



Actors re-create daily life at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.

By Ashley Thompson

Photo by Thomas Jefferson Foundation

Sample town and country in a region touched by three distinctive historical figures.

You wouldn't expect Thomas Jefferson, Stonewall Jackson, and William Shakespeare to have anything in common, but they do. All three men cast long shadows in a swath of Blue Ridge country bracketed by the towns of Charlottesville and Staunton. A three-hour drive southwest of Washington, D.C., this corner of Virginia offers a sampler of history and bucolic scenery, with Jefferson, Jackson, and Shakespeare front and center.

In Charlottesville, you'll naturally want to make the pilgrimage to Jefferson's Monticello estate and the grounds of the university he designed, but also be sure to check out at least one local eatery. "In a place with so much history," says local writer Brian Wimer, "start with Michie Tavern, which dates to 1784 and is popular for its lunchtime Southern buffet based on 18th-century recipes."

After lunch, head west across the Blue Ridge into the Shenandoah Valley, the apple blossom capital of the state and scene of numerous Civil War battles. Thirty-nine miles from Charlottesville is historic Staunton (pronounced Stanton), whose downtown is a parade of Victorian storefronts. Be sure to visit the Frontier Culture Museum. "Farms from Germany, Northern Ireland, and England have been moved here and restored, along with American farms of the same time period," says Frank Strassler of the Historic Staunton Foundation. In the evening, you can catch a performance at Blackfriars Playhouse, a meticulously re-created Elizabethan theater that's home to the American Shakespeare Center. For a place to bed down, you might choose Staunton's venerable Stonewall Jackson Hotel, named in honor of the Confederate general who campaigned in the Shenandoah Valley a century and a half ago. For a more intimate stay, head 20 miles south to the village of Steeles Tavern. Nestled in the George Washington National Forest, with its swimming holes, waterfalls (some of the best in Virginia), and Blue Ridge peaks, the town is easy to pass by. There's just a country store, a few houses, and an unassuming former water-powered mill. But the 1849 refurbished mill, once part of the Cyrus McCormick family estate and now the Osceola Mill, a cozy inn, boasts four guest rooms and a country-chic restaurant.

"For an extra special weekend," suggests Kevin Daly, who owns and runs the inn with his wife, Kim, "you can rent out our adjacent cottage, which used to be the miller's store, and have our chef serve you a six-course meal in your own private dining room."

Next day, learn about local agricultural history—and get a glimpse into the life of the inventor of the back-saving mechanical reaper—at Cyrus McCormick's Farm, two miles outside of Steeles Tavern on Highway 606.

Spend the rest of the weekend outdoors exploring central Virginia's natural treasures. Hiking enthusiasts can take to trails like Crabtree Falls and Spy Rock, both moderately strenuous half-day outings. Spy Rock, a steep 2.6-mile roundtrip trail, leads you to panoramic perfection, a 360-degree view of gentle green crests. Crabtree Falls (six miles roundtrip) slinks up the tallest waterfall east of the Mississippi (five cascades tumbling down 1,500 feet). Midsummer's butterflies are likely to be your most ubiquitous hiking companions here.

Back at Osceola Mill's restaurant, enjoy dinner on the wraparound porch, spotted with hummingbird feeders and pots of daisies. Fill up on the savory bread, a hybrid of crusty French baguette made especially for Osceola Mill at Newtown Baking in Staunton. Be sure to save room for the actual meal, though, with choices like seared ahi tuna (with a tangy relish of tropical fruits, eggplant, and green olives), steak au poivre, and crab cakes.

Before you head out for another day of outdoor adventure (consider St. Mary's Falls or Goshen Pass, both secret local swimming holes), stop by Gertie's Country Store, just down Tye River Turnpike from Osceola, for perfect picnic fixings and conversation with folks taking a break from hiking the Appalachian Trail. After all, roughing it is inspiring, but so is a little thing called country comfort. That's something Jefferson, Jackson, and Shakespeare could agree on.

•**LOGISTICS:** Charlottesville is served by the Charlottesville-Albemarle Airport. Monticello, www.monticello.org. Michie Tavern, www.michietavern.com. Frontier Culture Museum, www.frontiermuseum.org. Blackfriars Playhouse, www.americanshakespearecenter.com. Stonewall Jackson Hotel, www.stonewalljacksonhotel.com, from \$99. Osceola Mill, www.osceolamill.com, from \$110. Gertie's Country Store, 563 Tye River Turnpike. Cyrus McCormick Farm, +1 540 377 2255.

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