



JENN GARBER

DISCOVERIES: Holiday shoppers check out the eclectic offerings at the open-air Historic Roanoke, Va., City Market, which opened in 1882.

Rallying Roanoke

A onetime Virginia rail hub is reclaiming its station as a welcoming destination, its eye-catching art museum and Southern charm adding to its locomotion.

JENN GARBEE
REPORTING FROM ROANOKE, VA.

During a recent visit to my husband's hometown, we watched as a colorful local character saunter into the downtown Roanoke coffee shop where we were refueling.

"Slow," as he prefers to be called, was decked out in a leather and leopard-print ensemble that stood out among the local Christmas tree sweater-set crowd. Yet his eye-catching appearance seemed the ideal complement to the city's new Frank Gehry-inspired museum looming outside the window. And, for the first time in years, dozens of tourists were bustling about.

Nestled along the Blue Ridge Mountains, Roanoke has long been beloved by residents for its Southern charm. But with many popular travel destinations in the region — among them Richmond, Va., Washington, D.C., and Charlotte, N.C. — the downtown center of this former railroad hub often felt more like a ghost town than the busy travel center it once was.

The reopening of the Taubman Museum of Art and the coinciding revitalization of downtown restaurants and shops, many with prices reminiscent of the old days, has made Roanoke a good city to rediscover, especially during the holiday season.

Start at the Virginia Museum of Transportation, housed in the former downtown railroad freight station. Inside you'll find dozens of steam engines, rail cars and cabooses, as well as automobiles, tractors and airplanes. Railroad tycoon Frederick J. Kimball chose Roanoke, formerly known as Big Lick, for a key railroad junction and locomotive construction factory for the Norfolk & Western Railway.

In 1882, Kimball built the historic Hotel Roanoke, still in operation, to meet the travelers' needs. But the dream of Roanoke's becoming a major metropolitan city ended in the late 1950s when diesel became the engine of choice. By 1963, those steam locomotives were permanently parked at the museum, and many downtown businesses closed shop.

The Hotel Roanoke survived the economic downturn, but it wasn't until 10 years ago that its aging, wood-paneled ceilings and marble floors got a much-needed refurbishing. (Guest rooms were given a full makeover last year.) New amenities such as a spa, pool and conference facility were added, but some things, such as the classic Virginia peanut soup and spoon bread — both still available in the hotel's formal dining room — were left, wisely, as they were.

A pedestrian walkway from the hotel now stretches directly into the heart of downtown. Among the handful of railroad-era businesses that survived is the Historic Roanoke City Market, the oldest continuously operating open-air market in Virginia. (It opened in 1882, the same year as the hotel.)

It's one of my favorite places to shop for one-of-a-kind holiday food gifts — \$5 slabs of hand-cured bacon from nearby farms, \$3 tubs of peanut butter fudge made by the Christmas tree vendor's wife, and even handmade dog treats packed in snowflake-decorated jars. Plus, there's always a chatty crew of modern artists selling mixed-media sculptures, pottery, jewelry and festive jars of bubble bath for the grandmother who swears she doesn't want a thing (but really does).

Along the edge of the market are many of the brick-and-mortar shops, such as Chocolatepaper, that have moved into the neighborhood more recently. The shop's namesake chocolate truffle and

If you go

THE BEST WAY

From LAX, connecting service (change of planes) is available on US Airways, Delta, United and Northwest. Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$288.

Roanoke is an easy drive from several major Southern travel destinations, including Charlotte, N.C., and Richmond, Va. It's about a four-hour drive from Washington, D.C.

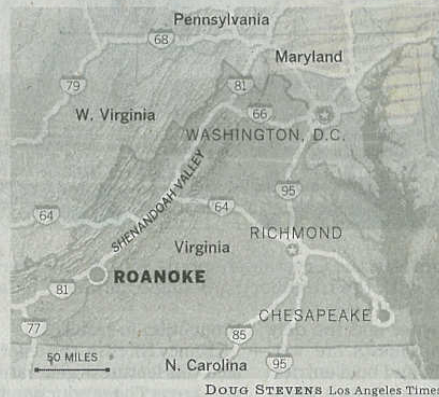
WHERE TO EAT

Table 50, 309 Market St., Roanoke; (540) 904-2350, www.table50roanoke.com. Modern bistro with crab bisque (\$7), house-ground beef burgers and pulled pork sandwiches (\$12 to \$13), and grilled fish and meats (\$22 to \$28). Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 11:30 a.m. until late night.

Texas Tavern, 114 W. Church Ave.; (540) 342-4825, www.texas-tavern-inc.com. The very limited menu includes \$2.20 "cheesy Westerns" (grilled cheeseburgers topped with fried egg) and \$1.60 bowls of chili. Open seven days a week, 24 hours a day (closed Dec. 25).

Roanoke Weiner Stand, 25 Campbell Ave. S.E.; (540) 342-6932. Walk-up counter known for its hot dogs "all the way" (mustard, chopped onions and chili) and inexpensive beers, all less than \$2 each.

Regency Dining Room, Hotel Roanoke, 110 Shenandoah Ave.; (540) 985-5900, www.hotelroanoke.com/dining/regency.php. Traditional Virginia peanut soup and spoon bread as well as contemporary Southern cuisine. Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner daily, and Sunday brunch. Dinner entrees, \$20 to \$32.



stationery selections are tempting, but don't leave without grabbing a few jars of salsas from Gunther's Gourmet, a small family-owned business in Richmond. You'll want some of the fantastic spicy peach with cinnamon or the cranberry to add to your New Year's buffet.

Among the several recently opened lunch spots serving modern Southern-style food, my current favorite is Table 50, a bistro with house-ground beef burgers and ridiculously creamy crab bisque. (One \$7 bowl is a meal.) But locals, no doubt, will tell you not to miss the Roanoke Weiner Stand. Take their advice and make room for a second lunch.

The unusual spelling is a testament to the

WHAT TO DO

Taubman Museum of Art, 110 Salem Ave. S.E.; (540) 342-5760, www.taubmanmuseum.org. Permanent collection features 19th and 20th century American art, plus a variety of traveling exhibitions. Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays (Thursdays until 7 p.m.), and noon to 5 p.m. Sundays. Closed major holidays. \$10.50 general admission, \$9 seniors, \$8.50 students, \$5.50 children ages 4 to 12, children 3 and under free.

Virginia Museum of Transportation, 303 Norfolk Ave. S.W.; (540) 342-5670, www.vmt.org. Norfolk & Western steam locomotives, rail cars and more. Admission: \$8 for adults; \$7 seniors; \$6, children ages 3 to 11; children under 3 free. Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays and 1 to 5 p.m. Sundays. Closed major holidays.

Historic Roanoke City Market, downtown square, www.downtownroanoke.org/market.htm. Four dozen rotating vendors. Open seven days a week, closed Christmas and New Year's.

Market Street Shops, hours and stores vary, see www.downtownroanoke.org/shopping.htm for a list of stores, including Chocolatepaper, www.chocolatepaperroanoke.com/

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Roanoke, 110 Shenandoah Ave.; (540) 985-5900, www.hotelroanoke.com. Special discount packages include tickets to the Taubman Museum of Art and Virginia Museum of Transportation. See website for details. Rates from \$156.

TO LEARN MORE

www.downtownroanoke.org

shop's nearly 100 years in business. ("Weiner" is an early variation of the more common "wiener.") Order your dog "all the way," which means with mustard, chili and chopped onions. Add a beer, and lunch will set you back all of \$4 — total, including the loaded dog.

After digesting, head across the street to the Taubman Museum of Art — you can't miss it. The massive, 80,000-square-foot structure was designed by Los Angeles-based architect Randall Stout, a student of Frank Gehry's. Inside the signature undulating stainless-steel building, you'll find several large galleries housing the museum's permanent collection of 19th and 20th century American art.

But the real draws are the fabulous traveling shows the museum has hosted since it reopened last year, among them exhibitions of tattoo photography and 17th century Florentine paintings, as well as a stunning semi-permanent installation designed by architect Stout and dedicated to Judith Leiber's bejeweled handbags.

Afterward, swing by the museum shop to peruse the handmade jewelry and great children's toys. Although it's tempting to hit the museum glass-enclosed cafe for a slice of pumpkin pie, you really don't want to miss the Texas Tavern, the city's beloved Depression-era diner known for its "cheesy Westerns" (a griddle-cooked cheeseburger topped with a fried egg). At \$2.20, it's one of the best deals in town for one last bite of Southern nostalgia before you hit the road for Christmas at your in-laws.

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