

Carolina Crossroads/Halifax County Article for July/August Bus Tours Magazine spread
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Roanoke Rapids, NC, is one of the first cities to greet travelers as they drive south on Interstate 95 and enter North Carolina, making the city a gateway community and tourism ambassador. Located in Halifax County, Roanoke Rapids, population 16,721 (Dec. 2006), is a comparatively young community, having celebrated its centennial just ten years ago in 1997, but has a history that stretches back to the early 1800s.

Roanoke Rapids' newest endeavor is breaking into the music and entertainment business - introducing Carolina Crossroads, North Carolina's newest music and entertainment destination, a 1,000-acre family entertainment district. Located on I-95 at Exit 171, Carolina Crossroads will include a complete package of accommodations, shopping and dining, featuring a \$16 million, 147-room Hilton Garden Inn (which opened Feb. 2008) with conference facilities, a restaurant, bar, fitness center and pool.

Carolina Crossroads is already your destination for spectacular outdoor concerts. With assistance from several partners, the Carolina Crossroads Music & Entertainment District held three outdoor concerts in Summer 2006, hosting such big names in country music as Big & Rich, Cowboy Troy, Jason Aldean, Danielle Peck, Hank Williams, Jr. and Gretchen Wilson and contemporary Christian artists Steven Curtis Chapman and Third Day. Concert attendance ranged from 10,000 to over 30,000 fans.

Carolina Crossroads launched another successful concert and event series in 2007 with plans to have offerings year-round. Last year's concerts featured such names as country stars Trace Adkins, Willie Nelson & Gretchen Wilson; a Beach Music Festival featuring Clarence Carter, Delbert McClinton, The Tams, The Embers, and The Catalinas, as well as a professional sand art team building 12-14 foot sand sculptures; and a Classic Corvette and Car Show.

For 2008 Carolina Crossroads will be kicking off their event season with a Hot Air Balloon Festival on May 17, featuring comedian Jeff Foxworthy.

The cornerstone of Carolina Crossroads is The Roanoke Rapids Theatre, which opened July 2007, featuring house band Jerusalem Ridge in their standing show Family Reunion and a diverse entertainment lineup of specialty shows. The Roanoke Rapids Theatre is a 1500-seat, state-of-the-art, live performance theater, offering group discounts on tickets with drivers and/or escorts entitled to free services compatible with the group package. A theatre staff member will give a personal orientation and step-on greeting to the group. Buses can drop tour groups off and pick them up at the front entrance to the theatre, and bus parking is available in the rear.

For more information about Carolina Crossroads and The Roanoke Rapids Theatre, visit www.carolinacrossroads.com or www.rrtheatre.com.

As indicated by its name, the City of Roanoke Rapids is located on the banks of the mighty Roanoke River and has, even prior to its incorporation as a city in 1897, been intimately linked to that waterway. Beginning in the early 1800s, when our country's economy depended on the transportation of goods from the West to our seaports in the East, a means had to be found to navigate around the rapids in the Roanoke. These rapids in North Carolina are caused by the fall line, a granite shelf that runs the entire length of the East Coast.

The solution was found in an engineering marvel, the construction of the Roanoke Navigation Canal beginning in 1819, routing boats carrying freight out of the river at what is now Roanoke Rapids into the nine-mile canal to get back into the river at Weldon. After transportation on the river ceased due to the advent of the faster, more reliable and less expensive rail system, the water in the canal was harnessed to generate power. As a result of this access to hydropower, industries sprang up along the river, including a textile mill and paper mill, and the city of Roanoke Rapids was born.

This history of transportation, power generation and industrialization is expressed in the exhibits of a new museum in Roanoke Rapids – the Roanoke Canal Museum – which opened in September 2005. Once you enter this museum you will follow the river and experience the creation of the canal, the development of local industries, the beauty of area wildlife and the determination of the people.

The Roanoke Canal Museum and Trail is a unique attraction, blending the preservation of the past through the history of the canal with a look at our community's future and where the canal has brought us with the development of hydroelectric power and industry. One of the best features of the museum is a DVD oral history presentation of local residents telling stories about the canal and the river.

The museum also celebrates the natural beauty along our river. There is an entire section of the museum, dedicated to our wildlife, the Roanoke River and river basin and the very popular hobby and sport of fishing, especially for the mighty Striped Bass or Rockfish as they are known here.

The museum charges a nominal fee of \$2 per person for guided group tours. A picnic area is available just outside the museum entrance. Buses can pull straight through the museum's driveway for easy passenger drop-off and pick-up. There is an upper parking area that is convenient for buses.

In addition to the museum, there is a 7.5-mile nature trail that follows the old navigation canal bed. The Roanoke Canal Trail has recently been designated as a site on the North Carolina Coastal Plains Birding Trail, and the trail, which can be used for hiking and biking, is rich with native wildlife and plants. For more information about the Roanoke Canal Museum & Trail, visit www.roanokecanal.com or call 252-537-2769.

Roanoke Rapids offers a public swimming area and several other amenities at Roanoke Rapids Lake Day Use Area, a brand-new facility that opened May 2007. The Lake Park, equipped with restroom and concession facilities, also offers walking trails, picnic shelters, sand volleyball, Frisbee golf and a handicapped-accessible fishing pier. Use of the facility is free of charge, and motorcoaches have ample parking.

Roanoke Avenue, once the main thoroughfare through Roanoke Rapids, is a walk-able downtown business district that is alive with small shops and eateries, including several unique storefronts. Buses can easily park and allow passengers to stroll along the avenue. There is also an old railroad depot, a beautiful, castle-like high school building that is on the National Register of Historic Places, and a home called the Turtleback House, a unique architectural-style.

While you're visiting Carolina Crossroads and Roanoke Rapids, explore the rest of Halifax County, including a visit to the Town of Weldon, east of Roanoke Rapids on Highway 158. Weldon is a lovely town along the banks of the Roanoke River and is known as the Rockfish Capital of the World. Weldon is also home to another live performance venue, The Centre at Halifax Community College, a 1500-seat theater

bringing in different shows each month. Groups will enjoy spending time in the downtown area with quaint shops like The Farmer's Exchange and Corner Junction Gifts & Antiques.

Also in the downtown area are old passenger and freight train depots. Weldon was once the hub of the Weldon-Wilmington Railroad, the longest railroad in the world during the Civil War and considered the lifeline of the Confederacy, supplying Lee's army in Virginia. River Falls Park is right on the river, enabling tour groups to stop along the river to fish or picnic, hike the Roanoke Canal Trail to see the amazing, hand-hewn stone canal aqueduct, spanning 35 feet over Chockoyotte Creek, or see a restored three-story grist mill.

Groups must visit our cradle of history, the 18th century town of Historic Halifax, site of the signing on April 12, 1776 of the Halifax Resolves, the first official declaration of independence from Britain by any colony. Historic Halifax features a Visitor Center with a short film about the town and a small museum with exhibits and artifacts.

There is no charge for admission to the site, though donations are welcome, and free guided tours of the ten historic structures are available with larger groups being split to enable everyone to experience all of the buildings. Enjoy living history demonstrations showcasing various aspects of colonial life, such as quilting, tin-smithing, chair caning, tatting, butter churning and more.

Group tours can be dropped off and picked up right in front of the Visitor Center, and there is a designated parking lot for buses and RVs. A picnic area is also available on site. To learn more, take a virtual visit at www.nchistoricsites.org/halifax/halifax.htm or call 252-583-7191. Don't forget to shop at the many antique and unique stores along King Street, Halifax's main thoroughfare.

Discover the world's largest collection of rare and endangered waterfowl at Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Park in Scotland Neck. Sylvan Heights is affiliated with the North Carolina Zoo and gives visitors the opportunity to see over 1500 birds from more than 170 different species, some of the rarest and most endangered in the world.

Visitors of all ages and interests can walk-through aviaries from six continents around the world, including a multi-national aviary, experiencing the beauty and sound of these creatures. Sylvan Heights has just recently opened a new flamingo exhibit, featuring Chilean and Lesser Flamingoes, and also features a wetland walk. A gift shop, gallery of wildlife art and picnic area are also at your group's disposal. Groups can be dropped off and picked up directly in front of the Eco-Center, and bus parking is available anywhere in the large parking lot. Sylvan Heights also offers group ticket discounts. You can request a specialized bird program for your group tour. For additional information, visit www.shwpark.com or call 252-826-3186.

While in Scotland Neck, park the bus and stroll along Main Street, where you can shop at local stores like Josey Brothers, offering home décor, accessories, unique gifts and much more, or satisfy your hunger at Luigi's with a wonderful selection of lunch and dinner items.

Enjoy more of Halifax County's natural amenities at Medoc Mountain State Park, home of North Carolina's first vineyard, in Hollister. Medoc Mountain is a marvelous facility for groups, completely free of charge (small fee to reserve picnic shelter) and with ample bus parking. Roam the seven meandering hiking trails, fish or paddle in Little Fishing Creek, and picnic under a large shelter.

Nature programs are regularly scheduled throughout the year, but groups can arrange a special exploration of the park tailored to your interests. For more information on Medoc Mountain State Park, visit www.ncsparks.net/memo.html or call 252-586-6588.

Step back into small town life in Hobgood, Enfield, and Littleton. Hobgood offers a restored town square with the Country Church Museum housed in the beautiful Hobgood Methodist Church (ca. 1880) and Atlantic Coastline railroad depot (ca. 1890), featuring a railroad museum.

Enfield is home to A&B Milling Company, where your group can sample some of the finest of Halifax County's agricultural bounty – the peanut. Enjoy Aunt Ruby's brand of peanuts in a variety of delicious forms – roasted, chocolate-covered, red-skinned, honey-roasted, made into brittle or salted in the shell. There are also antique shops, a hometown drug store and a locally-owned jewelry and gift store.

Littleton's downtown is thriving with small business owners who have breathed new life into the buildings. Enjoy the shops at Main Street Station, offering stained glass, clothing, jewelry, antiques, shabby chic items, and home & garden accessories, as well as a coffee, sandwich and ice cream shop to satisfy any taste.

Enjoy more live theatre at Lakeland Cultural Arts Center in Littleton, a community theater located in a renovated school building with talented actors giving performances every weekend, including such shows as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Oliver*, *High School Musical* and much more. Group discounts are available, as well as bus parking and easy passenger drop-off in front of the theater.

Visit a resettlement community and museum at the Tillery History House. The History House Museum stands on former plantation land worked by generations of slaves. After the Civil War, African-American family farmers as sharecroppers lived and labored on the former plantation lands of Tillery.

Approximately 65 years after the Emancipation Proclamation in the 1930's and 1940's, President Franklin D. Roosevelt instituted his New Deal Resettlement Program, a program offering black families the opportunity to purchase land. Today the History House Museum, a former resettlement home, houses a community historical exhibit.

While your group is visiting our area, if the bus is in need of service or repair, Redwine's Garage, a long-time, family-operated business is available. The garage is located just two miles from Roanoke Rapids in Gaston, NC, and the phone number is 252-537-0058.

Hotels that specialize in hosting large groups are the Hampton Inn (252-537-7555), Sleep Inn (252-537-3141), Holiday Inn Express (252-536-2300), Days Inn (252-536-4867), Jameson Inn (252-533-0022), Comfort Inn & Suites (252-535-3300), and the brand-new Hilton Garden Inn.

Dining choices abound to satisfy any taste. All of these restaurants are located near Carolina Crossroads and can easily accommodate buses. Enjoy local Eastern North Carolina barbecue at Ralph's (252-536-2102), family-owned and operated for over 50 years. Your group might also enjoy Timeless Tea (252-535-2071) or David's (252-537-3262). Chain restaurants Ryan's Family Steakhouse (252-535-4266), Lone Star (252-537-7092), Logan's (252-537-1414), Applebee's (252-308-1264) and Ruby Tuesday (252-535-1853) have reliable service for large groups and good food at reasonable prices.

History, culture and music flow, like the waters of the mighty Roanoke River, through the city of Roanoke Rapids and Halifax County, NC. Come see what it's all about.

For more information on scheduling your group tour of Carolina Crossroads and Halifax County's many other attractions, contact the Halifax County Convention & Visitors Bureau at 1-800-522-4282 or visit www.visithalifax.com, which has a specialized group tour section. The staff is more than happy to customize a food and fun package, including itineraries, accommodations, dining, shopping and discount tickets to all attractions, tailored to your group's needs.