The mountains and foothills of North Carolina have over many centuries fostered a rich mosaic of cultural heritage. The birthplace of the Cherokee’s advanced early civilization, the region is home today to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, which continues to preserve many facets of traditional Cherokee culture.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, European and African settlers moved into the mountains. The relative isolation of mountain life helped these settlers refine and preserve many traditions, most notably handmade crafts, traditional music, and local agricultural practices.

Today, these distinctive cultural legacies are celebrated as living traditions, providing employment to master artists and tradition bearers and drawing tourists from across the globe to experience the region’s craft galleries, music halls, festivals, museums, farms, and local cuisine.
Blue Ridge National Heritage Area Designation

A National Heritage Area is a place designated by the United States Congress where natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography. Currently, there are 49 National Heritage Areas across the United States, where each area shares how their people, resources, and histories come together to provide experiences that “tell America’s story” and to encourage the community to join together around a common theme and promote the cultural, natural, and recreational benefits of the area.

In November 2003, Western North Carolina (WNC) was designated the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area in recognition of the region’s agriculture, craft heritage, traditional music, the distinctive living traditions of Cherokee culture, and rich natural heritage, and their significance to the country.

The natural beauty of North Carolina’s mountain region has proven to be one of this area’s greatest economic assets, drawing tourists to enjoy its many state and national recreation areas, including the Nantahala National Forest, the Pisgah National Forest, the Blue Ridge Parkway, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, ten state parks, and more than 264,000 acres of old-growth forest.

Agricultural Heritage

For thousands of years, Native Americans cultivated the fertile valleys of Western North Carolina, raising the “three sisters”—corn, beans, and squash—that were the staples of their diet. Euro-American immigrants brought many of their agricultural practices with them as they settled in the mountains, but soon adopted many Cherokee crops and techniques that had been refined over centuries. This blending of immigrant agricultural practices with Cherokee traditions resulted in a distinctive regional agricultural heritage.

Today, agriculture is the number one industry in North Carolina, and Western North Carolina is recognized nationally as a leader in agriculture, with a product line that ranges from trout to Christmas trees and includes poultry and livestock, turf farms, greenhouse and nursery crops, dairy, fresh vegetables, and fruits of all kinds. Farm gate receipts in the region totaled $900 million in 2009, about 10 percent of the state’s total.

With an average farm size of 78 acres, Western North Carolina has farm operations that are considerably smaller than the national (418 acres) and state (160 acres) averages. Of the more than 12,000 farms in the region, 90 percent are family-owned. The map at right shows this concentration per county.
Craft Heritage

Western North Carolina is one of the leading centers for craft production and education in the United States. The region fostered the country’s traditional craft movement (1800s to early 1900s) as well as the contemporary craft movement (1940s) and is home to such major craft institutions as the Southern Highland Craft Guild, the Penland School of Crafts, and the John C. Campbell Folk School.

A 2008 economic impact study showed that the professional craft industry in Western North Carolina had a total direct impact of over $206 million in 2007. The positive impacts of the craft economy include:

- **Jobs and new businesses:**
  - 33% had full and/or part-time employees
  - 55% of surveyed craft artists reported working full-time at their craft
  - 50% of graduates from area craft residency programs remain in the area to establish their own studios

- **Increased tourism:** Tourism is one of WNC’s main sources of revenue. Sixty percent of craft consumers come from outside the region, and they spend an average of $642 per visit.

www.wncvitalityindex.org/culture/craft-heritage

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
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<tr>
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Creative Occupations

Western North Carolina’s “creative economy” encompasses a diverse array of occupations, including those seen in the table above. In 2011, total jobs in this sector were 14,233.

www.wncvitalityindex.org/culture/creative-occupations

The Folk Art Center, located in Asheville, showcases outstanding examples of traditional and contemporary Southern Appalachian craft and is the most visited attraction on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

The Folk Art Center features crafts from current members of the Southern Highland Craft Guild, as well as samples from the Guild’s collection of craft objects dating back to the turn of the twentieth century. The Folk Art Center also offers live demonstrations by master crafters on a daily basis and a series of educational events seasonally.

Photo courtesy of Southern Highland Craft Guild

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Photo courtesy of Southern Highland Craft Guild
Western North Carolina offers the greatest concentration of craft education in the country. Two internationally recognized crafts schools in WNC are responsible for more than a $10 million economic impact on the local economy: Penland School of Crafts enrolls more than 1,300 students from 48 states and overseas annually and attracts over 14,000 visitors a year, and John C. Campbell Folk School offers more than 800 classes in contemporary and traditional craft. Other craft education programs are offered through area colleges and universities.

Penland School of Crafts carver.
Photo courtesy of Robin Dreyer and Penland School of Crafts

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Heritage Sites in Western North Carolina

Built between 1889 and 1895, Biltmore Estate is one of the grandest attractions in the region, and is the largest privately-owned house in the country. The house was designed in the French château style, and the grounds were designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, the architect of New York’s Central Park. Biltmore Estate also features a winery.

The 6,500-acre Cradle of Forestry Historic Site near Brevard, North Carolina, commemorates the beginning of forest conservation in the United States. On this site in 1898, Dr. Carl Schenck, chief forester for George Vanderbilt’s Biltmore Estate, founded the Biltmore Forest School, the first forestry school in America.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park is one of America’s most beloved national parks. Extending over half a million acres in North Carolina and Tennessee, the area is not only a popular tourist attraction, but a cradle of biodiversity that contains many rare and endangered species. It also contains 77 historic structures that provide a window into how settlers in Appalachia once lived.

The Cherokee County Historical Museum displays the rich history of Native American and pioneer settlers in the far-western corner of the state. The museum is housed in a historic Carnegie library building in downtown Murphy.

The Museum of the Cherokee Indian traces the story of the Cherokee from the earliest inhabitants of the area 11,000 years ago to the present with extensive exhibits of artifacts and new technology. Next door, the Qualla Arts and Crafts Cooperative, the longest operating Native American arts cooperative in the country, features works by traditional and contemporary Cherokee artists in wood, clay, fiber, metal, and beads.

Founded in 1925, the John C. Campbell Folk School offers week-long and weekend classes in traditional music, dance, crafts, gardening, and cooking year-round. Nestled on 380 acres of rolling farmland, the campus includes craft studios, a saw mill, an outdoor dance pavilion, nature trails, a craft shop, vegetable gardens, and rustic lodgings.

The Cherokee County Historical Museum displays the rich history of Native American and pioneer settlers in the far-western corner of the state. The museum is housed in a historic Carnegie library building in downtown Murphy.
As the county seat for one of North Carolina's oldest counties, Rutherfordton has a rich history. Visitors can take walking tours of the historic town and experience the historic Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail, a children's museum, a farmers' market, and a collection of Tiffany stained glass windows in St. Francis Episcopal Church.

The Old Wilkes Jail in Wilkesboro, built in 1859, held Union prisoners and Confederate supplies during the Civil War, and also held the subject of the well-known folk song, “Tom Dooley.”

The Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site near Flat Rock, North Carolina, is where the acclaimed poet lived for 22 years and wrote more than a third of his work. The 264-acre farm contains the historic house and farm buildings, as well as walking trails and dairy goats.

The mountains and foothills of Western North Carolina are world-renowned for their living traditions of old-time and bluegrass music. In 2003, this vibrant music heritage spurred the launch of the Blue Ridge Music Trails as a tool for heritage tourism development and helped earn the region a Congressional designation as the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area.

Known as “America’s favorite drive,” the Blue Ridge Parkway traverses 18 counties in Western North Carolina, offering stunning views of the mountain landscape. Along the way, visitors can sample the work of local craft artisans at the Parkway Craft Center/Moses Cone Manor near Blowing Rock and the Folk Art Center in Asheville.

The Old-Time Music Heritage Hall in downtown Mount Airy is a community hub for concerts and jam sessions and features life-sized portraits of the master old-time musicians from Surry County. Nearby, radio station WPAQ 740 AM continues to broadcast the Merry-Go-Round, the oldest live radio show presenting old-time, bluegrass, and gospel music from the Blue Ridge.

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Traditional Music

The mountains and foothills of Western North Carolina are world-renowned for their living traditions of old-time and bluegrass music. The region profoundly influenced the development of banjo styles in both old-time and bluegrass music, started team square dancing, preserved one of the country’s longest unbroken ballad singing traditions, and pioneered the development of the modern-day folk festival.

The number of venues and recurring events—music halls, jamborees, festivals, fiddlers’ conventions, concert series, jam sessions, and the like—dedicated to presenting traditional music and dance in Western North Carolina is remarkable. A conservative count in 2011 put this number at 160. That same year, visitor research conducted at 26 of these venues and events revealed a direct economic impact of $18.6 million and a total economic impact of $20.7 million.

In 2003, this vibrant music heritage spurred the launch of the Blue Ridge Music Trails as a tool for heritage tourism development. Efforts are underway to expand and reinvigorate the Music Trails in North Carolina to bring more visitors to rural communities and help sustain these traditions by providing work opportunities for musicians and dancers.

In Western North Carolina, old time and bluegrass music continue to be passed from generation to generation as living traditions.
Cherokee Heritage

The Cherokee Indians, early inhabitants of the region, sought to protect and nurture this land not only for what it could offer, nor for its striking beauty, but through the belief that the land itself was alive. As it provided for the people, praises were returned and efforts were taken to safeguard its enduring vitality.

The 56,000-acre Qualla Boundary is home to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, a federally recognized Native Tribe of Western North Carolina with about 14,000 registered members. Here they continue to honor and cultivate the traditions that have guided and supported their culture for thousands of years.

Cherokee land is traditionally held in common by the tribe, allowing individual family groups to occupy it as needed, thus providing a connection to the land that encourages responsibility for its conservation and protection—the more that is required, the more care is taken to ensure it continues to provide. Being that the Cherokee depended on the land for crops for food, herbs for medicine, materials for shelter, clothing, and tools, and for artistic and spiritual inspiration, much was at stake. Such reliance prompted efforts of conservation on the concept of reciprocity—the belief that life is cyclical and actions have both short- and long-term consequences.

WNC’s Natural Landscape and Its People

The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area of Western North Carolina works to preserve the spectacular beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains and to interpret traditional mountain music, folk life traditions, traditional arts, the culture and influences of the Cherokee Indians, and the Scots-Irish heritage of the region.

Western North Carolina lies upon two distinct physiographic provinces: the Blue Ridge and Piedmont. Separating these two is the Blue Ridge Escarpment, a steep, highly dissected mountain front that marks the change from the mountainous Blue Ridge province to the lower, rolling topography of the foothills zone of the Piedmont province. Influencing weather patterns, biodiversity, transportation, and tourism, this landscape provides the foundation for our unique way of life.
Tourism

Dating back to the late nineteenth century, the natural beauty and moderate climate of the North Carolina mountains have proven to be one of this area’s greatest economic assets, drawing millions of tourists to enjoy mountain views, hot springs, waterfalls, scenic drives, and pastoral landscapes. Visitor research indicates that the region’s cultural assets—festivals, museums, crafts, music, Cherokee heritage, and historic small towns—are also a major draw. In many ways, the experiences of natural and cultural heritage are inseparable. The region’s top destinations—the Blue Ridge Parkway and Great Smoky Mountains National Park (which are also the two most visited National Park units in the country)—provide a great variety of outdoor recreation experiences, but also operate museums, exhibits, and galleries showcasing the region’s agricultural, music, and craft heritage.

Estimates on total annual visitation to Western North Carolina vary, but a 2010 state-sponsored study put that number at approximately 7.1 million person-trips, 89 percent of which were for leisure. That same year there were 9.5 million and 2.1 million recreational visits to the North Carolina sections of the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, respectively. The region’s two National Forests received 6.8 million recreational visits in 2009.

In 2011, visitors spent $2.6 billion in Western North Carolina (27 Mountain Resource Commission counties), supporting 27,190 jobs and generating $141 million in state tax receipts and $103 million in local tax receipts.

Recreation Areas

Outdoor recreation activities in Western North Carolina include innumerable hiking trails, including a 200-mile section of the famed Appalachian Trail. Top-ranked mountain biking, hunting, fishing, rafting, kayaking, canoeing, birding, rock climbing, camping, skiing, and even ziplining bring outdoor enthusiasts to the area.

Asheville is repeatedly cited as one of the best travel destinations in the world, offering arts and crafts, outdoor adventures, eclectic cuisine, spas and resorts, public gardens, and more.

www.wncvitalityindex.org/employment-sectors/tourism