



# EXPERIENCE BURNSVILLE FROM THE GROUND UP ... AND STRETCH YOUR VISIT TO THE STARS

story and photos by Zenda Douglas

The Milky Way as seen overhead  
at the Mayland Earth to Sky Park.  
Photo courtesy of Mayland  
Community College & Foundation

**E**arth holds a treasure trove of unique places waiting to be experienced. Now, as deep space exploration sends back more and more astounding images, we know similar treasures stretch deep into our universe and beyond.

Less than two hours from Upstate South Carolina there is a rare place where visitors can experience the wonderment of both earth and space.

In Yancey County, NC, on the edge of the Pisgah National Forest, lies Burnsville, a bustling small town embraced by forested countryside and tall mountains, but whose limits stretch to the stars and beyond.

From earthly clay that is creatively transformed into unique and exquisite pottery, to small-town streets lined with unique shops and restaurants, to countless trails leading to majestic mountain peaks, to a lofty and dark knob where constellations and planets are brought into view, Burnsville offers an opportunity to explore both heaven and earth.

Arthur Planetarium offers unique perspectives to show attendees.  
Photo courtesy of Burnsville-Yancey Chamber of Commerce



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Blair Belt, Earth to Sky Park coordinator, shows off some constellations with a laser pointer during a community viewing night at the Bare Dark Sky Observatory. Photo courtesy of Mayland Community College & Foundation

Just 16 minutes from downtown Burnsville is the internationally certified Bare Dark Sky Observatory, located at the Mayland Earth to Sky Park. Here, visitors are rewarded with night sky and planetary views only recently imagined possible. Images of Jupiter and Saturn, with its clearly defined rings, and the Andromeda and Milky Way galaxies fill the lenses of a custom-built f/3.6 StarStructure Newtonian telescope and a Meade 35-cm LX200 telescope.

Visitors are encouraged to plan a trip during the new moon and astronomical twilight to enhance viewing. The six-acre site opened in 2017 and is situated in the rugged mountain terrain of the Pisgah National Forest.

Right next door, the Glenn & Carol Arthur Planetarium opened this past summer. It features 60 reclining chairs beneath a 36-foot projection dome that allows visitors to see magnificently crafted and engineered astronomy as well as STEM and nature shows. Now is a particularly good time to visit the planetarium as a new holiday laser light show featuring the music of the Trans-Siberian Orchestra is being shown on weekends.

Impressively, the planetarium and observatory pairing in Burnsville is one of only two such combination sites in the world — the other is in South Korea.

Obviously, a critical requirement for a dark sky observatory is darkness. A site must be a

sufficient distance away from development to be devoid of light pollution — the awareness of which both facilities at the Mayland Earth to Sky Park seek to raise. To that end, programs seek to teach municipalities, airports, malls, suburban developments and homeowners ways to reduce artificial lighting and mitigate the dangerous impacts of light pollution on human health, wildlife and biodiversity.

### A SWARM OF CREATIVE TALENT

Another delightful and mesmerizing discovery awaiting visitors to the Arthur Planetarium is an exterior mural painted by international artist Matt Willey, who travels the world painting bee murals to promote bee health and teach the connectivity of all living things. The mission of his “Good of the Hive” project is to paint 50,000 bees, the number needed in a healthy hive.

Taking in the mural is a good starting point for those interested in artisan endeavors. Burnsville and all Yancey County have long been sources for art in many forms. The region has a reputation for having more crafters and artisans per capita than anywhere in the United States. Nature inspires art here and it's easy to find works by potters, glassblowers, woodworkers, quilters, painters, photographers and others. Among several internationally known artists is glass artist Rob Levin.

The Toe River Arts Council is an impor-



tant organization that is supportive of artists, providing access to venues and exposure as well as classes and exhibitions for the public. TRAC facilitates spring and fall studio tours each year, involving over 80 artists. A new TRAC gallery on Burnsville's downtown square is scheduled to open in coming months. Hearth Glass and Gallery, a Harvey K. Littleton legacy, opened on Main Street in September. Littleton was the founder of the American Studio Glass Movement and grandfather of the gallery's owner. Time spent at High Country Ceramic Arts also promises to be fun and educational if you engage owner Linda Powell about creative ways of working with clay.

{left} International mural artist and environmental activist Matt Willey is pictured on his final day of painting bees at the Glenn and Carol Arthur Earth to Sky Planetarium. • {right} Linda Powell, owner of High Country Ceramic Arts, shows off her unique bunny tatted tray.



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Famed glass artist Rob Levin lives and works near Burnsville in the Western North Carolina mountains.  
Photo courtesy of Burnsville-Yancey Chamber of Commerce

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**TRAILS TO NATURE**

Burnsville lies among the Appalachian Mountain peaks at an elevation of 2,815 feet. Five of the highest peaks in the eastern United States are within Yancey County's boundaries. One of them, Mount Mitchell, reaches 6,684 feet, making it the highest point east of the Mississippi.

The area offers perfect places to hike, camp, mountain bike, go gem hunting and cruise along the southeastern border on the Blue Ridge Parkway. Hikers can explore a new trail connection with the recent opening of the Appalachian High Route.

**LODGING ABOUNDS**

It's easy to get comfortable and cozy in Burnsville.

The Terrell House Bed & Breakfast does a stellar job of pampering guests and preparing them for the day ahead with a delicious, homemade breakfast. The owners know a lot about the town ... just ask. Guests can feel at home at the quaint Carolina Country Inn, in the heart of town or Mount Mitchell Eco Retreat, where guests are surrounded by nature in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

If you are a repeat visitor to Burnsville, you may have experienced the historic NuWray Inn on the Square. Be advised it's not available now but will return in the spring, fully restored to its original glory. The Inn's restaurant may open first, and you'll want to book a table.

### BBQ, BEER AND MORE

Burnsville boasts serious culinary skills and talent. Restaurants are bustling, and there's great variety.

Pig & Grits absolutely won't let you down for any meal whether it's a Southern breakfast, BBQ plate or brisket over salad greens. Pig & Grits is also running the snack bar at the top of Mount Mitchell. Cast Iron Kitchen has amazing specials, including fresh peach cobbler. The fish and chips are the real deal, and a charming bar is a great place to meet locals. Homeplace Beer Co. offers good food truck fare, to say nothing about tasty bar food that includes the best burgers in town. You can eat in an expansive outdoor area, where you can catch a great band or play cards at one of the picnic tables. The sign at Appalachian Java says "coffee" and it's really good but go hungry and you won't be sorry.

### UNIQUE SHOPS FILL DOWNTOWN

One of the best things about Burnsville is it's wholly walkable to enjoy the scenery and browse through the shops.

With winter holidays approaching, inspired shoppers will find numerous shops and studios to find gifts with an artful flair. Among them are One of a Kind Art Gallery, Mountain Time on Main Street, Something Special, Hearth Glass and Gallery and High Country Ceramic Arts. Plott Hound Books has answers for readers on your holiday gift list. ■

*Burnsville is 114 miles from Salem. Take Highway 11 to I-26 and head north. Take exit 9 onto US 19. A right turn takes you straight into town.*



Homeplace Beer Co. provides a friendly setting for enjoying beer, good food, live music and recreation. The interior is also a fun place to be. Photo by Zenda Douglas

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— Edna Porter

