

Where HISTORY and LUXURY Meet

Like craft beer and wine, boutique hotels offer character, story, and, yes, a kind of terroir.



What would Thomas Jefferson have thought of today's pop-up hotels? You know the type—boxy; built seemingly overnight using sheet-metal studs, drywall, and acres of stain-masking carpet; and outfitted with trendy, mid-century modern-inspired interiors. They huddle around interstate highway exits offering room rates ending in nine—\$119, \$129, \$139 per night. No matter what the price, the flimsy construction depresses me. How long, I wonder, before this one gets carted off to a landfill to make way for the next?

I'm not a fan, and I don't think TJ, who complained in his day about the impermanence of wood-frame buildings, would be either. Jefferson believed in stone and brick, in materials that last long enough to become historic. "A country whose buildings are of wood, can never increase in its improvements to any considerable degree," he wrote in his 1785 book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. "Their duration is highly estimated at 50 years. Every half century then our country becomes a tabula rasa... Whereas when buildings are of durable materials, every new edifice is an actual and permanent acquisition to the State, adding to its value as well as to its ornament."

I feel certain Jefferson would approve of The Blackburn Inn in Staunton. Completed before 1830, the building is made of brick, with walls nearly two feet thick, rising atop a foundation of beefy limestone slabs. The awesome presence of history hits you the minute you drive through the wrought-iron fence and approach the columned building via a circular drive that welcomed horse-drawn carriages for nearly a century. But what makes me absolutely certain TJ would approve of The Blackburn Inn is that the building was designed by—and named for—Thomas Blackburn, an architect and master craftsman who arrived in Staunton after helping Jefferson build the University of Virginia.

There is no hard-and-fast definition of boutique hotel. Like boutique clothing stores and boutique investment firms, boutique hotels are typically small—10 to 100 rooms—and appeal to a specialized set of people with, for lack of a better word, sophisticated tastes. They're often located in historic buildings. This is especially true in Virginia, a state rich in history and with a robust tax-credit program that incentivizes converting old buildings into new, income-generating businesses, like hotels. The Blackburn, originally built as the Western Lunatic Asylum (though it came to be known as Western State Hospital), is a great example of adaptive reuse. So is The Georges, in nearby Lexington, which occupies two of the city's oldest surviving structures, both built over 200 years ago. Cities, towns, and rural areas across the state are chock-full of old buildings like these that have either been converted into boutique hotels or are candidates for conversion.

Not all historic inns are boutique hotels. The former may be beautiful, but they generally don't offer the up-to-date décor, gourmet food, craft beverages, and personal service savvy travelers expect. Richmond's Quirk Hotel exempli-



Clockwise from far left: Check-in at The Blackburn Inn; The Bristol Hotel entrance; room and lobby of The Georges. Opposite: Lobby of The Bristol Hotel.

fies the balance of a boutique hotel: It occupies a historic structure—the circa 1916 Italian Renaissance-style building that originally housed the J.B. Mosby and Co. dry goods store—but it also features a Tesla charging station and beds made from the salvaged floor joists of the original building. Quirk's recently opened Charlottesville hotel incorporates a sleek new main hotel building with two historic homes dating to the 19th century and features guestroom headboards designed by Kiki Slaughter and original works of art by Elizabeth Graeber, Ryan Trott, Molly Evans, and others.

Nor is a bed and breakfast a boutique hotel. B&Bs are too small and too intimate. Some people love B&Bs, which is perfectly fine. I find it hard to relax in a stranger's home when the owners are around, no matter how spacious or private. And I've already shared my thoughts on generic pop-up hotels. To me, the sweet spot of overnight accommodations is the boutique hotel, which I choose for the same reasons

I choose for the same reasons I choose craft beer or wine—for character, story, and, yes, terroir, which manifests not in flavor but in a region's architectural style and history.

Last spring, when we all began sheltering at home because of the coronavirus pandemic, one thing I missed most was dreaming about and planning periodic getaways to Virginia's many boutique hotels. Fortunately, in the months leading up to the stay-at-home orders, I stayed at two fine boutique hotels—The Blackburn Inn & Conference Center in Staunton and The Bristol Hotel in the southwestern Virginia city of the same name—and reported on several more.

If you're a fan of history and architecture, staying at The Blackburn Inn is a real treat. The hotel development team worked within the confines of the Department of the Interior's standards for historic rehabilitation, so guests can see the bones of the place—wooden floors, those thick masonry walls, handcarved woodwork and moldings—and appreciate its historic function. "Of all the workmen who trained in the shadow of Jefferson, none was more prolific, accomplished, and consistent as Blackburn," architect and author Bryan Green writes in his book, *In Jefferson's Shadow: The Architecture of Thomas R. Blackburn*. Green's book is filled with Blackburn's gorgeous architectural drawings and watercolors, some of which also adorn the walls of the hotel.

If the original use as a lunatic asylum bothers you, you should know that the early hospital was pioneering in its progressive, humane approach to mental health treatment. Indeed, The Blackburn Inn's sweeping circular drive, fountains, and acres of parklike grounds were built expressly for allowing patients to enjoy the fresh mountain air. They were encouraged to work on site in the gardens and an orchard. The heavy iron fence surrounding the property, installed in 1855, was not meant to keep patients in but rather to keep picnicking townsfolk out.

Each of the inn's 49 rooms is a little different, but they all have high ceilings, original wood floors (that squeak like old floors), and spacious bath-



Clockwise: Hotel Weyanoke guest room; entrance to The Blackburn Inn; chef Valeria Castro at The Georges; rooftop cocktail at The Bristol Hotel. Opposite: The Blackburn Inn.

before Teddy's first day at the military school, he even checked into an inn housed in one of the buildings that he and his wife would, decades later, convert into The Georges.

The couple's exquisite taste also shines through in the décor. Every room is unique, with hand-picked furniture in a tasteful combination of vintage chic and comfortable glamour. Ann Parker says she designed The Georges to have what she would like to have in a hotel. "I have heated floors in bathrooms, heated towel racks, a bathtub with a shower. I wanted beautiful linens and a comfortable bed," she says. She sourced everything herself, with the help of a circle of close friends and family she calls the hotel's "design team."

Ann Parker's father, Heywood, loved piano music, so she created Heywood's Piano Bar and Grill, using her father's signature—taken from letters he wrote to her mother while serving during World War II—as the restaurant's logo. The hotel's second restaurant is a bistro-pub style eatery called Taps, with comfy sofas and chairs surrounding a fireplace. "A friend pointed out that parents who have children at W&L and VMI were always either in their hotel room or waiting in line at a restaurant," Ann Parker says. "That's why we decided to make Taps more like a living room." A new chef, Valeria Castro, recently of Perry St. in New York, joined the restaurant team over the summer.

Ann Parker says it's really important to make guests feel at home. "I've put a lot of TLC into the rooms to make them as beautiful and comfortable as I can, and I've instilled a sense of service in all our staff," she says. "Everybody is so welcoming. They really get to know our guests. It's just good old Southern hospitality."

The hospitality and passion paid off this year when The Georges was named the second-best city hotel in America and #53 of the top 100 hotels in the world in the 2020 *Travel + Leisure* World's Best Awards. "To be honored at this level for the first time, especially during a pandemic, is a testament to our loyal guests and the service of our outstanding team," says Ann Parker.



rooms with marble sinks and gleaming glass showers. Mine came with a huge soaking tub—just the kind of amenity I seek in a boutique hotel.

I also enjoy the local menu touches. I sipped a pint of pale ale from the nearby Skipping Rock Beer Co. in a glass-encased gallery at one end of the building and ate chocolate croissants from Staunton's own Reunion Bakery. The croissants were so good I stopped by the shop and picked up half a dozen to take to a friend. When the weather permits, you can sit at patio tables on the front terrace in the shadow of the Blackburn's towering ionic columns and imagine a time when carriages came and went.

The Georges in nearby Lexington is smaller than The Blackburn—18 guest rooms, two restaurants, and a stunning event space in three downtown buildings—and even older, with one building dating to 1789. Opened in 2014, the hotel is very much a passion project for the owners, Teddy and Ann Parker Gottwald from Richmond.

Their passion shows in every detail, starting with the name. The two Georges derive from Lexington's two colleges: Washington and Lee University and the Virginia Military Institute. One George comes from W&L's namesake, and the second from George Marshall, VMI's most famous alumnus. The owners have ties to both schools, but especially to VMI. When the couple was first dating, Teddy was a VMI student, and Ann Parker often attended VMI football games with her father, a VMI alum. On the night

During the roaring 1920s, a number of high-rise luxury hotels went up across the state. Several of those have been converted in recent years to boutique hotels. That includes Farmville's Hotel Weyanoke.

Originally opened in 1925, Hotel Weyanoke, named for an early indigenous group in the region, once attracted conventioners, merchants, politicians, salesmen, and celebrities, including Helen Keller, who passed through the central Virginia town, home of Longwood University and nearby Hampden-Sydney College. The hotel's original grandeur eventually faded, and the hotel closed in 1986, later becoming off-campus housing for Longwood students. But in 2018, after a complete renovation and the addition of a new wing, a stylish new version of the Hotel Weyanoke opened.

The new Weyanoke has 70 guest rooms—27 in the original building and 43 in the new wing—and three restaurants, including a coal-fired pizza cafe and a rooftop wine bar offering 360-degree views of the area. It features mid-century modern décor, local artwork, and many luxury touches. Many rooms in the new wing have balconies.

But there's no denying the power of the original architectural elements—marble floors in the lobby, the old lobby desk and chandeliers, original win-





Guest room at The Georges.

dows. The century-old mailbox is still there.

“When you walk into the lobby, unlike a chain hotel, all that history tells a story about why we’re here and what we stand for,” says general manager Meg Ryan.

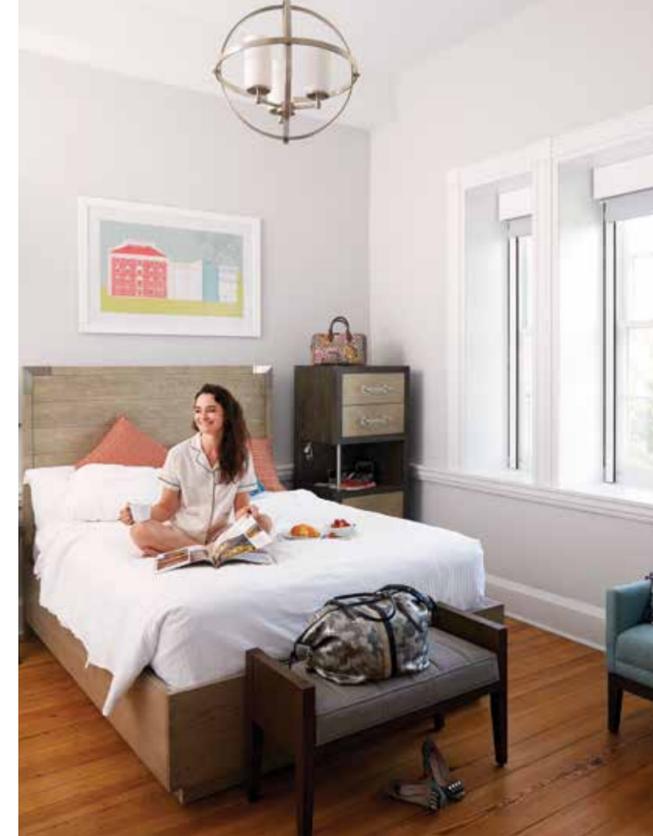
Today, people come for a pampered hotel weekend; to bike High Bridge Trail, a 31-mile former railway trail featuring a majestic 2,400-foot-long bridge rising 125 feet above the Appomattox River; or to shop at Greenfront, the legendary home-furnishings business that fills more than half a dozen old warehouses in downtown Farmville.

The same year the Weyanoke reopened, another 1925 high-rise was given a second life as a boutique hotel in Bristol, 250 miles west. Originally built as a hotel by Hardin Reynolds, nephew of the tobacco mogul R.J. Reynolds, the Reynolds Arcade became one of Bristol’s most prominent office buildings, housing physicians, attorneys, accountants, and other professionals.

Today, the Classical Revival style elements—a Roman arched entryway, stucco exterior, and display windows—lend character and timelessness to the 65-room hotel.

Stopping at The Bristol last winter on our way to visit relatives, my wife,

return to anything resembling normal. Until then, if I am going to stay in a hotel, I’ll feel safest staying in a boutique hotel, where attention to detail is a core value. **VL**



Guest room at The Blackburn Inn.

daughter, and I loved pulling up to the downtown hotel, having the car valet-parked, and not thinking about driving for a while. You can do that when you stay downtown in a boutique hotel that was once an office building.

After settling into our room, we walked next door to the Birthplace of Country Music Museum, where we learned the story of the Bristol recording sessions of 1927 and the Carter family, the first family of country music. Back at the hotel, we headed to the rooftop bar, Lumac, for a cocktail and sunset views of the city. And then we took the elevator down to street level and had a delicious dinner, including a slow-braised pork osso bucco that was out of this world, at Vivian’s Table.

Like a lot of boutique hotels, the Bristol is pet-friendly. We weren’t traveling with our dog, but if we had been, we could have asked for a plush pet bed, water, and food bowls for the room and even turn-down service in the form of a treat on his bed.

Who knows when travel will

SLEEP AROUND *At these 14 boutique hotels scattered around the state, you can inhabit history.*

The Blackburn Inn Staunton

Housed in an early 1800s mental institution designed and built by a Thomas Jefferson protégé, The Blackburn Inn is an easy walk to downtown Staunton. Blackburn-Inn.com

The Bolling Wilson Hotel Wytheville

Originally opened in 1927 as the George Wythe Hotel, the hotel’s recent incarnation draws inspiration from former first lady Edith Bolling Wilson, the second wife of President Woodrow Wilson, who grew up across the street. BollingWilsonHotel.com

The Bristol Hotel Bristol

Once the sun sets, head to the hotel’s rooftop bar, Lumac, for cocktails and gorgeous views of the city’s century-old electric sign—“Bristol VA TENN: A Good Place to Live”—which straddles State Street, the border between the two states. BristolHotelVa.com

Hotel Cape Charles Cape Charles

Located in the quaint town of Cape Charles on Virginia’s Eastern Shore, this 100-year-old hotel mixes antiques and clean-lined modern design and offers harbor views from private glass balconies. HotelCapeCharles.com

The Craddock Terry Hotel Lynchburg

Once a shoe factory dating to 1888, this downtown Lynchburg property became a plush hotel after a 2007 makeover that kept the original industrial feel, with exposed wood beam ceilings, brick and stone exterior walls, and nine-foot-tall windows. CraddockTerryHotel.com

The Georges Lexington

A (growing) collection of downtown Lexington buildings make up The Georges, which blends deep history with luxe furnishings and thoughtful service. TheGeorges.com

Glass Light Hotel & Gallery Norfolk

Works of glass art by renowned artists such as Peter Bremers and Lino Tagliapietra hide in the corners and

hang from the spaces of this hotel, housed in a 1912 downtown Norfolk building. GlassLightHotel.com

Jackson Park Inn Pulaski

Converted in 2015 from a 1920s grocery warehouse, this 32-room hotel 15 miles from Claytor Lake features old brick, exposed post-and-beam timbers, and wide plank wood floors. JacksonParkInn.com

Hotel Laurance Luray

This charming 12-room hotel, which began its life in 1830 as a mercantile store, is known for its crisp, contemporary design and comfortable beds and for suites with kitchens, a rarity among boutique hotels. HotelLaurance.com

Linden Row Inn Richmond

Way back in 1988, this 70-room inn was carved out of a handful of grand 19th century homes—arguably the nation’s best surviving row of Greek revival architecture—in downtown Richmond. LindenRowInn.com

Quirk Hotel Richmond and Charlottesville

Both of these hotels blend history with contemporary art and design in extraordinary ways. DestinationHotels.com

Western Front Hotel St. Paul

This hotel in tiny St. Paul boasts reclaimed wood doors, eclectic décor, and art that reflects early Appalachia. WesternFrontHotel.com

Hotel Weyanoke Farmville

Once a bustling conference center on a popular rail route, Hotel Weyanoke has been reimagined as a small-town sanctuary with mid-century modern décor. HotelWeyanoke.com



Hotel Weyanoke lobby.

WARDROBE STYLING BY LAUREN HEALY-FLORA. MODEL BY LIQUID TALENT. THIS PAGE: ORGANIC POLKA DOT SHORT PAJAMA SET BY DOMI SLEEPWEAR, METALLIC CAMO CANVAS OVERNIGHT BAG AND COSMETIC CASE BY KEMPTON & CO., ALL AVAILABLE AT VERDALINA. PATENT LEATHER SQUARE TOE HEELS BY MIU MIU, BENGAL TIGER GG BISTON HANDBAG BY GUCCI, ALL AVAILABLE AT baggioconsignment.com. TOILE KNIT TOP BY RACHEL COMEY, AT ROAN. PREVIOUS PAGE: CRYSTAL CHAIN SUNGLASSES BY KREWE NEW ORLEANS, TOILE KNIT TOP BY RACHEL COMEY, DENIM LOVE PANTS BY DOROTHEE SCHUMACHER, ALL AVAILABLE AT ROAN. VINTAGE PONY HAIR BELT WITH GOLD BUCKLE, AT 68HOME. BLACK LEATHER AND WOOD TWEED PUMPS BY LOUIS VUITTON, CC MEDALLION PEARL AND BOW NECKLACE BY CHANEL, BENGAL TIGER GG BISTON HANDBAG BY GUCCI, ALL AVAILABLE AT baggioconsignment.com. AMETHYST AND STERLING RING, BLACK PEARL STUD EARRINGS, AND STERLING ENGRAVED CUFF ALL AVAILABLE AT DRANSFIELD JEWELERS. METALLIC CAMO CANVAS OVERNIGHT BAG BY KEMPTON & CO.; AT VERDALINA.