

## **A Wellness Tour in Asheville, North Carolina**

Asheville, North Carolina, embraced by the Appalachians and just off the scenic Blue Ridge Parkway, can wonderfully serve any woman traveler. Sometimes we travel to explore; sometimes we set out to challenge ourselves or learn a new skill; sometimes we want to indulge and relax, or gather with friends or family in a “vacation.” And sometimes, our heart just needs to get away from all it's mired in, and just retreat in order to rejuvenate. Asheville's reputation as a mecca for wellness is just what I was looking for.

In the 19th century, Asheville's pure mountain air, mineral waters and hot springs and mild climate were prescribed for a host of illnesses, including tuberculosis. In 1880, the railroad rolled through, improving accessibility. George W. Vanderbilt drew further attention by building his 250-room Biltmore Estates, and Edwin Wiley Grove, a medicine manufacturer, made his mark by building the elegant Omni Grove Park Inn in 1913. Today, there's another boom going on, and with both Southern and Mountain hospitality, Asheville boasts a vibrant, active mindset, and a heady dose of wellness opportunities.

Visiting this city of almost 90,000 residents, I indulge in a host of treatments that have me exhaling one nice long, “Om,” and returning home with a brighter outlook for having taken care of myself.

### **Traveling Yogini: Salt Cave, Yoga in the Park, and a Foot Soak**

Cameron Gunter, owner of Traveling Yogini, leads Wellness Tours, Bend & Brew tours and corporate yoga classes around Asheville. I meet her group of two men and three other women at Asheville's Salt Cave for the start of our tour.

Salt Cave owner Jodie Appel first discovered the benefits of spending time in a salt cave through her father, who found great relief of serious asthma and lung issues from the therapy. After this first halotherapy treatment, he didn't need his inhaler for many months. Jodie comes from a holistic background and she too discovered benefits, so in 2012, she opened Asheville's Salt Cave, with her father, brother and sister all playing roles in the business.

Salt therapy started in the 1800's in Poland, where Dr. Felix Boczkowski explored why salt miners who worked in the salt mines in Wieliczka's salt mine did not get the tuberculosis that had spread to the rest of the area's population. Benefits have been demonstrated for allergies, congestion, bronchitis and other respiratory issues, acne, psoriasis, eczema and other skin issues, viral infections, more. Crystal salt, unlike rock salt, contains high concentrations of minerals and trace elements.

In building the salt cave, Jodie got help from the owner of the salt cave in Williamsburg that had helped her father. She used Polish salt to construct caves, then Himalayan salt on floor. The cave is constructed in storefront space that combines 20 tons pounds of Polish salt, two water features and wood. The result is a living therapeutic microclimate, where stalactites form independently and sustainably.

Inside the cave, we settle on the floor or slip into zero gravity recliners and relax in the comfortable 70 degree temps. There's soft music and the sound of the water features. Cameron leads us into a guided meditation before leaving us to our own devices. The 45 minutes of relaxation or meditation goes by quickly. I didn't arrive with health ailments, but my sinuses are indeed clearer afterwards and I'm feeling great.

On to our next stop. Cameron points out downtown Art Deco, Beaux Arts and Neoclassical architectural gems, locally-owned restaurants, shops, music venues and art galleries. She knows her city well, and is positive about all the city has to offer.

At a tree-covered park in Pack Square, we spread out mini-yoga mats in a circle. Cameron leads us in some gentle yoga asanas. It's a beautiful sunny, cool morning. In Reverse Warrior, I look up and I'm under the canopy of a sprawling, leafy oak. I make a little promise to myself to take my practice outdoors more.

Then it's on to Wake, "the foot sanctuary & shop." The retail store carries scented bath salts, food, jewelry and other gift items. Behind thick drapery, our group settles into comfy chairs and sofas in the spa. Choosing from a menu of invigorating or relaxing solutions is difficult, but I end with "Meditation," a mix of lemon, juniper, cinnamon, clary sage, and peppermint. There are warm neck wraps and hand towels, and huge copper caldrons of our soaking solutions. Who doesn't love a good foot soak? We soak, play with the water, rub our legs, and then relax, sipping cups of chamomile and vanilla bean tea in Japanese tea cups. Our soak is refreshed with more hot water. Lovely. The soaks ends with our technicians pampering our feet with baby powder and a brief foot rub, there with hugs all around, I leave the tour with the proverbial spring to my step.

### **Esalen Massage and a Saltwater Float: Not Your Run-of-the-Mill Massage and Soak**

There are endless opportunities for massage in Asheville, with just about every modality represented. I want true bodywork that goes beyond simple relaxation massage, and book an Esalen massage at Still Point Wellness. Located a bit outside the clamor of downtown, the interior is just the oasis it should be. I accept a cup of herbal tea as I fill out the pre-treatment paperwork, which goes beyond inquiring as to whether I have physical injuries or limitations they need to know about. They want to know other ways I've explored the mind-body connection, what is going on in my life emotionally, and what my goals are for the session. A true holistic spa.

Esalen massage hails from the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. This is not your timid relaxation chair massage; it's an intriguingly slow, deliberate type of whole-body bodywork that combines Swedish, deep tissue, and Thai massage, as well as cranial-sacral therapy. Ben, my LMT, has a sometimes gentle, sometimes firm touch, and uses sweeping body-long strokes that leave me mindfully awake, blissful, and calmly energized. I left feeling I've been cared for tenderly. Namaste, indeed.

Donned in a lush white spa robe, I relax in a spacious softly-lit, indigo-hued room with a very healthy 220 gallon saltwater tank at its center, before a stint in Still Point's saltwater floatation chamber. Floatation tanks are still a new experience for most, but I've enjoyed "floating" before. There are different tank designs, some like the one at Still Point, and some that are body-hugging pods, sometimes called "deprivation tanks;" which can be too claustrophobic for many, especially the first time. The chamber at Still Point Wellness is a spacious 6' x 8' x 7' tall and you'll float in about 13" of water to which half a ton of Epsom salts have been added. I close the chamber door and relax in total darkness. (This is optional; the tank is housed in a large, fully private room with a shower and toilet, so I could have cracked the door open to let in a bit of light.) I float along a bit, playing in the water as I might in a warm swimming pool. But soon, I'm in my own little dark and quiet world, and enter various stages of mediation, trains of thought, and relaxation. Saltwater floatation is a totally self-guided experience; a true inner journey. The experience is different for everyone and different each time. It can offer stress and anxiety relief, tension reduction, and pain relief. Many people find regular use is very much like meditation; your body and mind enters a relaxed state fairly easily, helping to deal with real-life tensions and conflicts.

Ninety minutes later, I slowly exit the chamber, shower, freshen up and return to daily life. The float leaves my body feeling awake and my mind clear and unencumbered. (Side benefit: salt water floats are wonderful for the skin.)

Owners Corey Costanzo and Robin Finn-Costanzo together bring many years of training, therapeutic and teaching experience in Esalen massage, Somatic therapy, yoga therapy, meditation training, and more to the center.

### **Stay at a Retreat Center**

Om Sanctuary is a holistic retreat center just two miles from downtown Asheville that offers a calm respite. The retreat center is situated on 54 acres, and includes the Sanctuary Pavilion, the central property in which my room is located and a large conference center or dining hall, as well as cabins and woodland cottages, the Renewal Center, Serenity Garden, the Woodland Acres and the Tranquility Trail.

In mid-2015, the woods were granted protection by a Southern Appalachian Highlands

Conservancy Conservation Easement. Shelli Stanback, Founder and President of this non-profit retreat center, says, "Natural places are essential for human health. With few urban open spaces remaining near Asheville, protecting the forest with a conservation easement was the clear, sustainable choice." She says Om Sanctuary strives to be a place to "disconnect from technology to reconnect to our natural rhythms."

Formed in 2012, the sanctuary is located on the site of the historic Richmond Hill hotel with the mission to inspire health lifestyle practices through holistic education and connection with nature. Throughout the year, the center offers space for various holistic programs, and rotating gallery space for local artists.

The grounds and gardens are lovely. Serenity Garden blooms with columbine, hasta, roses, peonies, foxglove, lilies, ferns, skimmia, rhodies, dogwoods and so much more, and is beautifully tended. There's a stone waterfall, trellised patio with tables and chairs, and benches interspersed throughout. I wander the grounds and trails, finding great nooks and crannies in which to sit, relax, read and write. A rare white turkey roams the grounds, as well as deer and birds, and the occasional brown bear is sited in the woods.

My corner room is spacious, with high ceilings. The four-poster bed has a good quality Posturepedic mattress and memory foam pillows. There are two swivel armchairs at the black-shuttered windows, built-in armoires and a gas fireplace with lovely large mantel. There's a small frig, but no television, radio, or clock, alarm or otherwise.

The bathroom is large, with separate enclosed shower and oversized tub. (One night, I relax in the tub using bath salts from Wake.) It's all new, except for the original black and white coin-sized hexagon floor tiles—a smart move, as the tiles are a classic.

Down the hall in the breakfast room, hot water, mugs, and a selection of tea is available from morning until about 9:00 at night. Breakfast is a chance to gather with the other guests in the breakfast room. There's coffee, tea, fresh fruit, fruit salad, scones, muffins, bagels, an assortment of jams, nut butters, hard boiled brown eggs, muesli and oats, and yogurt. One morning the entrée is a cheese and arugula frittata and another, ham and cheese omelets.

While the accommodations are lovely and comfortable and I thoroughly enjoy my stay and would return, Om Sanctuary is foremost a retreat center. If I'd wanted all of the perks of a luxury hotel, there's the Biltmore Estates or Omni Grove Park Inn, at considerably higher cost. The rooms are lovely, but Om Sanctuary is not the place to "ohh and ahh" over the thick towels or high thread count sheets. There is no pool or hot tub, and the sauna in the renewal center wasn't available at

the time of my stay. There's no on-site restaurant, although again, you're just minutes from downtown and the River Arts district.

Om Sanctuary is a place for retreat and contemplation, whether you're alone, or traveling with a partner or a friend, or attending one of the group retreats. (Programs are a mix of national companies and local practitioners hosting their own programs.) Complementary "sampler" classes take place after breakfast, including tai chi, yoga, meditation, and qi gong. The classes are taught by "affiliated partners", a.k.a., local teachers. My yoga class with local yogi Elle was especially good.

**"Bliss Me Out"**

Asheville lifted my spirits, strengthened my ki, exercised my mind and body, and jump-started creative juices. I moved around a little slower and a bit more mindfully. As always, I enjoyed talking with people and hearing their stories—it's probably what I like best about travel because I'm reminded that our joys and struggles are all the same in the big picture. I passed a woman in a t-shirt that read, "Bliss Me Out." Yes, Asheville blisses me out.

As well, there's so much more to this energetic city than the wide range of wellness options. I hike and visit some of the outlying parks. I browse the vibrant downtown core, full of quality art galleries and fun shops, and enjoy coffeehouses, restaurants, breweries, and interesting architecture. I explore the River Arts District, visiting an array of warehouse studios and galleries.

Stretch yourself, in mind and body. Breathe. Feel gratitude. Visit Asheville, and enjoy these experiences for yourself, or create your own wellness tour!



**IF YOU GO:**

- Om Sanctuary, [www.omsanctuary.org](http://www.omsanctuary.org)
- Traveling Yogini, [www.thetravelingyogini.com](http://www.thetravelingyogini.com)
- Asheville's Salt Cave, [www.ashevillesaltcave.com](http://www.ashevillesaltcave.com)

## Confetti Travel Cafe

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- Wake, [www.wakefootsanctuary.com](http://www.wakefootsanctuary.com)
- Still Point Wellness, [www.stillpointwell.com](http://www.stillpointwell.com)
- Asheville Convention and Visitors Bureau: [www.exploreasheville.com](http://www.exploreasheville.com)

*-All photos by Nancy Zaffaro.*