



Photograph © C. & M. Love

THE NEW CHATTANOOGA

URBAN AND OUTDOOR ADVENTURES COME TOGETHER IN THIS REVITALIZED CITY

BY MARY K. LOVE

Years ago, I attended prep school near the tiny college town of Sewanee, Tennessee, home to the University of the South. From the window of my dorm, which was perched on the edge of the Cumberland Plateau, I enjoyed a breathtaking view of a spreading valley and the precipitous drop-offs that surrounded it. I never took

that million-dollar view for granted. With so many outdoor distractions at my doorstep, I had no intention of driving down the mountain to Chattanooga, a city that CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite, citing an EPA report, announced was “the dirtiest city in America.” The year was 1969. What a difference half a cen-

tury makes! Today, Chattanooga (population 176,000) is the poster child for successful urban renewal. As a result of rigorous planning and a highly motivated public-private partnership that started in the ‘80s, the city cleaned up the air—and its act. Downtown, on any warm weekend, paddleboarders glide down the broad, slow-moving

Tennessee River, which snakes seductively through the city. On the river’s south shore, joggers run along the shaded path of the 13-mile-long Tennessee Riverpark, named one of world’s 10 best city running trails by CNN. Meanwhile, across the water in Coolidge Park, families spread blankets on the grass, toss Frisbees or line up for a



ride on an antique carousel. I witnessed all this—and more—when my husband and I visited Chattanooga last spring. We learned of new and expanded museums, scores of music festivals (from classical to country to blues),

a thriving restaurant and bar scene, and soon-to-open luxury hotels. **Tennessee’s Grand Canyon** Chattanooga has long been a playground for outdoor enthusiasts who come here to hike,



FOR MORE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Chattanooga Metropolitan Airport is served by Allegiant Air, American Airlines, American Eagle, Delta and United Airlines.

WHERE TO STAY

The Dwell Hotel, thedwellhotel.com, 423-267-7866
The Westin Chattanooga, westinchattanooga.com, 423-531-4653
The Edwin Hotel, theedwinhotel.com, 423-713-5900 (opens June 28)

FESTIVALS

There are more than 100 festivals and events in Chattanooga every year, from the Four Bridges Arts Festival (April) to the Riverbend Festival (June) to Wine Over Water (October), a wine and food festival that supports historical preservation. Go to Chattanooga’s comprehensive website to find one that interests you!
chattanoogaafun.com/events

mountain bike, horseback ride and hang glide—to list a few activities. The heart and soul of this adventure lover’s paradise is the 26-mile-long Tennessee River Gorge, “Tennessee’s Grand Canyon,” whose creation over 200 million years ago accounts for the region’s dramatic caves, canyons, steep valleys and escarpments.

Protecting 17,000 of the gorge’s 27,000 acres is the Tennessee River Gorge Trust, a land trust that partners with state and federal entities, like the Tennessee Valley Authority and Prentice Cooper State

Forest, as well as community organizations. The trust’s activities, apart from setting aside land, include scientific research, education and community outreach. As much as I longed to go hiking, I had no time on a two-day visit. But I called up Chad Wykle, co-owner of Chattanooga’s award-winning retailer Rock/Creek Outfitters, to

1. Chattanooga by night.
2. Matilda Midnight, The Dwell Hotel.
3. Tennessee Aquarium.
4. Hunter Museum.

Photograph courtesy of The Dwell Hotel

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Photograph © David Livingood



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get the scoop on things to do when I return.

Wykle said he and his wife moved from Morganton, North Carolina, in 2001 to pursue what he calls “the best rock-climbing in the United States.” At that point he ticked off all the outdoor activities I could enjoy within an hour’s drive of downtown Chattanooga: If my preference is to hike, there are some 52 trailheads within 25 minutes of downtown. Hang gliding? Plenty of that behind Signal Mountain. Class 5 rapids? There are about 36 “steep creeks,” within 20 minutes of town. I can also rent a bike or paddleboard

from Rock/Creek’s concession on the river.

The Riverfront

The next day, I found myself standing on the framed-out balcony of a riverfront suite in The Edwin Hotel, a luxury property due to open this summer.

From here I could see the river, the trussed 127-year-old Walnut Street Bridge (one of the longest pedestrian bridges in the world), and the Hunter Museum of American Art. A block to my left, just out of sight, was the Tennessee Aquarium, a cornerstone of the Tennessee Riverpark Plan that

kicked off Chattanooga’s renaissance back in the day.

The Tennessee Aquarium’s (tnaqua.org) popular exhibits are housed in two structures. The original building, River Journey, opened in 1992 to great acclaim, followed by Ocean Journey in 2005. Visitors can easily spend all day exploring the complex, which is rated as Chattanooga’s top attraction.

The aquarium doesn’t limit itself to exhibiting species that live in water—or even in North America. Rather, this is a place to discover animals you’ve seldom heard about, much less observed, no matter where they

5. Pot Point, Tennessee River.

6. Ring-tailed lemur, Tennessee Aquarium.

7. Hang gliding near Chattanooga.

live in the world. On our visit, we had a below-the-surface view of macaroni and gentoo penguins bulleting through the water and walked through an enclosed garden inhabited by hundreds of fluttering butterflies. Then we moved on to the Lemur Forest to watch Madagascar’s threatened red-ruffed and ring-tailed lemurs display their acrobatic skills. Great fun for adults and kids alike!

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Photograph courtesy of Songbirds Museum; photo Damien Rogers



Photograph courtesy of The Dwell Hotel

looking the Tennessee River, the Hunter Museum of American art (huntermuseum.org) houses one of the finest collections of American art in the Southeast. The permanent collection includes paintings, works on paper, sculpture, photography, mixed media, video, furniture and contemporary studio glass over a range of styles and periods. Among the artists are Charles Burchfield, Thomas Cole, Winslow Homer, John Marin, Thomas Hart Benton and

Mary Cassatt, to name a few, as well as photographers Ansel Adams and Edward Weston.

Downtown

Chattanooga's Downtown and Southside neighborhoods are graced with buildings that date to the early 1900s. Reflective of a time when the city was an important hub of industry and transportation, many are embellished with elegant brickwork and decorative cornices.

Today, a line of old ware-

houses accommodates upscale shops, while a golden glass tower, built in 1970, has been reborn as a luxury Westin Hotel. Meanwhile, down the street, the grand Read House Historic Inn and Suites, built in 1926, is undergoing a \$25-million restoration, led by Charleston-based Avocet Hospitality.

We stayed at The Dwell Hotel, a boutique property with a mid-century ambience. (A local confided: "It's right out of a Wes Anderson movie.") Built

8. View from Coolidge Park.

9. Lobby, The Dwell Hotel.

10. "Sparkle" Fender guitars, Songbirds Museum.

as a hotel in 1909, the building still has its original brickwork and hardwood floors. Our large guest room had high ceilings and a fireplace. Tiny hexagonal black-and-white floor tiles and glass doorknobs gave a retro vibe to our thoroughly up-to-date bathroom.

LINDSAY GOODWIN



Photo by Holger Oberaus

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The owner indulged her creative side by filling the hotel with vintage pieces from the '50s to the '70s and using bold splashes of color on furniture and walls—aqua, gold, orange, pink, green. At the hotel's bar, Matilda Midnight, where the ceiling is lit with tiny "stars," cocktails have tarot-inspired names. (My Hangman was a mix of whiskey, rhubarb bitters, egg whites and flavors of orange and thyme.) The hotel's restaurant, Terra Mãe, served up exotic dishes, like a papaya and prawn appetizer (spicy and minty) and my seafood entrée, monkfish and lobster in a broth redolent of an herb garden.

The Southside

The epicenter of the Southside, which starts south of 12th Street and runs to 20th, is the Terminal Building, a Beaux-Arts-style railroad station built in 1909. Today it's on the National Register of Historic Places. The building houses the Chattanooga Choo Choo Hotel and an assortment of bars, restaurants, shops and cafés.

Within this complex is the unique Songbirds Museum (songbirdsguitars.com), which opened in 2017. Rotating exhibits include over 300 classic American acoustic and electric instruments made from the 1920s through the 1970s. Some are very rare, valued at six figures or more. Here are over 30 Gibson Sunburst Les Paul guitars, considered by many to be the Holy Grail of electric guitars; one-of-a-kind custom-color Fender guitars; original five-string banjos; mandolins; and more. Both guitar aficionados and those who simply love music will leave with a new understanding of the instrument

and how it developed.

Staff members have an encyclopedic knowledge of instruments, American music genres, celebrity performers and even their repertoires. The museum offers a variety of educational programs as well as musical performances throughout the year.

My husband went wild here, asking many questions and exclaiming over guitars owned by legendary performers Chuck Berry, Les Paul and others.

When it comes to dining and drinking on the Southside, choices range from upscale St. John's Restaurant to the always-buzzing Flying Squirrel, whose ultra-modern design won it a People's Choice award in a contest sponsored by the Los Angeles chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

You can also line up with the locals for breakfast at the Blue Grass Grill or Niedlov's Bakery, both on Main Street, and explore the art galleries nearby.

As I reflect on my time in Chattanooga, I can't help but respect what the city has accomplished over the past decades—protecting natural resources, preserving local culture and history, and developing capabilities and infrastructure to attract 21st-century businesses. (Chattanooga's utility was the first in the world to introduce 1GB—and now 10GB—service).

Yes, Chattanooga wasn't an attractive place to visit when I was in high school. Who knows what trouble I might have gotten into if I had abandoned my dorm for a wild evening at Matilda Midnight! ♡

Mary K. Love is editor of *Charleston Style & Design* magazine.



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