

# America's Largest Home



by Alexandra Edwards

One of the greatest things about living in this neck of the woods is that we are surrounded by some of this nation's most beautiful National Forests. From the Smokies to the Blue Ridge Mountains, winding scenic highways lead through the Appalachians to some internationally renowned destinations. Popular tourist attractions like Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge, Cades Cove TN, Cherokee, Highlands, and Asheville, NC, are all within easy driving distance.

Those like myself that regularly have out of town friends and relatives come to visit, have no trouble deciding on a trip that will not only entertain them, but at the same time show nature's amazing beauty at it's best.

Among the most intriguing places visited is Biltmore Estates in Asheville, North Carolina.

Biltmore House, America's largest home, sits on 8,000 acres amidst the most spectacular views of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The 250 room Renaissance-style chateau was erected in 1895 for George Washington Vanderbilt, son of railroad tycoon William Henry Vanderbilt and grandson of Cornelia Vanderbilt, one of the richest families in the world. Architect Richard Morris Hunt designed the Vanderbilt house to resemble many famous chateau's in France, with an irregular roof line and a multitude of windows, balconies, terraces, chimneys, towers, and spires in order to match the scale of the surrounding mountains.

Biltmore house was the primary residence of

George Vanderbilt until his death in 1914. His wife Edith and daughter Cornelia continued living in the house until Cornelia's marriage to John Francis Amehurst Cecil in 1924. Cornelia took possession of Biltmore estate in 1925 as stipulated in her father's will.

The Cecil's entertained frequently at Biltmore during the roaring twenties living a glamorous lifestyle. During the great depression, Asheville town leaders suggested Cornelia and John open Biltmore house to the public to en-



George Washington Vanderbilt

courage tourism. On March 15, 1930, America's largest house, filled with fine furnishings, paintings, antiques, rare books and priceless art from around the world was opened to the public.

During the opening ceremony Cornelia Cecil said, "Mr Cecil and I hope that through the opening of Biltmore House to the public, Asheville and Western North Carolina will derive all the benefit they deserve and the people who go through the house will get as much pleasure and enjoyment out of it as Mr. Cecil and I do in making it possible. I also want to say that we both feel that in doing this, it is a fitting memorial to my father. After all, it was his life's work and creation."

Biltmore Estates in Asheville, NC



As Asheville soon became a major tourist attraction and today Biltmore Estates attracts almost a million visitors a year.

Although possible to visit on a day trip, because of the size of Biltmore House and the many interesting attractions that surround the property, an overnight stay is highly recommended.

Tickets are purchased at the visitor's center where the day can be planned to suit each individual's needs.

As all the attractions of Biltmore Estates are several miles apart from each other,

it is necessary to drive to each destination. Visitors are given a map of the entire estate to decide which trail they need to follow.

Guided tours of the house begin each hour and the option of a digital audio guide is also available for an extra \$8. The informative tour gives a glimpse into the life of the Vanderbilt's, their personalities and family traditions.

Each Christmas, employees of Biltmore and their families were invited to the massive banquet hall with a huge triple fireplace where gifts would be given to all the children present.

Each lavish room seems to tell a story. For late nineteenth century, Biltmore house had some very modern conveniences including a 53'x 27'x 81/2' indoor swimming pool with original underwater lighting, a gymnasium which contains what was once state of the art fitness equipment, and it's own bowling alley.

Surrounding the house are numerous gardens and a conservatory well worth exploring, they include an Italian garden, shrub garden and esplanade inspired by the gardens of a 17th century French chateau.

Follow the trails to River Bend Farm to a historic barn with informative exhibits of antique farm equipment and tools

used that reveal Biltmore's past. Visit the farmyard and the kitchen garden and learn which animals were



John and Cornelia Cecil

used for meat and which vegetables were grown to feed the families that lived on the estate. The stables at the Deerpark area are also worth a visit. Carriage rides and guided trail rides are available with advanced reservations.

For those who love wine, the Biltmore Winery is a must. A good chance to learn about the art of wine making begins with an informative film, a tour of

the bottling room and wine cellars and ending at the tasting room where visitors have the chance to sample some of Biltmore's finest wines. Check with the visitor center for times of special wine tasting tours including the pairing of red wines with dark chocolate or wine and cheese. Afterwards you can select your favorite wine from the tasting at the wine shop.

Various good restaurants and cafe's are scattered around Biltmore estates and Biltmore village and of course, wherever there's plenty of interested tourists, there are also plenty of interesting shops.

Before leaving the luxurious properties of Biltmore Estates, take a peek around Biltmore village, at the cottages, businesses and church created by George Vanderbilt for the needs and supplies of his estate. A long time member of the church, Marie Louise Boyer wrote of Vanderbilt, "He was an ardent student of theology as well as

a deeply religious man. He aimed to benefit those who were in physical and mental need, hence he erected the church he named 'All Souls.' In order that the sittings might be free and the offerings made at it's services devoted solely to missionary and charitable purposes, he defrayed all expenses connected with the maintenance of the church until the time of his death."

Lifestyles of the rich and famous a century ago seem to have been a lot less self centered than those of the Hollywood bunch today.

For directions and more information on Biltmore Estates, call 800-543-2961 or visit [www.biltmore.com](http://www.biltmore.com).



Banquet Hall in Biltmore Estates