

# Great Escapes

## Eat, drink and be daring

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**Abingdon Trail Mix** *Milling around in the southwest corner of Virginia* After navigating our way out of the high-speed traffic on I-81, my husband and I eased into a slower pace of life, as we pulled into the charming town of Abingdon, our home base for several days of outdoorsy adventures in Southwest Virginia. Here you should hike, bike or at least sit on a porch with a good view of the breathtaking scenery, since the Virginia Creeper and Appalachian trails and the Mt. Rogers National Scenic Recreation Area are all nearby. In town, you can find fine dining and a show at the famous Barter Theatre, which is within walking distance of a lovely place to stay, the Martha Washington Hotel. We let the 21st century zoom on by for a few days.

**Stay** If you want to feel pampered, check in at the **Martha Washington Hotel and Spa** (276-628-3161 or [marthawashingtoninn.com](http://marthawashingtoninn.com)), located in the heart of Abingdon's compact downtown. The Martha Washington — a private residence in 1832 and a finishing school, a Civil War hospital and a women's college in later years — is relaxing and refined, with a beautifully appointed porch, an indoor pool, and a lovely two-level flagstone-lined outdoor Jacuzzi alongside a fire pit. Soaking in small-town ambiance never felt so good. We added massages at "The Martha," as the locals call it, to work out the kinks from overdoing the hiking.

**Dine** Eating well in Abingdon is as easy as rolling out of bed at The Martha and wandering into the dining room. The hotel serves a full breakfast of eggs and sausage, fresh fruit, biscuits, sweet breads and apple butter. Although well fortified for the trails, by the time we'd finished hiking, we were hungry enough for the Southern gourmet dinner menu at the hotel's dining room. A sumptuous but intimate setting, the dining room includes a gorgeous old bar with comfortable leather seating. On another night during our stay, we dined at **The Tavern** (276-628-1118 or [abingdontavern.com](http://abingdontavern.com)), in Abingdon's oldest building, which dates to 1779. Owned by a German, the restaurant offers food with an intercontinental flair unusual for this

rustic spot. You can order schnitzel, spaetzle, rippchen, Chicken Saltimbocca and stuffed filet mignon Palermo-style.

**Don't Miss** Getting away from the grind should include a trip to the picturesque White's Mill & Mercantile (276-628-2960 or [whitemill.org](http://whitemill.org)). A working mill undergoing restoration, it's open Wednesday through Sunday (the mill is closed January and February). Powered by water until 1989, the 1790s gristmill uses electricity to grind cornmeal, buckwheat flour and grits. The actual grinding, which makes quite a racket, usually goes on when the mill is closed to the public. But you might get lucky. Either way, you can tour the mill, see old and modern equipment, and buy gluten-free products milled there; other delectables and collectibles are available at the adjoining old-timey Mercantile.

**Shop** **The Gallery** (276-628-3161, ext.159 or [marthawashingtoninn.com/martha-washington-gallery](http://marthawashingtoninn.com/martha-washington-gallery)), is a recent addition to The Martha Washington that's tucked away on the hotel's lower level. The Gallery shows and sells artwork on canvas, glass, paper and wood, as well as blown-glass fine jewelry by regional artists. Along with traditional Appalachian landscapes, there are refreshingly contemporary works for sale at the shop. And you can find old, architecturally interesting photos of the hotel. The Gallery displays monthly changing exhibits in the Regional Art Exhibit Hall of the hotel.

**Discover** The pace picked up considerably when we rode our mountain bikes along the Virginia Creeper Trail — a euphoria-producing trail that starts at Whitetop Station. You can bike the entire 34-mile trail by starting in Abingdon. But most folks use the town of Damascus as their launching point. Six hiking, biking and driving trails converge there and, as a result, it's full of bike-rental outfitters. We took a shuttle from **Adventure Damascus** (888-595-BIKE or [adventuredamascus.com](http://adventuredamascus.com)) to the top of Whitetop Mountain near the North Carolina border and then biked to Damascus along a stunningly beautiful trail, banked by rhododendrons and tall trees. A logging train nicknamed the Virginia Creeper once chugged along this route. We careened downhill, following the rambling Laurel Creek as it tumbled down the mountain. With bridge crossings, waterfalls and scenic overlooks, it's a jaw-dropping ride that bikers of most any age can handle. —*Maureen Egan*