

Roanoke

Contributed by David Salem
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I don't think Roanoke is at the top of anyone's "must see" list. And that's too bad. This Virginia city offers an old school urban feel with a mountainous backdrop, but without the annoying "granola factor" of, say, Asheville. It's a great place for a day trip or a weekend visit.

Roanoke was sort of iconic for me as a child. It was the first city we passed through on our semi-annual trips to the horse races in West Virginia, and I was fascinated by the giant Tudor-style Hotel Roanoke. I once persuaded my parents to take me there for what turned out to be a very expensive (and not very good) lunch when I was ten or eleven years old. I've been told the food has improved. I hope so.

Like Norfolk and Richmond, the population of Roanoke proper has been stagnant or declining for the past fifty years or so. What this means is that Roanoke feels in many ways like a much bigger city than it actually is. It was built up as a bigger, denser city in its early days, and the physical evidence remains, even if many of the buildings are now empty.

Downtown and Environs

It's a fascinating place to explore if you're a fan of the urban form. While urban renewal was not kind to certain areas of the center city, the downtown area retains a string of beautiful commercial buildings from the decades surrounding the turn of the last century. And there's some evidence of a renaissance, with new tenants moving into many of the abandoned storefronts. The area around the City Market is lively and healthy, if not necessarily thriving just yet.

The downtown area is also surrounded by numerous interesting older neighborhoods, including the Old Southwest historic district. Again, urban renewal resulted in some very noticeable clearance, particularly to the north of downtown and in the areas around Williamson Road and I-581, but there's still a lot to see here.

Williamson Road

Speaking of Williamson Road, it's one of my favorite strips in Roanoke. Also signed as US Highway 11, it was the primary northern route out of Roanoke before I-81, and it's a treasure trove of commercial architecture dating from the 1930s to the 1950s, including some surprisingly well-preserved old motels. Some stretches can be a little dicey, with telltale signs of prostitution and drug-dealing, but it's not really a particularly scary drive, even at night.

Williamson Road also houses the best (and worst) eateries of my most recent trip. The New Yorker Delicatessen is a wonderful thing, with huge sandwiches and a setting that is something straight out of 1968. They close for the sabbath, so don't expect to grab a Saturday afternoon meal there.

The Williamson Road Pancake House, on the other hand, is from hell. It draws a big crowd, and I can't for the life of me figure out why. The food is expensive (for what it is) and not very good, the service is slow, surly, and bordering on nonexistent. And the place seems absolutely filthy. I nearly lost my breakfast in the men's room due to a stench which came from general neglect rather than one person's, ummm, activity. And lest you think I'm a prima donna, understand that dumpy (and sometimes even dirty) old diners are generally some of my favorite places. But not this one.

Random Things to See

The trek up Mill Mountain to the big lighted star (and the nearby overlook to see downtown) is a must, as is a stroll through downtown.

For a good cross-section of the city, I'd recommend following the route of US Highway 11 west of downtown, along Campbell and Memorial Avenues, Grandin Road, and Brandon Avenue, and then into neighboring Salem, which is also worth a look.

Before visiting, you might want to check out the wonderful [Old Roanoke website](#), which provides an amazing photo history of the city, through postcards and vintage photos.

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Roanoke skyline as seen from Mill Mountain.

The old City Market now houses a food court and several retail stores on its perimeter.

A row of old commercial buildings in downtown Roanoke.

Neon signs in downtown Roanoke.

Roanoke skyline.

The old meets the modern in downtown Roanoke.

Classic supermarket, Winborne Street, Roanoke.

Little Chef Restuarant on Willimason Road.