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Crazy About Winchester

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You could lose a whole day in Winchester, Va., looking for Patsy Cline's grave marker. Unlike Jim Morrison in Paris or Elvis in Memphis, Patsy's burial ground is no shrine. No graffiti, no eternal flames. No lines of weeping tourists. Her stone is as flat as all the others at Shenandoah Memorial Park, engraved simply with her husband's family name, Dick.

As I peered closer I found her name, Virginia Patterson Hensley, and below that, in parentheses and smaller type, almost as an afterthought, Patsy Cline. Two fresh, muddy graves nearby tell you this is a working cemetery, and as I stood there among the dead in the autumn sunlight a woman stepped out of a car, walked right past me, knelt near a stone just five feet away, brushed off some dirt, then held her head and began to cry.

It was time to go.

This story perhaps serves as metaphor for a weekend in Winchester, a working town where people live and work and love and, yes, die, that just happens to be a great weekend escape from Washington. Winchester, 60 miles west of the Beltway and 15 miles north of Shenandoah National Park, is not necessarily quaint or pastoral, but offers much in history, accommodations and fine dining.

People mostly come to Winchester for the Civil War (first) and Patsy Cline (second). To those I would add the area's B&Bs and inns and a dozen or so good-to-better restaurants, including L'Auberge Provencale, which has been featured on PBS's "Great Chefs of the East."

Brochures claim thousands of visitors for the area's festivals, nine of which surround the topic of apples (more than 40 orchards in Winchester-Frederick County account for roughly half of the state's apple trees). But I was disappointed by the recent Apple Harvest Arts & Crafts Festival -- 163 vendors, only two of whom sold anything related to the apple. Rather, I found miles of door wreaths decorated with paper leaves and plastic acorns.

I recommend Winchester's historical side. In one day you can take two very different tours. The first consists of three areas: Stonewall Jackson's Confederate headquarters from November 1861 to March 1862; George Washington's office, where he worked one year as a young man and helped design Fort Loudoun to

protect the Virginia frontier from the French and Indians; and Abram's Delight, the oldest house in town, built in 1754. None offers the historical or military drama of, say, Fort Sumter, in Charleston, S.C. -- no booming cannons, or shots heard 'round the world here.

But the intense, well-educated tour guides make it worthwhile. They will take you through the buildings one-on-one, peppering their monologues with strings of details: George Washington actually had red hair under that wig, stood about 6 foot 1 (very tall for that era) and weighed around 180 pounds. You'll learn what a dummkopf really is, that the phrase "sleep tight" may have come from rope box springs, and that Jackson died from something we now call "friendly fire."

Winchester, the first settlement of the American frontier west of the Blue Ridge, changed hands 72 times during the Civil War, acting as Union and Confederate headquarters. A gift shop in the old downtown area occupies the building that briefly housed Gen. Sheridan's Union headquarters.

The second tour -- if you can call it that -- consists of driving and walking past Patsy Cline landmarks: her childhood home; Gaunt's Drug Store, where she worked as a teenager; G&M Music, where she made several recordings. A brochure, available at the tourism center, lists 10 places associated with the country singer whose song, "I Fall to Pieces," hit No. 1 in 1962. You won't find signs that say "Patsy Slept Here." Without the brochure, you'd drive right by her house, in the poorer section of town and currently occupied. In the whole town, her name appears only twice, Patsy Cline Memorial Highway and Patsy Cline Boulevard.

But don't fall to pieces over Patsy's forgotten past. At dinner and again at breakfast, when the local servers kindly asked about my day, I mentioned my tours of the Civil War museums. In both places the response was the same: "Civil War museums?"

WAYS & MEANS

GETTING THERE: Winchester is 60 miles west of the Beltway near the intersection of U.S. 50 and I-81. Take I-66 west to 50 west (a slow trip, as bedroom communities, strip malls and heavy traffic now stretch well past Dulles). A faster, more pastoral route: Stay on I-66 to U.S. 17 north.

BEING THERE: Visit the Winchester-Frederick County Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center at 1360 S. Pleasant Valley Rd. (1-800-662-1360, <http://www.winchesterva.org>) for free brochures, maps and advice. A combination ticket for the three historical sites costs \$7.50 and is available at any of the sites. You can also simply walk around town. Loudoun Street is the heart of Old Town Winchester. There's a parking lot off Braddock Street. The Kurtz Cultural Center at 2 N. Cameron St. (540-722-6367) has a permanent exhibit, "Shenandoah, Crossroads of the Civil War," an overview of the battles, commanders and the

strategic importance of the valley. For a hot-air balloon ride, call Island Balloons (1-800-891-3555). And 10 wineries are within an hour of Winchester; pick up the brochure at the visitor center.

WHERE TO STAY: There are lots of chain hotels along I-81, plus several well-known inns and B&Bs. We stayed in the five-room River House (540-837-1476, doubles \$90 to \$145). A few miles east of Winchester off U.S. 50, this B&B is one of the few such places that allows kids under 10, and several people told me it's their favorite. The owners have lived in the house for 30 years. The Ashby Inn (540-592-3900, doubles \$100 to \$190) in Paris, Va., serves dinner and brunch and has six rooms in the main house, four in the adjacent School House. Farther east in White Post is the well-known L'Auberge Provencale, a 14-room French country inn and restaurant (1-800-638-1702, doubles \$145 to \$250). About 15 minutes south on U.S. 11, the equally romantic Inn at Vacluse Spring (1-800-869-0525, doubles \$135 to \$215) has 12 rooms spread over four buildings nestled on more than 100 rolling acres with a spring-fed pond and stream.

WHERE TO EAT: Vivian's Country Cookin' (540-667-7612) is where the locals dine. The radio played "Chattanooga Choo Choo" and people talked about shoeing horses while we waited for freshly baked bread lightly toasted, freshly sliced ham and apple jelly. Violino (540-667-8006), a northern Italian restaurant just down the street, offered excellent food and professional but very warm service. A violinist strolled around terrace tables while we sampled calamari, fish cooked in puff pastry and a trio of braised beef, lamb and pork served with shiitake mushrooms and gnocchi. Other dining choices include the Ashby Inn, L'Auberge Provencale and, Saturdays only, the Inn at Vacluse Spring (see where to stay); Coalie Harry's (540-665-0616), an Irish pub; One Block West (540-662-1455), a newer restaurant; Tucano (540-722-4557), family-run, Brazilian; and Cafe Sophia (540-667-2950), family-run, Bulgarian-Slavic.