

Where to safely see the fall leaves in Western NC

BY MAE LACKEY
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For Western North Carolina, October is typically prime “leaf season,” when visitors flock to see the vibrant transformation of fall foliage into warm, striking hues.

Two weeks ago, however, Hurricane Helene devastated the region — destroying homes, closing schools and roads, and leaving thousands without power or cell service.

Many spots that would normally see a surge of tourists this time of year are not only recovering from the storm’s aftermath but are also struggling due to the drop in visitors.

- North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper told the Asheville Citizen-Times on Oct. 3 that tourists are not welcome in Western North Carolina, and he only wants dedicated response efforts coming into the region.
- A Visit North Carolina advisory warns against coming to the area, citing continued risks of “landslides, slope failures, downed trees and road closures.”
- And on Wednesday, Oct. 9, NC Department of Transportation Secretary Joey Hopkins said 600 roads remain closed in the area, The News & Observer reported. “Non-essential traffic is hindering our efforts to get roads opened back up. Crews are having to stop work to allow traffic to pass through damaged areas. To help us get roads open, cleared and open as fast as possible, we again ask that traffic use alternative routes,” he said.

To safely reach the towns that are unaffected and cautiously welcoming visitors, it might mean driving a long way around in some cases.

[13 state parks closed in Western NC after Hurricane Helene. Estimated reopening timeline.]

How to get there: Traditionally, people traveling from the eastern part of the state could take Interstate 40 to many of these places. But with I-40 closed after Helene, that’s not an option. It’s also best to avoid taking local roads that are too close to the damaged towns — save those roads for local traffic, people bringing in aid and emergency care.

NC DOT has posted a detour map you can consult when planning your route. Drivenc.gov has

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SCOTT SHARPE: The News & Observer

Vibrant fall foliage covers a mountainside overlooking a small farm in the Matney community in western Watauga County near Boone in 2023.

Boone still recovering post-Helene, but fall visitors welcome

BY HEIDI FINLEY
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As Western North Carolina recovers from the devastation of Hurricane Helene, many restaurants and small businesses who rely on tourism dollars during the fall foliage travel season are struggling.

While major roadwork will be underway for the foreseeable future and the North Carolina Department of Transportation has called for essential travel only in the region, some towns are now accessible and cautiously welcoming back travelers.

We’re taking a look at various Western North Carolina towns to consider visiting with safety in mind, as well as support for those who rely on tourism for their livelihoods.

Here is what you need to know about traveling to Boone in the near future.

IS TRAVEL TO BOONE SAFE?

While Boone remains under a state of emergency declaration, the town is also finding some return to normalcy, too. Appalachian State University has resumed classes, and visitors are slowly beginning to return.

David Jackson, president and

CEO of the Boone Area Chamber of Commerce, said via Instagram that as those visitors make their way to Boone, they should be mindful of the destruction that took place.

“As we continue the careful return of students and visitors to our area over the days and weeks ahead, it is important to understand that you aren’t coming back to the same community you saw just a few weeks ago,” Jackson said.

“While some areas have restored their infrastructure and ability to operate quickly, other areas throughout Watauga County and the High Country region are still deeply involved in recovery efforts, and will be for quite some time.”

Jackson added, “Please be respectful and pack plenty of grace and patience,” in a similar statement on the Boone area Chamber of Commerce website.

HOW TO GET TO BOONE

- Boone is accessible from Charlotte via I-85 North to U.S. 321 North, as well as via I-77 North to U.S. 421 North. From Raleigh or Durham, take I-40 West to U.S. 421 North. (Note: I-40 West is indefinitely closed past the

Maggie Valley interchange, but traffic flowing east from Asheville has reopened.)

- Main roadways, including U.S. 421 South/W. King Street in downtown Boone, are open for travel.
- Many secondary roads are undergoing repairs, and lane closures and detours remain in place, especially along NC Hwy 105 and U.S. Hwy 421 North toward the Tennessee line. Stay on primary routes and follow posted advisories.

CAN I STAY IN BOONE?

- Many hotels and lodging facilities are filled with displaced families, aid workers and repair crews. Explore Boone recommends visitors consider making a day trip to support local shops, restaurants and businesses, adding: “Thank you for your understanding and for helping us prioritize those most in need.”

WHAT RESTAURANTS ARE OPEN IN BOONE?

Restaurants in Boone may be operating on limited hours and menus. Here are a few local

spots to check out:

Betty’s Biscuits

Location: 640 West King Street, Boone, NC 28604

Betty’s Biscuits serves up savory and sweet biscuits, plus bowls and plates, using ingredients from local farms and purveyors. Its biscuits can also be ordered by the dozen — with jam, butter or gravy — packed up in boxes to go. For now, hours are 9 a.m.-noon with a limited menu. Gift cards and store merchandise are available online, too.

Black Cat Burrito

Location: 127 S. Depot St., Boone, NC 28607

Black Cat Burrito has resumed normal hours and is open in downtown Boone from Tuesday-Saturday, 11:30 a.m.-9 p.m. Of course, you’ll find a variety of burritos there. (It is in the name, after all.) But there are also tacos, enchiladas, loaded fries and salad.

F.A.R.M. Cafe

Location: 617 W King St, Boone, NC 28607

In addition to making meals to donate to community members, F.A.R.M. Cafe is open for lunch Monday-Friday, 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Items on the menu include breakfast burritos, soups, salads and desserts. Vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, dairy-free and nut-free options are available.

Gamekeeper

Location: 3005 Shulls Mill Rd, Boone, NC 28607

Gamekeeper, a fine dining restaurant in the mountains between Boone and Blowing Rock, has reopened for dinner service Wednesday-Sunday from 5-9 p.m. Reservations are required for its “adventurous”

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Neon/TNS

Mark Eydelshiteyn, left, and Mikey Madison star in “Anora.”

MOVIE REVIEW

‘Anora’ a rollicking, wild bender of an adventure

BY KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service

Over the course of his career, filmmaker Sean Baker has delivered intimate films of humanity and connection that take place in the nooks and crannies of society: the places that are often the most overlooked, economically, socially and cinematically. He’s made movies about

friendship, family and even cautionary tales, but his Palme d’Or-winning “Anora” is his first true-blue love story.

Or so it seems. Like any Baker film, “Anora” is not so easy to define, not a pat genre piece, no straightforward happy endings in sight. But it does deliver the experience of falling in love, as we fall in love with Ani (Mikey Madison), our plucky protagonist (and the title character),

and in love with “Anora” itself, a rollicking, wild bender of an adventure from the beaches of Coney Island to the desert sands of Las Vegas and back again.

Ani (short for Anora) knows her worth. An exotic dancer at a New York City strip club, the Brooklyn beauty hustles lap dances on the floor and has a price for extracurricular sex work (holiday rates are higher) — she’s an independent contractor

Anora

★★★★

Cast: Mikey Madison, Mark Eydelshiteyn, Karren Karagulian, Vache Tovmasyan, Yura Borisov

Director: Sean Baker

MPA rating: R for strong sexual content throughout, graphic nudity, pervasive language, and drug use

Running time: 2 hours 19 minutes

How to watch: In select theaters Oct. 18 and nationwide Nov. 1

after all. When Ivan Zakharov (Mark Eydelshiteyn), the spoiled young son of a Russian oligarch she’s been seeing, proposes a weeklong “girlfriend experience,” she negotiates a larger sum. When he actually proposes to her, in a heap of rumpled bed sheets during a weekend partying in Sin City, she accepts by pointing at her ring finger: “three carats.”

The whirlwind romance that makes up the first half of “Anora” plays out like a Gen Z “Pretty Woman,” and money is always on their mind, the relationship never not transactional. When Ani marries Ivan, she gets a Russian sable coat and crashing privileges in his Brighton Beach mansion, while he gets a

green card, and to give the middle finger to his parents.

Baker presents this version of a Cinderella story in a heady, dizzying, almost absurdist montage of conspicuous consumption (and consummation), which comes to a screeching halt as soon as Ivan’s parents catch wind of the happy union. They dispatch their local Armenian fixer, Toros (Karren Karagulian), who enlists his brother Garnick (Vache Tovmasyan) and their hired muscle Igor (Yura Borisov) to deliver the couple to a judge to get an annulment. When Ivan makes a run for it, “Pretty Woman” turns into “After Hours,” as Ani and the heavies set off across southern Brooklyn looking for him.

Despite the comparisons, “Anora” is a Baker project through and through, and not just because it’s a film about a sex worker, a theme to which he often returns in his oeuvre. “Anora” boasts the profane, screwball humor of “Red Rocket” and “Tangerine,” the tenderness of “Starlet,” and the unique ensemble of “The Florida Project.” It’s hilarious, but it finds humor in the heightened situations, never making a joke at the expense of the characters.

Like in other Baker films, these characters are defined by their economic circumstances, both the workers — including sex workers and fixers, but also

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