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TRAVEL

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“Sneaky cool.”

That’s how goldsmith Lauren Ramirez, a transplant from San Francisco, described Raleigh to me when I popped into her jewelry studio in late November. It was the same morning that I saw a man break dancing in the middle of the street before 8 a.m. and one day after I’d made an impulse purchase that sparkled like a disco ball.

“It sneaks up on you,” Ramirez said about the city’s cool factor, as her dog Alfred sat at my feet. She moved to Raleigh on a whim five years ago and wasn’t sure if she’d make it. But then her business took off, and now she appreciates the city’s small-town feel and the extent to which locals support each other.

I hadn’t visited Raleigh for any length of time since I was a kid but had a sense that it was a staid state capital, the cultural underdog of the Research Triangle. (Its other points being Chapel Hill and Durham.) As I biked

YOU’RE GOING WHERE?

Raleigh

This progressive point on North Carolina’s Research Triangle has a subtle sense of coolness

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

around, eating, shopping and talking to locals, I realized that if my assessment wasn’t already outdated it would be, soon.

The City of Oaks is growing swiftly, with a population of nearly 500,000. As I explored, I found a progressive city in a state that often isn’t, a place full of public art and bike paths and a university-inspired hub of innovation and design. Locals are at once excited about growth and worried about how it will change their city.

After three days, I wanted more Raleigh. I stayed an extra night and then an extra hour the next morning, waiting for Boulted Bread to open. The windows of the bakery were steamy, and I was second in line. I left town with a bag of pastries on the passenger seat and my new, super cool purchase in the back. Glitter track pants from Edge of Urge had snuck into my life. I loved them already.

RALEIGH CONTINUED ON F4

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The skyline of Raleigh, N.C., awaits those who make their way to the public terrace on the ninth floor of the Dillon. The Chihuly is a dessert at the Herons restaurant inspired by a the famed artist’s glass sculpture in the lobby of the Umstead Hotel and Spa, where grape holly blooms on the grounds. Mark Rossbach, owner of Che Empanadas at Transfer Co. Food Hall, helps his daughter, Mila, with her homework.

An artful take on public space

RALEIGH FROM F1

Go

Local faves

Hey, other cities: Just try to out-fest **Wide Open Bluegrass**, a free, two-day street festival with more than 100 bands on seven stages. Last September, it attracted 223,000 fans, with jams taking over entire hotel floors and music spreading to all parts of the city. The festival is part of the International Bluegrass Music Association's convention (which moved here from Nashville seven years ago), a week of shows, instrument workshops and awards. During the rest of the year, you can join the well-attended music jams organized by PineCone, Wide Open Bluegrass's local promoter. These knee-to-knee traditional music sessions are free for participants and spectators alike. For a calendar of live music every day of the year, check out [TheMostNC.com](#).

How can you go wrong with a brewer, baker and killer chocolate-maker, a creative partner who happens to be the Avett Brothers' cellist and a general manager who happens to be a popular local DJ? **Transfer Co. Food Hall** is a gorgeous new gathering spot and food space in the oft-overlooked east side of downtown. Built in a historic Carolina Coach bus garage, Transfer's centerpiece is a huge, lug-nut-shaped bar. Open now: Locals Oyster Bar, Che Empanadas and Asheville's Burial Beer. By the end of the month: Benchwarmers Bagels (from the Boulton team). In the spring, Videri Chocolate Factory will move its production here, with space for classes and a test kitchen. Summer will bring Saxapahaw General Store, the first grocery in the neighborhood, along with a calendar of music, gardening and nutrition events. Also check out Morgan Street Food Hall, which opened last summer.

Guidebook musts

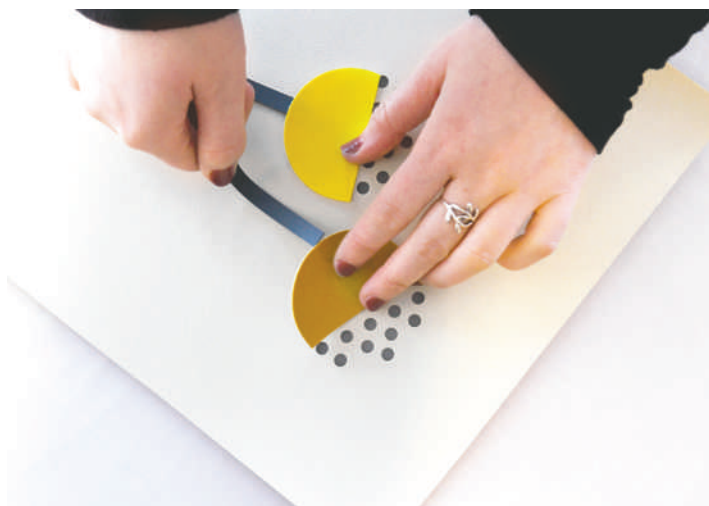
The **BookBot at N.C. State's Hunt Library** is hands down the coolest thing I saw during my visit. From the lobby of this award-winning STEM library, you can watch the robot zip down giant aisles and fetch a bar coded book in minutes. This Jetsons-like design enables the library to hold 2 million books in one-ninth the space of traditional stacks. And that has made room for large, museum-quality spaces for students to sit, read, write, study and collaborate; it's open to the public, too. Also, there's a collection of more than 80 types of chairs (quirky, modern, comfy, posh, retro, designer) in 100 colors. In the "Seriously?" department: the chairs even have their own website and book. On the tour, I saw a game lab, visualization lab, virtual reality space, maker space, gorgeous top-floor reading room and quiet room where you can still sniff books from a real shelf, if that's your thing. Free tours every Friday and Saturday except around holidays and exam time.

On a mild Sunday, I biked with a new friend to the North Carolina Museum of Art's 164-acre **Ann and Jim Goodnight Museum Park** on the city's western edge. We pedaled around a three-mile path that connects to the Greenway, passing strolling families, happy dogs, a pond with a stunning viewing platform and a few dozen art installations. There's a 46-foot, stainless-steel tree, a massive naked human form, a giant, patterned pig that you can enter via an airplane-style staircase and a sculpture made entirely of crowd-control barricades. Rebelliously, we biked off-path to cruise through local artist Thomas Sayre's three gigantic earthen rings. We couldn't help it — just being in the park makes you feel like a kid. Check the schedule for park tours and a summer outdoor concert series. (Past performers have included Earl Scruggs, Rosanne Cash, Wilco and local fave Tift Merritt.) The free museum has the Southeast's largest collection of Rodin sculptures and hosts Art in Bloom, a spring festival with floral interpretations of the museum's pieces.

Eat

Local faves

Always a good sign: a meat-eater fancying a vegetarian restaurant. At the **Fiction Kitchen**, a colorful downtown spot, I ran into Mitch, who owns legendary Mitch's Tavern across from N.C.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: At the North Carolina Museum of Art's 164-acre Ann and Jim Goodnight Museum Park, people walk through Thomas Sayre's "Gyre." Edge of Urge carries apparel, artsy accessories and playful gifts including locally made earrings. Deana Nguyen works on a special-order bouquet at Brewery Bhavana, a high-veiled space that includes the flower shop. **CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** The Umstead Hotel and Spa in Cary, N.C., offers package deals that include culinary artist getaways. If you come into Raleigh by train, you'll walk out of the \$88 million Raleigh Union Station into the formerly industrial Warehouse District. Whitney Drummond hand-cuts pieces for a custom order at Stitch.

For more photos and an interactive map, visit [wapo.st/Raleigh](#)

State. Although he's not a vegetarian, he's a regular here on Tuesdays (half-priced bottle of wine night) and a big fan of the popular Eastern N.C.-style barbecue pulled faux pork. The small restaurant (which doesn't take reservations and fills up quickly for dinner and brunch) has bright walls and a bar decorated with collages of old magazine pictures. I ordered the seasonal risotto with grilled balsamic-marinated king trumpet mushrooms and a basil-pistachio feta sprinkled with housemade cashew cheese. For more excellent veg fare, try Garland, owned by local darling and indie rock star Cheezy Ku-

mar; and Irregardless, where David Sedaris worked for nine months in 1980.

Walking around a new city, getting lost, chatting up strangers and scribbling in my notebook is exhausting. I'm usually ready for lunch by 10:30, so the midmorning kolaches at **Carroll's Kitchen** really hit the spot. The hockey-puck-size sweet rolls (one spinach and feta, the other apple butter and brie) were warm and satisfying, and the mission behind the food made me feel even better. The nonprofit restaurant employs women transitioning from homelessness, incarceration or abuse. It also provides job training, helps in

securing housing and teaches life skills. The grab-and-go restaurant, which has a line out the door at lunch, also serves sandwiches, wraps, salads and soups. A second location recently opened at Morgan Street Food Hall. Also in the eat-well-feel-good department: A Place at the Table, a volunteer-staffed, pay-what-you-can cafe where you have the option of paying it forward for another patron.

Guidebook musts

One night, I gathered five local friends at the buzzy **Brewery Bhavana**, a striking, high-ceilinged space that houses a little

flower shop (you can build your own bouquet) and a small book shop. There's a vast lending library to enjoy while dining, including Tennyson's poems, Ai Weiwei's art and the 1,364-page compact edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, should you find yourself debating a definition over dim sum. The brother and sister owners, who grew up in Laos, also own Bida Manda next door. Over dinner, my friends talked about their city, and we shared beautifully plated items such as scallion pancakes and edamame and ginger dumplings, and I wanted the food and conversation to last all night. On tap:

a citrusy IPA, chocolate rye stout and a mango peppercorn saison.

Almost without fail, locals suggested I eat at one of James Beard award-winner Ashley Christensen's restaurants. In 2007, the chef opened her first restaurant, **Poole's Diner**, which remains a favorite. One night, I grabbed a red bar stool and swiveled around to the green, horseshoe-shaped Formica bar, a relic from its midcentury days as a pie shop and luncheonette. On the chalkboard menu, which changes often, was pickled pumpkin with burrata, pimento cheese with fried saltines and a 10-ounce Royale with aged provolone. My late-season heirloom tomato pie was scrumptious; portions are generous. The vibe is relaxed and welcoming. On one end of the bar sat a man in flannel and a baseball cap; on the other, three well-dressed Danish men, in town for work and eager to compare travel notes. They'd gone skydiving and target shooting, which I didn't add to my list, but when their macaroni au gratin arrived, I gazed longingly. Poole's is open every day until midnight and doesn't take reservations. Looking for kid-friendly? Try Christensen's Beasley's Chicken + Honey or Chuck's, her burger joint.

Shop

Local faves

For the record, I loved **Edge of Urge** even before I bought myself that pair of glitter pants. I mean, what a coup when you discover both Llamanoes (dominoes with llamas) and hats that read, "Failure is an option." Up the street from Krispy Krema in the hip Person Street neighborhood, Edge of Urge carries apparel, artsy accessories and playful gifts — like the wedge-shaped notepad with a cover that reads, "Gouda ideas." You can find quirky, peazied earrings with celebs' likenesses (Jason Alexander, Dolly Parton, the Obamas); women's coveralls; men's Red Wing boots; and super-fly toddler threads like Beastie Boys and Bowie baseball T-shirts and Vans the size of Roma tomatoes. Check out the "North Freakin' Carolina" shirts. (All proceeds go to help feed kids impacted by Hurricane Florence.) And if you're flying into town, stop in Root & Branch, Edge of Urge's new airport shop, a collaboration with hip downtown shop Deco.

At **Oak City Cycling Project**, you can buy a new or refurbished bike, accessorize your ride or simply hang in the groovy, underground garage space and gab. You can also tinker with your own bike, using their workspaces and tools, for \$5 an hour. And best of all, you can sit at the bar and enjoy a local, cycle-themed beer like Unicycle pale ale from Crank Arm, a brewery in the Warehouse District that organizes a weekly group ride. OCCP, as it's known, is a short spin from the Greenway and the beautiful Oakwood (don't miss the cemetery) and Mordecai neighborhoods. The shop rents hybrid and mountain bikes, hosts a free bike maintenance class and offers a Third Thursday Cruiser Ride — affectionately known as the slowest ride in town, because all cyclists and speeds are welcome.

Guidebook musts

At some point while browsing the velour V-neck sweaters and button-up polyester shirts at **Father and Son Antiques**, I wondered if anyone in town was hosting a "Saturday Night Fever" party that night. This vintage furniture and clothing shop, in a beautiful new space in the Warehouse District, has treasures from our most fab decades. I found a Royal typewriter in pristine condition; midcentury modern lounge chairs; a Kelly green Izod dress; Western shirts; Sears overalls; a pair of white, beaded, fringed moccasins that I'm sure came out of my middle school locker; and a "Dukes of Hazzard" tee that my tween self might have coveted. If you're looking for less curation and more bargains, try the Raleigh Flea Market, open every weekend.

"People walk into **Stitch** and say, 'Oh, I love that smell,'" a sales associate told me. "They don't realize it's the new car smell, but that's what it is!" Holly Aiken graduated from N.C. State's College of Design and set up shop making vinyl bags and wallets in fun, retro colors with simple geometric shapes. In addition to being cow-friendly and durable, the bags can be cleaned with pretty much whatever household cleaners you have on hand (think 409, Magic Eraser). Yay, vinyl! The bags are hand-cut in the store, and custom orders with mix-and-match styles and colors are the same price as the in-store bags. (Custom's a cinch with the online Design A Bag feature.) Spend any time in Raleigh, and you'll start seeing Aiken's bags around town. Don't miss the bluegrass-themed totes during Wide Open Bluegrass.

Past and present intermingle throughout Raleigh, a city with a small-town feel

RALEIGH FROM F4

Stay

Local fave

If you were in Raleigh two Februarys ago, you might have seen an 1880s house rolling across town. Its owners — a young urban planner-architect husband-wife team — relocated and expanded the historic house, and with the support of local artisans and friends, created **Guest House Raleigh**, a stunning lodging option sorely needed downtown. The eight-guestroom house has a vibe that's more boutique hotel than bed-and-breakfast (although European continental breakfast is included), with Scandinavian furnishings, gorgeous original floors and beams, skylights, vaulted ceilings and French doors to private balconies. Off-street parking is complimentary, and some rooms are wheelchair accessible. For a more traditional hotel, try Marriott's trendy Aloft, which offers 15 percent discounts for friends and families of N.C. State students or prospective students.

Guidebook must

Nestled up against Umstead State Park in Cary, N.C., the **Umstead Hotel and Spa** is luxurious and serene, and the staff is impeccably hospitable, even if you're just strolling around in

cycling clothes. The 150-room hotel is owned by local billionaire businessman and philanthropist Jim Goodnight and his wife, Ann, who is responsible for curating the property's 95-piece art collection. If you're feeling

particularly flush, make reservations at award-winning Herons, and ask for the Art Tour — a multicourse tasting menu that pairs artfully created dishes with pieces in the collection. A custom Dale Chihuly blown glass sculp-

ture, for example, inspired an exquisite dessert course with pulled and blown sugar shards. The Umstead, which sits on a three-acre lake, hosts afternoon tea with a live harpist and offers complimentary yoga and bike



KATHERINE FREY/THE WASHINGTON POST

Poole's Diner, a former pie shop, is run by James Beard award-winner Ashley Christensen.

tours. If the opulence stresses you out, take a deep breath and listen to the waterfall in the meditation garden, just outside the spa.

ture Preserve or Anderson Point Park east of downtown; all have plenty of parking and bathrooms.

Guidebook must

If you visit Raleigh by train, you'll roll into the \$88 million Raleigh Union Station located in the **Warehouse District**. Arguably the liveliest part of town, this neighborhood of former industrial buildings on the west side includes the new Morgan Street Food Hall, barbecue at the Pit, chocolate at Videri and contemporary art at CAM Raleigh (hours are limited). Shop at Raleigh Denim Workshop if you want very soft, high rise skinny jeans for \$245 and Sorry State Records if you're adding to your DIY punk and hardcore vinyl collection. An Urban Outfitters recently opened in the Dillon, a new office and residential tower, and Weaver Street Market, a regional co-op, will open there in February. For great views of the city, head up to the Dillon's ninth floor lobby and step out onto the terrace, or walk across Boylan Bridge at sunset and ask a local to point out the Shimmer Wall on the convention center.

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Explore

Local fave

Raleigh's bike share just launched in December (70 percent of the fleet is electric), making it even easier now to bike the **Capital Area Greenway**, more than 100 miles of paved paths throughout the city. One place to start is downtown at Little Rock Trail, accessible from John Winters Park or Chavis Park. From there, you can take the Greenway to the North Carolina Farmers Market, open daily. Or you can bike by Dorthea Dix Park, Pullen Park (kids love the \$1.50 train ride) and N.C. State. If you're down for a longer ride, head across the nifty Wade Avenue pedestrian bridge over the Beltline/Interstate 440 — at which point you'll be "OTB," outside the Beltline — to the North Carolina Museum of Art and Umstead State Park. You can even bike to Durham, almost entirely on bike paths. Locals also love the Neuse River Trail, a scenic 27.5-mile uninterrupted stretch on the east side of town. Hop on from Falls Lake in North Raleigh (where you can rent wheels from the Bike Guy), Horseshoe Farm Na-