

Kid-friendly attractions in North Carolina

BY ALAN HODGE
Staff Writer

With springtime just around the corner, it's not too soon to start thinking about road trips in North Carolina. Since bringing the kids along is the norm in most families, thinking of places to go that will keep them entertained has to figure into the equation. Actually, there's no need to fear in this respect since our state is liberally dotted with kid-friendly attractions.

The mountains of North Carolina are full of fun things for both adults and children to do. The town of Franklin in Macon County has several attractions to keep the kids busy. Besides being the home of the Franklin Gem and Mineral Museum, the area also features several gem mines where customers of all ages can try their hand at finding a natural gemstone. If the thought of finding a ruby or sapphire strikes your fancy, then Franklin is a great place to go.

Mountain scenery, a majestic lake, and the highest dam east of the Mississippi River all combine to make Fontana Village a place where the kids won't get bored. Located north of Robbinsville on Highway 28, Fontana Village is near the lake and dam that also bears the name Fontana.

An observation deck and broad sidewalk across 480-foot tall Fontana Dam gives a thrilling look at the 10,600 acre lake as well as the tailrace far below. Fontana Marina rents boats by the hour or day. Cruises are also available. Another attraction in the Fontana area that kids enjoy is Great Smoky Mountains Stables. Ponies are available for rent and trail rides are available.

One of the most popular des-

tinations in the North Carolina mountains draws children and their parents by the tens of thousands to Bryson City and Dillsboro each year. A unique and exciting way to see the hills, the Great Smoky Mountain Railway offers rides on an old time train pulled by a steam or diesel locomotive. Passengers can ride either in an enclosed coach or on open air cars. The GSMR opens in April and operates through December.

Another venerable railway attraction that has delighted children of all ages for decades is Tweetsie Railroad on Highway 321 near Blowing Rock. Tweetsie runs from mid-May through October and besides the train ride also has an Old West village and petting zoo. The three-mile train ride is full of action with "bandits" around every bend.

Cheap and fun is a good way to describe the inner tube action at Deep Creek campground near Bryson City. After all, where else can you and the kids rent huge inner tubes for just a few bucks each and float down the crystal clear (and cold) waters of Deep Creek all day. Besides the inner tubes, Deep Creek also has several outfitters, snack bars, and of course the campground.

The North Carolina Piedmont is a treasure trove of places to take the chaps for a day of fun, adventure, or learning. One unique stop is the Angela Pearson Doll and Miniature Museum at 101 W. Green Drive in High Point. The museum has more than 1,600 dolls and doll artifacts. Some of the dolls on display date back to the 19th century. Modern dolls like Barbie are also part of the collection.

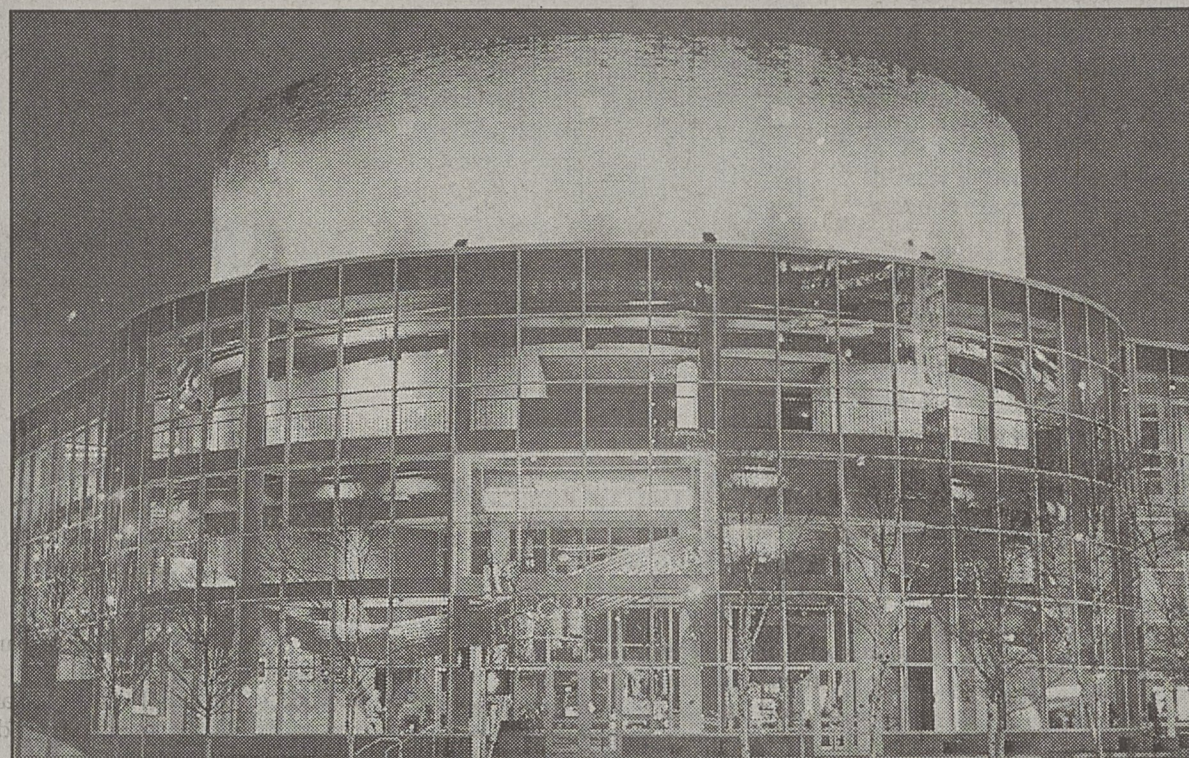
In Greensboro, the Natural Science Center has a zoo, plane-

tarium, and hands-on exhibit. The petting zoo features donkeys, rabbits and goats. The museum also has a dinosaur exhibit and herpetarium. Greensboro can give kids and adults a good lesson in U.S. history at Guilford County Courthouse National Military Park. Site of a major battle during the American Revolution, the park has 200 acres of trails monuments, and markers. There's also a nice visitor center with displays.

If a trip with the kids to Charlotte is in the works, why not stop at Discovery Place at 301 N. Tryon Street downtown to see the world's largest eyeball. Actually an exhibit where folks can see how the human eye operates. The big eye would fit a person nearly 100-feet tall. Other attractions at Discovery Place include the Omni-Max Theater, a tidal pool, and tropical rain forest room complete with birds and a boa.

Located near Freedom Park, the Charlotte Nature Museum is an especially good place to introduce children to the world around them. Displays explain flora and fauna of the region. There's also a butterfly room. Live animals in the museum include raccoons, several species of snakes, and birds. Nature trails weave their way around the museum and over to Freedom Park.

Moving along to the southern plain in our state, the town of Hamlet has an interesting attraction that everyone will enjoy in the National Railroad Museum. Located in the old Hamlet railway station, scale models of trains and loads of rail memorabilia are on view. Further down U.S. 74 at Laurinburg, the Indian



Discovery Place, Charlotte, North Carolina

Photo courtesy of NC Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development

Museum of the Carolinas has a large collection of Native American artifacts and lore.

A trip to the beach with the kids has been a Tar Heel tradition for generations. Though the North Carolina shore offers sand and surf, many coastal locations offer more. Even if the weather is dreary, there's always something to do Down East.

The city of Wilmington and its immediate area is literally brimming over with neat things for kids to see and do. One of the top attractions in Wilmington is the USS North Carolina battleship. Literally hours can be spent exploring this restored veteran of World War II. Boys of all ages especially enjoy manning the anti-aircraft guns.

Its location on the Cape Fear River makes Wilmington a great place to go for a boat ride or for

some waterfront dining and shopping. A good place to catch the paddle wheeler Henrietta II is at Riverfront Park on the corner of Market and Water streets. A ride on the Henrietta II will go about eight miles along the Cape Fear and gives riders a great view of historic homes and sites.

Down the coast from Wilmington, the North Carolina Aquarium at Kure Beach has a huge shark tank, exhibits of many other live fish species, a coastal marsh walkway, and an alligator pond. Field trips, films, and lectures are also part of the N.C. Aquarium experience.

The North Carolina Outer Banks has as many great things to do with the kids as a pirate's chest full of treasure. From the Wright Memorial at Kill Devil Hills to a ride on the Ocracoke ferry, the Outer Banks' list of

adventure is a long one. A must-see for families is the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse in its new location. Recently moved back from the encroaching ocean, the 208-foot structure is the tallest lighthouse on the East Coast.

The town of Manteo rounds out a trip to the Outer Banks. Home to the outdoor drama "The Lost Colony" Manteo also features a full size replica of the Elizabeth II sailing ship that brought some of the first pioneers to America.

Even if there are still a few weeks to go before spring officially arrives, there's no need to sit at home cooped up in front of the TV. For a great read on what our state offers in the way of family day trips, look through a copy of "Fun With the Family in North Carolina" by James Hoffman.

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