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36 HOURS

36 Hours in Research Triangle, N.C.

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"Gyre," by Thomas Sayre, in Museum Park, 164 acres by the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh.
Jenny Warburg for The New York Times

By J. J. Goode
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TELL North Carolinians you're heading to the Research Triangle, and they'll probably ask "Which school are you visiting?" Yet the close-knit cities of Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill are marked by more than college bars and hoops fans. Visitors not bound for

Duke, the University of North Carolina or North Carolina State come to see buzz-worthy bands, dine on food from farm-worshiping chefs and explore outdoor art. From its biscuits to its boutiques, the Triangle occupies a happy place between slow-paced Southern charm and urban cool.

Friday

3 p.m.

1) ART INSIDE OUT

Anyone who has visited the Met or the Getty might scoff at the relatively succinct collection at the North Carolina Museum of Art (2110 Blue Ridge Road, Raleigh; 919-839-6262; www.ncartmuseum.org). But the lack of tour bus crowds means unfettered access to the Old Masters and contemporary heavyweights like Anselm Kiefer. The real treat is the adjacent Museum Park, more than 164 acres of open fields and woodlands punctuated by environmental art like Cloud Chamber, a stone hut that acts as a camera obscura, with a small hole in the roof projecting inverted, otherworldly images of slowly swaying trees on the floor and walls.

5 p.m.

2) TOWER OF BAUBLE

There's no pigeonholing the eclectic wares in this four-story indie minimall collectively known as Father & Son Antiques (107 West Hargett Street, Raleigh; 919-832-3030), and including Southern Swank and 2nd Floor Vintage. The organizing principle, if there is one, might be high design meets kitschy Americana, as the intermingling of vintage disco dresses ($18), Mexican wrestling masks ($20) and Eames aluminum group chairs ($250 to $500) attests.

7 p.m.

3) UPSCALE DINER

Memorable meals are easy to come by in the Triangle owing to its high concentration of accomplished, produce-fondling chefs like Ashley Christensen. She left one of the area's top kitchens to open Poole's Downtown Diner (426 South McDowell Street, Raleigh; 919-832-4477; www.poolesdowntowndiner.com) in a space that began as a 1940s pie shop. Diners sitting in the bright-red booths

dig into Christensen's low-pretense, high-flavor dishes, like a starter of lovably sloppy fried green tomatoes crowned with local pork smoked over cherry wood ($11), and the Royale ($13), an almost spherical hunk of ground-in-house chuck roll seared in duck fat, topped with cheese and perched on a slice of grilled brioche.

10 p.m.

4) CHEERS TO THE CHIEF

For most bars, a popular politician's visit would be a game-changing boon. But the Raleigh Times Bar (14 East Hargett Street, Raleigh; 919-833-0999; www.raleightimesbar.com) was packed well before Barack Obama showed up the day of the state's Democratic primary. The owner, Greg Hatem, painstakingly restored the century-old building that once housed its namesake newspaper and decorated the walls with old newspaper clippings, paperboy bags and other artifacts from the defunct daily. Mr. Obama bought a $2 Pabst Blue Ribbon (and left an $18 tip), but anyone not campaigning might choose one of the more than 100 other beers ($1 to $68), including esoteric Belgians and local brews you won't find elsewhere.

Saturday

10:30 a.m.

5) ECO JUNK

The Scrap Exchange (548 Foster Street, Durham; 919-688-6960; www.scrapexchange.org) is a "nonprofit creative reuse center" specializing in industrial discards or, for those not versed in eco-jargon, a bazaar of modestly priced former junk donated by Carolinians and scavenged from local businesses that include a hosiery mill, a zipper factory and a parachute plant. Even if you're not one of the giddy artists, teachers or theater producers who comb for utilitarian treasures, plan to spend at least an hour rummaging in a cool-struck trance through test tubes (20 cents to $1), empty fire extinguishers ($3 to $5) and swaths of double-knit polyester ($1 a yard).

2 p.m.

7) RIVER WALK

One of the Triangle's charms is that its urban trappings are so easy to escape. A 10-mile drive from downtown Durham brings you to

Eno River State Park (6101 Cole Mill Road, Durham; 919-383-1686; www.ncparks.gov). Its trails pass through swaying pines and follow the river past patches of delicate purple-and-yellow wildflowers and turtles sunning themselves on low branches in the water.

5 p.m.

8) GOING WHOLE HOG

Small towns and back roads, not cities, have a monopoly on great barbecue. What makes the Pit (328 West Davie Street, Raleigh; 919-890-4500; www.thepit-raleigh.com) a striking exception is Ed Mitchell, the legendary master of the eastern North Carolina art form of whole hog cooking. Now instead of trekking 100 miles to porcine meccas like Ayden and Lexington, you can dig into pilgrimage-worthy chopped or pulled pork — made from pigs purchased from family farms and cooked for 10 to 14 hours over coals and hickory or oak — just a short stroll from the Capitol Building. A chopped barbecued pork plate with two sides and greaseless hush puppies costs $12.

7 p.m.

9) ROOT FOR THE HOME TEAM

The Triangle is college basketball country, home to two of the winningest teams and some of the most rabid fans in N.C.A.A. history. But soon after the madness of March, the more tranquil local baseball fans stream into the Durham Bulls Athletic Park (409 Blackwell Street, Durham; 919-687-6500; www.dbulls.com). The Bulls, founded in 1902 as the Tobacconists, recently became the Tampa Bay Rays' AAA affiliate. The major league-quality play comes at minor league prices ($7 to $9 a ticket).

10 a.m.

11) DRIVE-THRU BISCUITS

There are several places in Chapel Hill that serve a distinguished Southern breakfast. Diners linger over gravy-smothered pork chops and eggs at Mama Dip's (408 West Rosemary Street; 919-942-5837; www.mamadips.com) and peerless shrimp and grits at Crook's Corner (610 West Franklin Street; 919-929-7643; www.crookscorner.com). But for a morning meal on the go that's equally unforgettable, roll up to the drive-through-only Sunrise Biscuit Kitchen (1305 East Franklin Street; 919-933-1324), where

the iced tea is tooth-achingly sweet and the main course is fluffy, buttery and filled with salty country ham ($2.02) or crisp fried chicken ($3.40).

THE BASICS

Several airlines offer flights between the New York area airports and Raleigh-Durham International Airport for as low as $150, according to a recent online search. Durham, Raleigh and Chapel Hill are 20 to 40 minutes apart from one another and public transportation is infrequent, so if you're planning to visit at least two points on the Triangle, you should rent a car.

The 150-room **Umstead Hotel and Spa** (100 Woodland Pond, Cary; 866-877-4141; www.theumstead.com), about 15 minutes from downtown Raleigh, has a pool, an elegant adjoining restaurant called Herons and an on-premises spa that offers massages and facial treatments. Doubles are $249 to $399 (there's often a two-night minimum).

Whether you stay in one of the seven impeccable rooms, garden cottage (complete with a porch swing) or 1700s-style log cabin at **Arrowhead Inn** (106 Mason Road; 919-477-8430;

www.arrowheadinn.com), 10 miles from downtown Durham, you'll enjoy imaginative breakfasts made by a co-owner, Phil Teber, and have access to six acres of manicured lawns, gardens and magnolia trees. Weekend rates start at $150 for a room with a fireplace and double bed and reach $325 for the Carolina Log Cabin.

The Carolina Inn (211 Pittsboro Street, Chapel Hill; 800-962-8519; www.carolinainn.com) is not your typical on-campus hotel. In-room massages, dry cleaning service and a lobby whose Southern grandeur extends to the hotel's 184 rooms make it much more than just convenient lodging for parents visiting the University of North Carolina. Rates start at $168.

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