as Conservation Farm of the Year. Just north of Roanoke, Blue Ridge Vineyard graces the banks of the James River and is sure to please all your senses. Finally, both AmRhein and Valhalla vineyards can be found in the area and offer a variety of catering and dining opportunities.

Another unusual point of interest is Dixie Caverns in nearby Salem. It is one of

seven commercial caverns in Virginia and the only one in the southwestern part of the state. Over the years, magnificent formations have grown: The Wedding Bell, the Magic Mirror, the Turkey Wing and the Cathedral Room are just a few of the many speleothems. Many of the formations in the caverns are still very wet and drippy, proving that the cave is still growing. Dixie Cavern is open year round.

Just outside Roanoke you will find Hollins University, renowned for its academic rigor and distinguished alumnae. Founded in 1842, Hollins is Virginia's first chartered women's college, and as a VMI alumnus, I trust it will remain all-female both for the sake of the school's honored tradition and for the sake of the cadets just down I-81. Also, Roanoke College can be found in (nope, not Roanoke) Salem, just a stone's throw from Roanoke. Roanoke College was founded in 1842 as Virginia Institute in Augusta County; however, five years later the college relocated to Salem. Renamed Roanoke College in 1847, it offers a traditional liberal arts coeducational setting in the heart of the Blue Ridge.

### The Sporting Life

Sportsmen may be surprised to



A boater cruises across Smith Mountain Lake.



The Roanoke River meanders along on a hot July day.

find so many fishing opportunities in and around a metro area with a population of 250,000. For the Virginia angler who has all day and loves to catch quality smallmouth bass, it is well worth the trip to the mountains for a day on the New River. Nationally known as a premiere smallmouth fishery, the river provides excellent fishing and breathtaking scenery. Another prime fishing venue is Smith Mountain Lake. In the summer months, the lake is extremely busy, but from Labor Day until Memorial Day things calm down and fly fishermen can surprise quality largemouth and smallmouth, which have seen every lure and plug that the summer crowd can toss at them. Fly fishermen will also find a mixed bag if they head out Rutrough Road until it ends near the Explore Park site.

From there, hike up the Roanoke River where she empties into Smith Mountain Lake for white bass in the spring as well as smallmouth and stripers.

As any fisherman will tell you, part of knowing where to fish is swindling another fisherman out of his honey hole. So I called my friend Mark Taylor and bamboozled him into divulging some of his

favorite spots. Mark and I agree it doesn't get much better than a lazy day on a stream in a canoe. For all those anglers who love that slow, rewarding drift, put your canoe in on the Roanoke River near Electric Road Bridge and float down to Wasena Park. The float takes about half a day, but whether you are four or 40, catching a mixed bag of smallmouth and pan fish never disappoints. If you need a boat, contact Back Ski and Sport for canoe rentals on the river. Anglers can also try Carvins Cove Lake, a 600-acre impoundment with outboard restrictions and limited fishing pressure for largemouth bass plus a rare chance to land big carp on a fly at the lake's mud flats. Also, the Roanoke River boasts two excellent sections of delayed-harvest trout fishing. One is located in Green Hill Park, in Roanoke, the other in the City of Salem. Finally, for all those sportsmen who just need a long hike or an afternoon out of the office, there are numerous areas where you can access the world-renowned Appalachian Trail, running from Georgia to Maine.

It's obvious that Roanoke has come a long way since the days of Big Lick. And by the time the city celebrates its 150th anniversary in 2032, who can imagine what new trail or discovery the city will reveal?

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