Entrepreneurship has found a new home in Greenville. Will Shurtz, co-owner of Methodical Coffee, can talk you through the flavors of various roasts. Views of Blue Ridge foothills inspired the landscape terrace (opposite) at Hotel Domestique, created by Tour de France veteran George Hincapie.
Going Greenville

Start-ups and a fresh look transform a sleepy South Carolina town.

By KATIE KNOROVSKY Photographs by JESSICA SAMPLE
IN A BLACK-AND-WHITE SHEATH DRESS and sporting a pixie haircut, Cherington Love Shucker emanates the no-nonsense cool you’d expect from a former New Yorker. Then she breaks into a warm smile that’s unmistakably southern. We’re at the old Brandon Mill, in Greenville, in the northwestern corner of South Carolina. A native who returned last year after two decades away, Shucker now serves as executive director of the new Greenville Center for Creative Arts, housed here. The brainchild of two women—one in her 70s, one in her 60s—and founded as a gift to the next generation, the gallery and art school opened in this historic cotton factory in May.

“People in Greenville love ideas,” says Shucker, who served a stint as a Henry Luce scholar in Guangzhou, China. Over the past decade, the three-day, juried Artisphere festival put her hometown on the national art map and, on a personal level, helped persuade her and her artist husband to relocate from Manhattan.

Ideas are what got me here, too—not just to this town of some 61,000 in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains but to the South. Born and raised in Iowa, I spent my 20s chasing opportunity in Washington, D.C. When my 30s brought a shift in priorities, friends began to eye suburbia, but my husband and I found ourselves dreaming instead of a place with room for ambitions to grow. A place where change didn’t require an act of Congress—or a trust fund.

Our horizons expanded south. Make that the New South, to rising cities—led by big-personality destinations like Nashville, Tennessee, and Austin, Texas—where a start-up culture has replaced industry, forging new, more inclusive paths along the way. Soon after moving to Asheville, North Carolina, we kept hearing about nearby Greenville. A colleague described the sunny hills of the surrounding countryside as the “Tuscany of the South.” A news article heralded a plan for an elevated public transportation system made up of Jetsons-esque pods. Fast Company magazine dubbed Greenville “the knowledge economy’s next big thing.” Billboards and radio ads parroted the city’s quirky tourism slogan: “Yeah, that Greenville.” I needed to see for myself what was happening.

ON MY HOUR-LONG DRIVE south from hippie Asheville, I pass the roadside Dixie Republic souvenir shop with its Confederate flags flying. Things feel more inviting as I enter the city limits.

I meet walking guide John Nolan at Greenville’s nucleus: Falls Park, where a nearly 40-foot natural waterfall churns just off Main Street. A pedestrian-only bridge curves overhead. It’s a bright spring day, and locals and tourists line up under the
An award-winning span, the pedestrian Liberty Bridge in Greenville’s Falls Park allows passersby to linger above downtown waterfalls. At Dapper Ink, screen-printed T-shirts (opposite) tout city pride.
suspension cables. Kids scramble across the rocks, testing their limits as they venture one step closer to the spray.

"Whenever it warms up, people swarm down here," Nolan says. Much credit for Greenville's new groove goes to five-term Mayor Knox White, who has spent the past two decades showing how to turn an idea—make Greenville "the most beautiful and livable city in America"—into a movement. White persuaded officials to tear down a heavily used, four-lane bridge that for decades blocked the falls. The city cleaned up the long-ignored Reedy River and built Falls Park, which became an instant community gathering space when it opened in 2004. Five years later, the Swamp Rabbit Trail transformed an old railroad bed. Packed with cyclists and runners year-round, the 18.7-mile paved path connects Falls Park north to the 19th-century stagecoach stop of Travelers Rest. Like the wisteria lining the trail, development has blossomed on both ends of the corridor.

As we walk along the river, Nolan points out where textile mills propelled the city through much of the 20th century. He also mentions how his small tour company hopes to begin offering foreign language tours, an outgrowth of the innovative tech and auto programs now fueling the region.

More than 40 Fortune 500 companies operate here, among them General Electric, Fluor, and Lockheed Martin. Michelin has been here since 1975, and Greenville County claims the highest foreign manufacturing investment per capita in the nation. About 15 miles east of downtown, just past the international airport, BMW recently rolled its three millionth car off the line at its only American production plant. Later, when I stop by BMW's sleek Zentrum visitor museum, teens pose for photos in front of the Z4 roadster, made famous by James Bond. But I'm more drawn to the mounted engines, which look like physical manifestations of the brainpower gathered in this unlikely pocket of the country.

After Nolan and I part ways, I find a bench across the street from the entrance to Falls Park to gather my thoughts. A gentleman seated next to me looks up from his book, his contemplative gaze cast in bronze. The statue is of local hero Charles Townes, an inventor of the laser. A plaque on the bench encourages me to stop and rest a while: "You, too, may have your own revelation."

Perhaps the biggest revelation is Greenville's urbane downtown. On Main Street you're as likely to hear a southern drawl as you are to catch snippets of French or German. The blocks around the thoroughfare hum with scores of restaurants and bars, serving Persian mezze and lamb shank, rare Belgian Trappist beer and southern novelties like fried green tomatoes dipped in pimento cheese fondue. Anchoring the scene, the 2,100-seat Peace Center brings in everything from Broadway shows to

The Station, an art collective launched in August 2014 and run by women, fuels First Friday festivities in the Village of West Greenville with art parties held in a former gas station.
Near Liberty Bridge, Passerelle Bistro serves French fare. Bird portraits on wood (opposite) by Diana Kilgore Condon alight at Art & Light Studios in the Village of West Greenville.
Sheryl Crow—and featured National Geographic speakers.

David Baker greets me at Methodical Coffee, his sparkling, glass-fronted café facing a shaded plaza. Baker “fell in love with craft coffee” while running a hostel in Prague. He and his wife eyed Austin, but in the end chose to return to their hometown.

“We felt we could make a larger impact here,” he says, sipping a cappuccino from a blue willow china cup.

When I mention the Indie Craft Parade, an annual fair for handmade goods, Baker pulls out his phone to text his friend Lib Ramos, one of the event’s founders. Now in its sixth year, the fair has evolved into an empire in progress called the Makers Collective. Turns out Ramos, a graphic designer by trade, works upstairs in the office building. A couple of minutes later, she pops down to say hi.

This isn’t my first clue that a close-knit community beats at the heart of Greenville. Deep-pocketed investors may help pay the bills, but that old-fashioned southern charm is what nurtures growth.

A few blocks away, flower boxes brighten the slate-hued building that houses Pedal Chic, America’s first women-specific bike shop. Inside, owner Robin Lennon Bylenga folds up the hem on a pair of stretch jeans to reveal reflective seaming in Levi’s new line of women’s commuter apparel, which she proudly tells me debuted at only a few stores around the country. Helmets stamped with daisies hang near sleek, carbon-frame road bikes.

A single mom and longtime cyclist, Bylenga opened Pedal Chic in 2010, the same year she completed seven triathlons. A loan from Michelin helped her get the store up and running. “People were shocked that this concept was developed in Greenville,” admits Bylenga, who has been featured on CNN and in Money magazine. She speaks tirelessly about the power of women on bikes. A group ride on Wednesday evenings is followed by wine and potluck appetizers in the shop’s courtyard. Consider it a hub-and-spoke model of community building.

Clockwise from top left: Pedal Chic provides a hub for bicycling women; Lily Wilkoff creates jewelry at her studio/shop Lily Pottery, in the Village of West Greenville; mushrooms with saffron purée up the menu at Passerelle Bistro; Chancey Lindsey-Peake (with husband, Dennis) is the banana bread queen behind Banana Manna bakery.

BACK AT THE BRANDON MILL, Shucker and I climb the stairs to the third floor, where the complex’s past surfaces next to its future. Old footprints in the hardwood floor, near easels set up for a drawing class, recall the mill days when workers assembled upstairs here to inspect cloth.

As we walk through the cavernous room, Shucker slips from polished PR woman to laid-back southern girl. She acknowledges a certain evolution in Greenville since her childhood, thanks in part to the influx of international influences. Yet she maintains that the “Greenville way” has always meant working to make the path broader for those who follow.

“Growing up here, I got the experience of ‘everybody knows who your mama is,’ so you stay on your best behavior,” she says with a belly laugh.

Today, part of that work revolves around reaching the segment of the city pegged as “unseen Greenville.” In well-heeled areas such as downtown, racial diversity can be hard to find. Crossing town through neighborhoods reveals a much wider story than the one Main Street tells. For its part, the Greenville Center for Creative Arts offers fellowships and exhibitions intended to cast light on all of the arts scene. “We want to be a place for smart conversation,” Shucker says, not least because the center itself sits on the fringes of western Greenville.

I look out the window, and Shucker lights up describing this, her favorite view. The rusty Brandon water tower rises above fresh landscaping and bright crepe myrtle.

Next to us is the park where Shoeless Joe Jackson grew up playing ball. Beyond the chain-link fencing of the parking lot, a brick building at the end of the road marks the start of the burgeoning arts district known as the Village of West Greenville. Around the corner, Shucker’s husband, Darin Gehrke, sells his Asian-inspired, wood-fired vases and trampots in an airy gallery. Less than two years ago, his studio was a cramped fourth-floor space in Manhattan’s Garment District.

“I love that my three-and-a-half-year-old daughter has a village that’s helping to raise her now,” says Shucker. “She remembers New York. I recently asked her, ‘Do you love living in Greenville?’ She said, ‘Yes, because I can take my shoes off and run in the grass.’”

I know the feeling. From its magnetic downtown to the visionary locals I’ve met at every turn, this place makes me want to kick off my heels and stay awhile too.

Traveler contributing editor KATIE KNOROVSKY is managing editor of Smokey Mountain Living magazine. This feature is photographer JESSICA SAMPLE’s first for Traveler.
TOP PICKS

THE BEST OF GREENVILLE

GREENVILLE HISTORY TOURS
Explore downtown on foot with local guidebook author John Nolan. The West End walking tour begins at Falls Park; Nolan recounts how the Cherokee and Catawba once hunted buffalo in this area, before it emerged as a leader in the textile industry.

SWAMP RABBIT TRAIL
Hop on this paved trail at Falls Park and gradually climb to Travelers Rest. In downtown Greenville, Pedal Chic and Reedy Rides offer bike rentals.

WHERE THE ART IS
Check out the free Greenville County Museum of Art, which mounts a digestible collection of Jasper Johns prints, Andrew Wyeth watercolors, and a survey of notable southern works. Old-master Christian paintings more to your liking? The labyrinthine treasury at the Museum and Gallery at Bob Jones University rivals the Vatican.

ZENTRUM
North America's only BMW museum provides a free look at the German automotive giant's heritage and the chance to admire rare rides, such as the famous Isetta "bubble car" (above). Renovations are planned; call ahead to confirm opening hours.

POMEGRANATE ON MAIN
Ask for a seat in the restaurant's courtyard, where a blue-tile fountain bubbles next to diners sharing savory mezze (small plates) while slurping Persian black tea the traditional way: through sugar cubes.

BEST FESTIVAL
Artisphere
One of the country's top juried annual arts fairs takes place May 13-15 in 2016.

MEAL WITH A VIEW
Passeirelle Bistro
From the patio, enjoy the vista over Falls Park along with Nicoise salads and mussels.

CRAFT COCKTAILS
American Grocery Restaurant
Try the Manhattan made with "beer jam," a sudsy syrup boiled with bourbon and cherry juice.

OUT-OF-TOWN STAY

Beds and Bikes
Geared toward bike lovers, Hotel Domestique carves out a piece of Tuscany in the rolling Blue Ridge foothills about 20 miles north of Greenville. The high-end hotel also attracts local cyclists, who refuel on French pastries and recovery shakes at its Café 17. Front desk clerks print out cue sheets that break down area rides.

TOP SHOP
Billiam
Owner Bill Mitchell crafts leather belts (above) and custom jeans made from raw denim, donating 20 percent of profits to fight sex trafficking.