

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

**B**een to Charlotte, N.C.? I thought I had. Dozens of times, actually. I've switched planes at the airport, barreled through on I-85 N and even lingered over lunch with clients. But during a recent visit, with my focus set as tourist, I came to realize that Charlotte is a great city. It's friendly, sophisticated, charmingly Southern and boasts hundreds of things to do (including some that are utterly unique).

What's more, it's only four hours away from Atlanta—close enough for quick escapes, yet distant enough to still truly get away.

Top among the reasons to visit Charlotte is the opportunity to stay at Ballantyne Resort. Online photos of

expansive grounds suggest a location way out in the boonies, so upon finding it across the highway from a mall, I struggled with disbelief. Could this be it? (The photos don't lie; they merely showcase the view in one direction.)

After surrendering my keys to the valet, I wandered into the lobby and into a world where apparently I was the anointed queen. Since Ballantyne Resort is Charlotte's only Mobil Four-Star and AAA Four-Diamond property, it's reasonable to expect excellent service. But the personalized service I received was beyond anything that I'd ever experienced or even dared to dream. As one example, while kicking back in the plush comforts of my suite one

evening before dinner, there was a knock on my door. "Room service," a voice cried. Not having placed an order, I opened the door prepared to explain to the server that he had arrived at the wrong room. Instead he said, "Ms. Philbrick, we thought you might enjoy your favorite cocktail before dinner," then breezed in to shake and pour me an ice-cold original martini. What pampering! How did they know my favorite cocktail? It just so happens that I've got the recipe posted on my personal Web site, and somebody here took the time to look it up and surprise me. I can't guarantee that you'll get the same experience, but I'd be very surprised if the folks at Ballantyne Resort didn't somehow find a way to treat you like royalty during your stay.

Even if you can't spend the night at Ballantyne Resort, there are other ways to indulge in its luxuries. The Spa boasts a full range of services, including a decadent ice cream pedicure, which simultaneously tickles the taste buds and the tootsies. While my feet soaked in chocolate-scented water (and were then buffed, exfoliated, soothed and polished), I sank back into the massage chair and savored a scoop of chocolate ice cream. At the Dana Rader Golf School, which is

named a top golf school by Golf Magazine, personalized instruction is tailored to each student's needs. Since I'd never swung a golf club, my lesson focused on the basics like grip. I left feeling confident about my potential for the game. The menu at the new Gallery Restaurant celebrates the farm-to-table journey, showcasing local area farmers' seasonal products in tasty presentations.

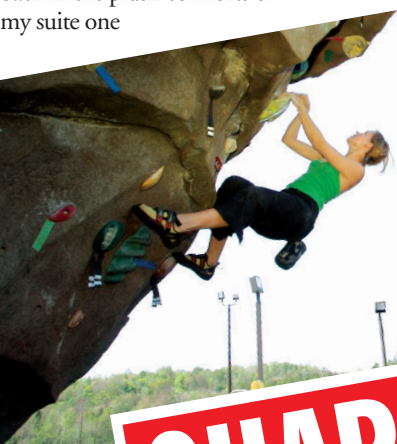
Ballantyne Resort isn't the only place to feel regal while in Charlotte, which is nicknamed "The Queen City," since it was named to honor Germany's Princess Charlotte of Mecklenburg. Within my spacious guestroom at the Duke Mansion, a historic bed and breakfast inn, I found welcoming serenity. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the circa-1915 building boasts 20 guestrooms decorated in Southern splendor. Though I was tempted to linger on the property, the friendly staff offered recommendations (and driving directions) for venturing out to explore Charlotte.

Downtown Charlotte has a very different vibe than Atlanta: For starters, the sidewalks are wider and tree-lined, so they're easier to navigate (and prettier). In this very walkable city, I parked my car and then spent an afternoon walk-

ing from one fascinating museum to another. Favorites included the Mint Museum of Craft + Design, which showcases North Carolina's artisan history, the Levine Museum of the New South, which provides an education on post-Civil War history, and Discovery Place, with more than 300 hands-on exhibits.

Another day, I opted for more active adventures at the U.S. National Whitewater Center. Billed as the world's premier outdoor recreation and environmental learning center, this place is an official U.S. Olympic training site and host to many national and international competitions. It's possible to raft the world's largest man-made whitewater river, kayak class III-IV rapids, mountain bike along an 11-mile trails, climb one of the nation's largest outdoor climbing structures and much more. This is a place to get your adrenaline going—just remember to bring a towel, because the challenge here is real. On the second lap around the whitewater course, my raft capsized and I ended up taking an invigorating ride. Like Charlotte itself, it was an unexpected blast. **SP**

TRAVEL



Rock climbing in Charlotte

Ballantyne Resort (its pool is pictured below)



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## WHERE TO EAT

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704-248-4100  
www.gallery-restaurant.com
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www.m5modmed.com

## IF YOU GO

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