

Monday, May 5, 1980



travel log

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contributing travel editor

Necessary indulgences keep the juices flowing

I am up to my neck in the Caribbean near Puerto Rico, eating fresh pineapple and letting the juice run down my chin into the sea.

This is the part of travel writing that I don't usually tell my editor about. I like him to focus on the times when I get up before dawn to catch a plane or stay up after midnight to meet a deadline.

We are on a chartered boat hired out of the La Concha Hotel in San Juan. Most of the hotels in the island offer them. This one, from the Caribbean School of Aquatics Inc., costs \$39 per person including lunch, lessons in snorkeling and diving and the gear to go with it.

Some hotels offer a sailing vessel instead of a motor launch. The El San Juan Hotel uses a 38-foot catamaran. You can also hire boats directly out of Fajardo, the town on the northeast coast of the island where all this activity is centered.

Fajardo is jump-off point for a number of small islands traditionally used for beachcombing, picnicking and camping. The tours take you there by van, although you can get there by car or by publico. A publico is a mini-van that runs on schedule like a regular bus.

On the way to Fajardo, you pass fruit stands where you can buy giant island pineapples, tiny bananas and other local fruit. You also pass Luquillo Beach, a huge expanse of sand covered by coconut trees.

Luquillo once was a coconut plantation, but is now a well-kept public beach.

As you approach the northeast tip of the island, you go past the fishing trawlers and the huge marina at Puerto Chico, where you can eat fresh lobster off the boats or take a ferry to the Caribbean island of St. Thomas.

At Las Croabas, where most of the hotel launches are moored, a huge hotel called El Conquistador climbs up the hill from the sea, its links connected by an inclined railway.

El Conquistador was considered an architectural feat when it was built, but it is somewhat of a white elephant now because it cannot attract enough tourists to keep its cash registers ringing.

IF YOU COME BY yourself or on a publico, you will take the public launches from Fajardo to islands like Vieques and Culbra. Vieques is the island partly owned and regularly bombed during practice runs by the U.S. Navy.

We headed across the water to a tiny strip of sand, with a headpiece of palm trees, called Palomares. That means Little Palomares, and refers to a larger island behind it.

When you put your bare face down in the water here, you see only shadows, but through a snorkeling mask the elk horn coral looms up, like thousands of giant elk horns growing out of the seabed.

A garden of shapes appears below, criss-crossed by brilliant blue fish. And when you tire of that, or of deep sea diving, you can stand in the sea, feel the pineapple juice on your chin, and plan a sunbath.

Half an hour face down on the deck will do it. I can report that from personal experience.

Going, going, gone

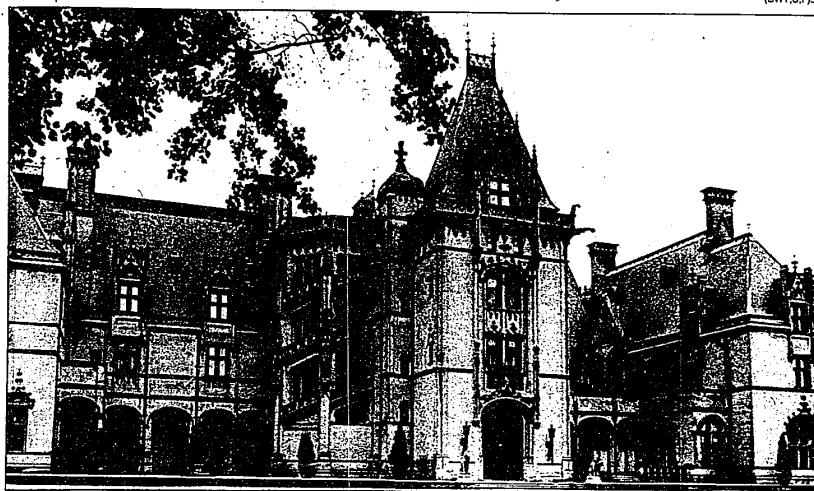
Northern Michigan's oldest and largest antique store is going out of business.

Nautic Antiques, a 25-year institution in Northern Michigan's resort area of Lake Leelanau, has an inventory of more than 5,000 square feet includes

furniture, glassware, porcelain, lighting and primitives for sale.

The auction will be May 9-10 with a preview on May 8, on the site in Leelanau, 20 miles north of Traverse City.

For information, call 1-616-947-0800.



Biltmore House is a fantasy of parapets, pinnacles, gothic chimneys, gargoyles and flying buttresses. Among the furnishings in the 250 rooms were Napoleon's chess set, Flemish tapestries, Meissen porcelains, Dürer prints and paintings by Renoir, Whistler, Boldini and John Singer Sargent. The 125,000 acres surrounding the estate were bought to keep George Vanderbilt's view unspoiled.

Success left a mark on Asheville

By BILL SCHEMEL

ASHEVILLE, N.C. — It's one of those unfortunate quirks of history that Thomas Wolfe and George Washington Vanderbilt never met.

Vanderbilt was not accustomed to inviting coarse young rubes to share his baronial table at Biltmore House, outside Asheville, N.C. By the late 1920s, when Wolfe's first novel, "Look Homeward, Angel," created a literary sensation, Vanderbilt was in his grave more than a decade.

However, both men immortalized Asheville, leaving their marks on the mountain town, one in soaring stone, the other in soaring phrases.

MOVIE-GOERS got a peak at Asheville's most famous tourist attraction, Biltmore House, in which Peter Sellers, Shirley MaLaine and Melvyn Douglas filmed some of the scenes of "Being There." Douglas' supporting performance snagged an Oscar, and the scenes in and around Biltmore House may lure some vacationers this summer.

The estate was the 18th century brainchild of young George Vanderbilt, youngest son of William H. Vanderbilt, and grandson of crusty old Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt. As was the custom among wealthy young easterners of the 1880s, George Vanderbilt spent his summers in the healthy Smoky Mountains around Asheville.

He galloped through a woodland glade one afternoon and gazed at the tableau of Mt. Pisgah and the Great Smokies rising against a French-blue heaven. A gentleman of considerable taste, as well as one of wealth, Vanderbilt envisioned the most magnificent palace a democratic America had ever seen.

To implement his dream in stone, he bought up all the land his eyes surveyed — 125,000 acres, including Mt. Pisgah — built a railroad to the site, and hired more than 1,000

European and American laborers and artisans.

Architect Richard Morris Hunt borrowed heavily from three Loire Valley French chateaux and created a 16th century French Renaissance fantasy of parapets, pinnacles, Gothic chimneys, gargoyles and flying buttresses.

Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted laid out 250 acres of gardens, terraces, parks and lily ponds. More than 5,000 varieties of roses were planted in the English walled garden.

A temperature-controlled greenhouse assured a year-around abundance of cut flowers for Mrs. Vanderbilt's many tables.

Biltmore House, as it was called, was christened with a Christmas ball in 1895. Even the Vanderbilt's jaded guests who trained down from New York were dazzled by this Xanadu in the wilds.

The 250 rooms included a spectacular Norman banquet hall, 72 feet by 64 feet by 42 feet, rising to a 75-foot arched beam ceiling and adorned with rare Flemish tapestries. The Vanderbilts customarily took their meals in the more relaxed family dining room, decorated with hand-tooled Spanish leather walls.

After Vanderbilt died in 1914 at age 52, all but 10,000 of his original 125,000 acres were sold or deeded to the federal government for the Pisgah National Forest and sections of the Blue Ridge Parkway, which today brings visitors through the great stone gates.

A \$7 admission (\$5 for ages 6-15) is requested. At least two hours are needed to walk the lush gardens and view the 16 rooms now open to the public.

TOM WOLFE was a lad of 14 when Vanderbilt died. His own home was only a few miles, but many light years, removed from the Biltmore estate, at 48 Spruce St. in downtown Asheville. "Old Kentucky Home" was a

rambling Victorian boarding house that his mother, Julia, operated as a declaration of independence from Tom's father, W.O.

As they grew up, Tom and his siblings shuttled back and forth between the boardinghouse and the family home, a few blocks away on Woodfin Street, where W.O. (a tombstone carver) stubbornly held out. The arrangement was an unhappy one, as Tom so scathingly depicted in "Look Homeward, Angel." Old Kentucky Home was thinly disguised as "Dixieland" in that first novel, which won him acclaim in the greater world and scorn in his hometown.

Wolfe would be amused to learn that his home has been turned into a shrine, which the curious willingly pay \$1 to gawk at.

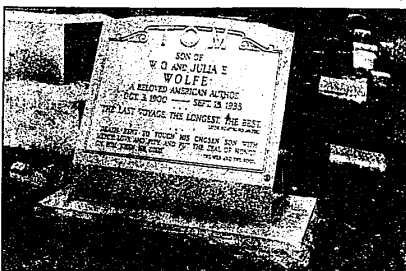
The old place is pretty much as Julia left it: the big dining table set for boarders; the family portraits staring glumly from mantle and bureau (there's one of 8-year-old Tom in Lord Fauntleroy curls); the kitchen shelves jammed with preserves; the bedrooms with their Spartan iron beds.

After his death in 1938, many of the writer's belongings, including his battered typewriter, baggy suits, and a fading photo of his lover, Aline Bernstein, were brought to Asheville from his last New York apartment. The house is open daily.

Wolfe is buried in Riverside Cemetery, near the resting place of another famous story teller, William Sidney Porter (O. Henry).

WITH A POPULATION of about 125,000, Asheville presides over the southern end of the Blue Ridge Parkway, the 470-mile scenic highway that traverses the mountainous spines of Virginia and North Carolina. The city is an excellent launching place for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Mt. Mitchell (highest peak east of the Rockies), Chimney Rock, Grandfather Mountain, and resort villages like Brevard, Highlands, Caters and Franklin.

For further information: Asheville Convention Bureau, 151 Haywood St., Asheville, N.C. 28802.



Writer Tom Wolfe's monument in stone is set in Riverside Cemetery.

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