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**Tallyho:** A pack of frenzied foxhounds prepares for a hunt in Winchester, Virginia.

## ROAD TRIP

# Retreat to Hunt Country

Virginia's historic horse region boasts Civil War landmarks, walkable villages, and local cuisine. | **By KATIE KNOROVSKY**

**T**HE OLD GUARD of Washington, D.C., has long retreated to the hills of rural northern Virginia—horses and hounds in tow. But long before it became a playground to the well-heeled likes of Jackie O., horse and hunt country was the embattled site of a string of Civil War clashes led by rebel John Mosby.

Next year officially kicks off the five-year-long Civil War sesquicentennial. Travelers who come to poke around historic battlefields and cemeteries might be in for a surprising twist: The area has never felt more alive, with a sparkling array of lively hamlets, postcard-perfect wineries, chic boutiques, upscale eateries, and world-class museums.

"We like to say that if Mosby and his Rangers came back to Middleburg or Upperville, they would know exactly where they were," says Childs Burden, a longtime local and board member of the Mosby Heritage Area Association. "Many of the old roads and most of the stone walls are exactly the same; the landmarks are recognizable through time."

The area makes a convenient day or weekend trip from Washington, D.C.,

but a more charming route zigzags from Winchester—which is about 70 miles northwest of D.C. at the tip-top of the Shenandoah Valley—east through Middleburg and on to Leesburg. As you meander along the drive's bucolic country roads, listen carefully for the whispers of ghosts—as well as the buzz of new life.

**ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS** Get your bearings in Winchester, famous as Patsy Cline's birthplace and for its Civil War significance.

"Winchester was a huge crossroads during the war: It changed hands 72 times," explains local historian Ben Ritter. More area history is on display at the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley ([www.shenandoahmuseum.org](http://www.shenandoahmuseum.org)), a polished trove

of regional lore, antiques, fine art, and ornately detailed and furnished miniature houses. The contemporary brick museum, which was designed by star architect Michael Graves, sits on the manicured grounds of the historic Glen Burnie House. The complex is surrounded by six acres of elegant gardens that are set ablaze with Siberian irises each May and 350 rose bushes by late June.



**TAKE A HIKE** Head southeast from Winchester on Rte. 50, once a buffalo trail and surveyed by George Washington in the 1760s to become the country's first incorporated turnpike. After 17 miles, take Winchester Road south one-and-a-half-miles to 1,862-acre Sky Meadows State Park ([www.dcr.virginia.gov](http://www.dcr.virginia.gov)), where you can stretch your legs on 14 hiking trails—or your horse's legs on two bridle loops—and access the Appalachian Trail. Watch for red-headed woodpeckers that roost in a deadwood grove near the visitors center.

**SEE A HORSE SHOW** Back on Rte. 50, continue east to tiny Upperville. It is home to Trinity Episcopal Church, known for its cobblestone courtyard and pint-size standalone lending library (said to be the nation's smallest). Locals congregate at Hunter's Head Tavern, a farm-to-table pub serving organic shepherd's pie. Check out the jowly (and faux) foxhunter's head mounted on the wall—the animal-loving proprietor's wry reply to the area's sporting tradition. A mile past town are the private grounds of the Upperville Colt & Horse Show ([www.upperville.com](http://www.upperville.com)), which dates to 1853 (and set for June 7-13 in 2010). Held on the manicured grass ring on Salem Farm, the show's marquee event is Sunday afternoon's grand finale Jumper Classic (\$100,000 prize), which you can watch from the surrounding hillsides.

**BRIDGE CROSSING** As troops headed toward Gettysburg in 1863, a minor Civil War battle broke out around Goose Creek Bridge,



**Divine diversions:** Stop along the way for a self-guided tour of the formal gardens at Glen Burnie and classic crème brûlée (left) at Magnolias.





an early 19th-century four-arch bridge that endures as one of Virginia's last standing stone turnpike bridges. Peek at this modest bridge from Rte. 50 or pull off the road and walk across the historic overpass.

**MEANDER MIDDLEBURG** Once you reach Middleburg, Rte. 50 slows to become Washington Street, a boutique- and café-lined main artery. Considered the official capital of horse and hunt country, tourist-friendly Middleburg welcomes visitors with a small-town—but decidedly upper-crust—embrace. Grab a bowl of creamy peanut soup at the cozy, stone-walled Red Fox Inn ([www.redfox.com](http://www.redfox.com)), America's oldest established inn and a favorite dining spot of the First Lady during John F. Kennedy's presidency. The building's core dates to 1728; during the Civil War, the restaurant's bar served as a makeshift surgery table.

Stroll up and down Washington Street to browse a range of regional artifacts, from Staffordshire porcelains and elegant colonial-era silver at the Middleburg Antique Emporium ([www.middleburgantiqueemporium.com](http://www.middleburgantiqueemporium.com)) to vintage couture cocktail dresses at Timmie Jane ([www.timmiejane.com](http://www.timmiejane.com)). Try on a pair of consignment riding boots at the Middleburg Tack Exchange ([www.middleburgtack.com](http://www.middleburgtack.com)); outfit your hound with a smart tartan fleece from Wylie Wagg ([www.wyliewagg.com](http://www.wyliewagg.com)); and sip local and European wines at the Tasting Room ([www.thetastingroomwinebar.com](http://www.thetastingroomwinebar.com)), a sleek self-serve wine bar owned by nearby Boxwood Winery. Its high-tech chrome

**“The building's core dates to 1728; during the Civil War, the restaurant's bar served as a makeshift surgeon's table.”**

dispensers let oenophiles sample one-, three-, or five-ounce pours at their leisure.

**HORSES AND FARMS** Back on Rte. 50, drive five miles east to the restored Aldie Mill ([www.nvrpa.org/parks/aldiemill](http://www.nvrpa.org/parks/aldiemill)), which supplied grain to Civil War troops and is Virginia's only remaining gristmill powered by tandem waterwheels. Open only on weekend afternoons April–November, the mill offers tours and grinding demos. Double back one mile on Rte. 50 to the Snickersville Turnpike (Rte. 734), an old-timey road that bounces northwest past a steady stream of barns and colonial estate farms, each flanked by hand-painted signs denoting their name. Admire thoroughbreds grazing behind stone walls. Roughly eight miles along Rte. 734, make a pit stop at the 1913 Philomont General Store, a shop from a bygone era, where locals pick up wine made in nearby vineyards and gab at the post office cached in back.

**DINE IN A MILL** Just past Bluemont, Snickersville Turnpike meets Rte. 7. Turn right onto Rte. 7 and head east toward Leesburg. As you approach Purcellville, swing off on business Rte. 7 then turn left at 21st Street to find Magnolias at the Mill ([www.magnoliasmill.com](http://www.magnoliasmill.com)), a rustic-chic restaurant

**Verdant valley:** Sunset Hills Vineyard (left) in Purcellville allows picnicking on its pastoral grounds, or you can dine on Virginia country ham and grits at the Red Fox Inn (below) in Middleburg.



housed in a refurbished grain mill and offering stone-fired pizza, fried green tomatoes, buttermilk onion rings, and local wines. It marks the end of the 45-mile, bicyclist-heavy Washington & Old Dominion rail trail, so don't be surprised to dine among cyclists refueling on the patio.

**STROLL THE GARDEN** Continue on Rte. 7 east roughly ten miles, then turn south on Rte. 15 for six miles, where you'll see a sign for the gracious grounds of the Oatlands Plantation ([www.oatlands.org](http://www.oatlands.org)), a sprawling former wheat plantation founded in 1804. Just before the Civil War broke out, Oatlands owned 128 slaves, the most in the county. History came full circle a few years ago: John Buchanan, Jr., a descendant of an Oatlands slave, tied the knot at the National Historic Landmark, now a popular wedding spot with its cheery yellow Greek Revival mansion and formal, four-acre terraced garden. Visitors without nuptials on the agenda can walk the tree-canopied grounds or join a half-hour guided tour of the antiques-filled mansion. ■

