

ESCAPES

Small-town Virginia, straight from the movies

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Every time I go to Lexington, in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, I pick up a historical tidbit or two. After all, the town is rich in history: It's home to Washington and Lee University, founded in 1749, and Virginia Military Institute, founded 1839. It's also the final resting spot of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson.

But I wasn't prepared, when I pulled into town one Friday in December, for the trivia offered by my friend Cynthia, a Lexington native. Bundled up for a drizzly, raw day, we met in the small parking lot behind the Georges boutique hotel, hugging as we said hello. Then she said, pointing across the way, "This is where Richard Gere was hung."

"Oh!" I exclaimed. I had no idea what she was talking about.

She quickly clarified: In the early '90s, Gere and Jodie Foster starred in "Somerset," a Civil War film, and a few scenes were shot in town. I made a note to rent the movie when I got home.

Located three hours southwest of Washington and surrounded by the Blue Ridge and Allegheny mountains, Lexington is a town of 7,000 — a mix of retirees, students and families that keeps the historic downtown bustling. It's a destination known for its farm-to-table restaurants, where hard-core kayakers paddle on the Maury River year-round and the Christmas parade features tractors and goats. Lexington attracts its share of Civil War buffs every year, but even though war tourism is not my cup of tea, the town has enough appeal to draw me back time and again.

During my previous visits, I've gone on a llama trek at nearby Applewood Inn; taken a historic walking tour of Stonewall Jackson Memorial Cemetery and antebellum homes; and overnights at a refurbished caboose just south of town. But I set off for this weekend getaway with an ulterior motive. Cynthia and her husband Dave are considering leaving town for an idyllic mountain spot out West. I thought if I reminded them of all Lexington's virtues, they could be persuaded to stay on this side of the country.

After Cynthia set me straight on the hanging scene, we walked into the Georges, a newly renovated inn. Since I was staying down the street with Dave and Cynthia, I had asked the innkeeper for a tour. The hotel occupies two historic buildings, on opposite sides of Main Street, which had sat vacant for years. The opening of this property and the historic Robert E. Lee Hotel — both of which occurred in 2014 — represent significant investment in the heart of downtown and have created some buzz, not to mention much-needed lodging options. (The Robert E. Lee originally opened as a hotel in 1926 but had fallen into disrepair; it was used most recently by the city as subsidized housing.)

Cynthia and I saw several of the 18 rooms in the Georges buildings — one of which is among the oldest surviving structures in Lexington. We saw crisp, clean, simply decorated rooms with original wood flooring, doors and windows, and ever-so-slightly crooked stairs that attested to the building's age. We admired wide porches that I wanted to return to in the spring, towel warmers and Frette robes in the bathrooms and views of House Mountain. Noticing all the attention to detail in the renovation, Cynthia repeatedly said she was delighted that the new owners had given such love and care to the old buildings.

Downstairs, the innkeeper explained that the price of each night includes a full breakfast with chef-made everything, from granola to ketchup. On the way out, she pointed to the hot chocolate sitting out for guests and offered us some, with homemade marshmallows that proved so heavenly, I thought for a moment they alone could persuade Cynthia to stay.

That night, we split four small plates at Haywood's, on the ground level of one of the Georges buildings. The restaurant sources its food from local places such as Polyface Farms and Buffalo Creek Beef, and we savored our dishes — cheese grits, salad with pickled apples, braised



The historic downtown of Lexington, Va., is so full of character that even the sidewalk bricks are interesting.



MIDDLE: The Maury River is an enticing spot for kayaking, even when the weather wouldn't seem to invite it. ABOVE: Just north of Lexington, Wade's Mill is a working water-powered flour mill that was built in 1750.

greens and sauteed mushrooms so hearty they tasted like meat. For both of us, the bill came to less than \$25.

We ran into Cynthia's high school classmate, a bartender at the restaurant, who explained how she created the Traveller cocktail, named after Robert E. Lee's horse. It's a mixture of Lexington (Kentucky) bourbon, ginger liqueur and orange bitters, poured over ice. I added this to my list of things to try when it's warmer. Naturally, the beloved horse is buried next to Lee's crypt on the Washington & Lee campus. The hide of Stonewall Jackson's horse, Little Sorrel,

is displayed at the VMI Museum. One thing you need to know before visiting Lexington is that folk here take their horses seriously.

The rain continued through Saturday, so I spent hours in the town's two bookstores, the Bookery (where you can find new and used books along with Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee and Traveller postcards, three for \$1) and Books & Co. (new books, toys, puzzles and marbles). Then I walked up to the library, which was holding its monthly book sale, and bought a dozen paperbacks for \$9.

Walking through the rain, I saw white rockers on a church porch and storefronts that made me think of a small-town movie facade, with attorneys' offices and the Armed Forces Recruiting Station. The sidewalks were built from bricks imprinted with a design of circles and lines originally meant to provide traction for horses and pedestrians in the late 1800s. But most of all, I noticed the steep hills everywhere. As Cynthia had warned me that morning, "It's uphill both ways."

In the evening, Dave, Cynthia and I met with their neighbors at Devils Backbone Outpost Brewery, a short drive from town. I had heard about the award-winning beer, so I ordered a flight of four samples, including the Kilt Flasher, a dark, sweet, malty ale. We snacked on cheese, crackers and nuts (the taproom is BYO food) and talked about our travel plans for 2015.

We woke Sunday to a clear and crisp morning. Dave and Cynthia made bacon from a local farm and omelets garnished with avocado slices. We walked from their house along the two-mile Woods Creek Trail, which runs through the back-to-back campuses of Washington & Lee (white-columned Greek Revival) and VMI (austere Gothic Revival) and ends at Jordan's Point Park. Cynthia, whose Confederate great-grandfather worked with army horses, pointed out the spot on the Maury River where Stonewall Jackson's body was brought to Lexington for burial in 1863. Dave looked out at the river and contemplated kayaking, despite the near-freezing temperature.

As we walked home through town, I wondered whether my strategy was working — if a weekend of talking about Lexington's treasures could persuade Dave and Cynthia to stay.

We said our goodbyes, and since my favorite local sandwich shop is closed on the weekends (Blue Sky Bakery), I stopped for a delicious veggie burger at Pure Eats. Then I browsed the snap-up shirts and John Deere socks at the Tractor Supply Co. and started my drive home.

Thirty minutes north, I stopped at Wade's Mill, a historic, water-powered flour mill that offers occasional cooking classes and sells stone-ground flours and meals. I picked up a biscuit mix with the intention of sending it to Dave and Cynthia — another reminder of lovely Lexington. Then I remembered they're on a low-carb kick. So I kept it as a reminder for myself.

travel@washpost.com

Kaplan is a freelance writer in Washington. Her Web site is www.melaniegkaplan.com.

If you go

WHERE TO STAY

The Georges

11 N. Main St.
540-463-2500

www.thegeorges.com

New boutique hotel with 18 beautifully appointed rooms located in two historic downtown buildings. Queen rooms start at \$150, suites \$250-\$400, including hot/cold breakfast for two.

Robert E. Lee Hotel

30 S. Main St.
540-461-8484

www.roberteleehotel.com

Recently renovated historic hotel with 39 rooms and suites that look out to the Blue Ridge Mountains. Located downtown, with an in-house Italian restaurant. Standard rooms start at \$125 a night.

WHERE TO EAT

Haywood's

2 N. Main St.
540-463-2508

www.thegeorges.com/haywoods

Piano bar with creative cocktails and menu of small plates that changes daily, sourced locally. Winter offerings: pumpkin bisque or braised greens and bacon, \$5; crispy skin salmon, \$13; brisket sliders with roasted apple jam, \$9. Open Wednesday to Sunday, 5 to 10 p.m.

Pure Eats

107 N. Main St.
540-462-6000

www.pure-eats.com

Tasty burgers from Lexington's Buffalo Creek Beef, starting at \$6.50; sweet potato fries, \$3; and milkshakes, \$5. House-made doughnuts in the morning (\$1.25)

Blue Sky Bakery

125 W. Nelson St.
540-463-6546

Sandwiches on fresh-baked focaccia or honey whole wheat, starting at \$6.25, including the Great Smokey, the Veg and the Egghead, and bakery treats. Closed weekends.

WHAT TO DO

Virginia Military Institute

415 Letcher Ave.
540-464-7334

www.vmi.edu

Hour-long cadet-guided tours offered daily at noon when classes are in session. Tours are free, departing from the lobby of the VMI Museum. Cadet dress parades are held most Fridays at 4:30 p.m., weather permitting; call to confirm.

Devils Backbone Outpost Brewery

50 Northwind Lane
540-462-6200

www.dbbrewingcompany.com

Award-winning beer's new brewery and taproom; free tours Saturday and Sunday at 2, 3, 4 and 5 p.m. Bring your own food to complement your pints or flights. Taproom open daily.

Virginia Horse Center

487 Maury River Rd.
540-464-2950

www.horsecenter.org

The 600-acre center is home to a coliseum, eight barns and 1,200 horses. Most shows are free, including horse and dog shows and an Old Time Music Jam on the second Tuesday of every month at 6 p.m.

INFORMATION

www.lexingtonvirginia.com

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