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HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT  
10 Reasons to Stay in  
Gaston County, NC

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# ULTIMATE MAGAZINE

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## HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

10 Reasons to Stay in **Gaston County** on Your Next Charlotte Business Trip. *by Ann Gibson*

FOR FREQUENT BUSINESS TRAVELERS, maintaining a healthy routine on the road is a challenge. Separation from familiar running routes, biking trails, and athletic facilities makes the thought of grabbing an after-work jog a bit daunting. A promising trend among savvy travelers is to choose lodging near recreation amenities, making it easy to combine work with a bit of outdoor therapy.

If kayaking alongside great blue herons or running through forested trails sound like a good way to end your workday, then choose Gaston County as home base for your next Charlotte business trip. A wide variety of lodging options cater to the needs of business travelers and, with Charlotte Douglas International Airport and Uptown Charlotte easily accessible in under 30 minutes, Gaston County offers a unique opportunity to find work/play balance on the road.

Towns like Belmont, Gastonia and Cranberry, rich in textile

history, have embraced the natural beauty of Crowders Mountain, the Catawba River, and a multitude of parks, trails and greenways to boost the local economy. You'll find one-of-a-kind dining and shopping experiences in every downtown, with friendly locals eager to share their passion for the area and recommend a craft brew pub, coffee shop, or running route. Choose from our top ten list to pair the best of Gaston outdoors with exceptional culinary experiences with local chefs and restaurateurs making their mark in the region.

ABOVE: The U.S. National Whitewater Center (top) is host to many live music events and outdoor festivals (photo courtesy of USNWC); 344-acre George Poston Park offers beautiful scenery (lower left, photo by Charlie Covine) and more than 10 miles of challenging natural surface trails cut through dense forest for runners, hikers and mountain bikers (lower right, photo by Rob Glover).

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## 1 | JOG MILES OF ROLLING GREENWAY

Swap your dress shoes for runners at the end of the work day to enjoy a jog on the Highland Rail Trail. The paved, flat 1.5-mile path begins in downtown Gastonia and connects with another 1.5-mile loop along the shores of Rankin Lake for serene water views and abundant bird activity, including an osprey nesting site.

After your run, check out dining hot spot, Wibb's Custom Kichen. At the center of Gastonia's post-textile renaissance, this former movie theater exudes Art-Deco chic. Vintage films run in the background, paying homage to the building's historic roots while diners enjoy inventive dishes drawn from locally sourced products. Open for lunch and dinner, specialties include maple-glazed duck breast, crabcakes with lemon coriander butter, slow braised short ribs, and lobster corn risotto. Custom cocktails, craft brews, and premium wines round out the extensive menu. Leave room for a piece of Wibb's sumptuous coconut cake for dessert.

If you're short on time, don't miss Gastonia icons Tney's Ice Creams, serving homemade ice cream and milk shakes since 1915, and Zoë's Coffee House, home to inventive java creations by day and craft beers, cocktails, live music, open mike night, and art shows at night.



ABOVE: Getting to Gaston County, NC is easy - especially if you're flying in on Ultimate Air Shuttle. Charlotte Douglas airport is just minutes away via I-85 and Charlotte is right next door. I-85 runs straight through Gaston County linking it to cities in the Northeast, Southeast, and Midwest, while I-40, less than one hour north, provides an important east-west link with coast-to-coast access.

Welcome home



## 2 | PADDLE THE CATAWBA AT SUNSET

It's scientifically proven (probably) that work stress cannot survive a peaceful paddle along a tree-lined shore. Tallace Marina, set atop a historic section of the Catawba River known as Tackasego Ford, offers a fleet of rental kayaks and stand-up paddleboards to get you on the water.

Carry that relaxed vibe through dinner at The String Bean in Belmont, a southern bistro offering an extensive wine and beer list, well-crafted dishes, and creative daily specials. If you prefer, just point to a deep red tuna steak or aged rib eye at the fresh meat and seafood market adjoining the restaurant to have a dish prepared to order.

RIGHT: Kayaking on the Catawba River. Photo by Rob Glover.



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### 3 | TEST YOUR TRAIL RUNNING METTLE

More than 10 miles of challenging natural surface trail at Gatsonia's George Poston Park cut through dense forest, offering ample shade for all-season trail running. Rarely flat, never boring, and always well maintained, the dual purpose trail system—runners and hikers share singletrack with mountain bikers—is a favorite training ground for the region's best runners.

Trail running burns calories fast. Great BBQ replaces them faster. Eyle Fletcher's is a local secret that's been around for years. Tender pulled pork with just enough smoke anchors a menu that includes fall-off-the-bone ribs and absolutely giant burgers. The onion rings are the must-get side. Don't expect a lot of fancy at KF's. Then again, after running the trails at Poston, fancy won't be high on your list.

### 4 | THROW DISCS ON ISLAND TIME

Some days call for a slower pace, and disc golf fits the bill. Requiring little more than golf discs and a laid-back attitude, packing for a round on the road is easy. Gatson County offers a beautiful and unique location to fling your discs. Running through Goat Island, a park surrounded by the South Fork River, the 18-hole course challenges players with sharp doglegs and narrow fairways. The serene, shaded setting provides the relaxation.

A new pedestrian bridge leads from tee boxes to downtown Cramerton for tacos and build-your-own rice bowls at Deffer's Cantovers. Salads, sandwiches, and local brews round out the menu, which can be ordered to go for a picnic along the banks of the South Fork River.



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## 5 | BOMB THE DOWNHILLS AT POSTON PARK

Some of the best mountain biking in the Charlotte region can be found in Gaston County, and the bike rentals available at South Main Cycles in Belmont make it easy to hit the trails after work. Rent a demo bike and ride to the Rocky Branch Trailhead for four miles of tight turns and punchy climbs with a creek crossing and several bridges.

For more distance and challenge, head to George Poston Park. Locals claim Poston rivals almost any ride in western North Carolina, with tight singletrack and some of the steepest climbs in the area. If you're lucky enough to be in Gaston on Thursday evening, meet at South Main Cycles for their group headlamp ride at Poston Park, followed by a stop at The Station, the taproom adjacent to the bike shop, for craft brews and wine by the patio firepit.

Just across the Catawba River from Belmont, the U.S. National Whitewater Center (USNWC) boasts an ever-expanding trail network with more than 25 miles of impeccably groomed and well-marked singletrack. Rent a bike and choose from trails signed for difficulty. Novice riders can cut their chops on the center's flatter, flowy trails while experienced riders tackle the tight singletrack, steep climbs, and sharp descents on more advanced loops. End your ride with dinner and sunset at the center's sit-down restaurant, River's Edge Bar & Grill.



## 6 | ZIPLINE AND DINE

How often can you combine a business trip with a zipline adventure? The USNWC offers thousands of feet of zipline course (shown above), challenging you to navigate heights and aerial obstacles as you move from platforms to platform up to 100 feet above the ground. Guided canopy tours are also available.

The excitement doesn't stop when you return to ground level. Enjoy the River Jam concert series on Thursday and Saturday evenings from May through September, a Friday night outdoor adventure film series, and outdoor yoga on select dates from May through October. All events are free after paying the \$5 parking fee upon entry to the center. Dine on burgers, salads, sandwiches, and vegetarian selections at the River's Edge Bar & Grill or try the Pump House Biergarten for numerous local craft beers on tap. Several grab-and-go concessions offer pizza, tacos, sandwiches, and salads.



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## 7 | BAG A PEAK OR TWO

Breaking away from your work day for a couple hours, a half day, sunrise to sunset? The trail network at Crowders Mountain State Park offers distance, elevation, and terrain for just about any level of hiker. Rising more than 1,500 feet above the surrounding landscape, Crowders is the go-to hiking destination for Charlotteans and just happens to be located off I-85 in the southeastern corner of Gaston County.

From the Sparrow Springs Access Visitor Center, a five-mile loop on the Crowders Trail leads to the summit of Crowders Mountain via moderate to strenuous trails with a few rock scrambles and sections of elevation gain. The four-mile, out-and-back Pinnacle Trail, while less rocky, includes a steep segment approaching Kings Pinnacle, the highest point in the county at 1,705 feet. Both trails are well worth the effort, affording expansive views of the surrounding Piedmont. Hikers looking for a more moderate loop can combine the Turnback, Fern, and Lake Trails for a 2.1-mile round trip. On the other end of the spectrum, the RidgeLine Trail, accessed near the summit of Kings Pinnacle, extends 16

**TOP RIGHT:** The trail network at Crowders Mountain State Park offers distance, elevation, and terrain for just about any level of hiker (photo by Charlie Covings). **BOTTOM RIGHT:** The Carolina Thread Trail offers paved and natural-surface trails to explore Gaston's hardwood forests and rivers on mountain bikes (photo by Rob Glavec).

miles through South Carolina into Kings Mountain State Park.

Begin and end your day on the trails at Nelli's Southern Kitchen in Belmont. Locally sourced ingredients are the cornerstone of traditional southern comfort dishes like pecan crusted green tomatoes, chicken 'n' dumplings, and tummy corn with Cajun butter. Owned by Kevin Jonas Sr. of Jonas Brothers fame, diners enjoy live music: just about every night. Pick up pastries and coffee at the adjacent bakery before heading to the trailhead. Nelli's rooftop bar, serving North Carolina wines and beers, is an ideal spot to wind down after your hike.

## 8 | CLIMB ON AT THE USNWC CLIMBING CENTER

While Crowders Mountain offers many climbing walks and routes for seasoned climbers with their own gear (day permits required and available at the visitor's center), the USNWC climbing center's instruction program opens the door to the sport for business travelers looking for a new challenge. From an introductory belay class to lead climbing and more advanced movement and technique instruction, group and private classes on the center's 30-foot climbing wall and 46-foot granite-like spire will test your limits. Repeat travelers to Charlotte can earn belay certification for access to roped climb and abseiling routes. All gear is provided.

A strenuous workout deserves a reward, and several local coffeehouses in surrounding downstate fit the bill. Caravan Coffee in Belmont is famous for their lattes and frozen creations. At Floyd & Flackie's in Cranston, you can get baked goods and ice cream with your cup of joe and Catawba Coffee in Mt. Holly features specialty lattes in flavors like banana bread and cinnamon bun, along with live music in the evening.



## 9 | PEDAL THE CAROLINA THREAD TRAIL

Think mountain biking sans rock-hopping and white-knuckle descents. Sound like fun? Gaston County's greenways and portion of the Carolina Thread Trail offer paved and natural-surface trails to explore Gaston's hardwood forests and rivers. Pick up your mountain bike rental and trail information at Main Street Cycles in Belmont for a seven-mile out-and-back on paved greenway in Gastonia's Linberger Park. The Seven Oaks Preserve Trail is a five-mile out-and-back that connects to Daniel Stowe Botanical Gardens. Park your bike to tour the orchid conservatory and outdoor gardens before returning to Belmont. Daniel Stowe's 300 acres of manicured gardens and fountains is worth the trip.

Back in downtown Belmont, stop by tapas and wine bar Luna Hombres for lunch or dinner. An extensive selection of two dozen wines and regional beers have been carefully selected by sommelier and owner Taylor Hobbs to introduce diners to adventurous yet affordable libations. Small plates highlight international flavors with a cheese and charcuterie selection and daily dessert specials.

## 10 | PADDLE THE BIG WATER

The crown jewel of the USNWC is a man-made whitewater river running through the heart of the center. Add this to your bucket list of business travel experiences and arrive prepared to get wet. Six-person guided raft trips navigate Class II-IV rapids on three connecting river channels. At the end of each run, rafts are propelled from the lower pond back to the upper pond on an oversized conveyor belt of sorts for a continuous two-hour raft trip. All gear is provided. If you fall in love with the thrill of whitewater, the center offers whitewater kayaking and stand-up paddleboarding instruction.

*This is just a taste of what Gaston has to offer an active business traveler. Don't be surprised if your next trip to Charlotte leaves you healthier than when you arrived. ☺*



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