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Eureka Springs: Where to eat, shop, sleep and see a show

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By Jason Sheeler / Photos by Ken Rundel

Growing up halfway between [Little Rock](#) and Texarkana, I would often hear stories about our more liberal neighbors in Arkansas' upper-left corner. Especially those in the Victorian village of Eureka Springs.

"Oh, you don't want to go up there," my grandmother warned me during my senior year of high school, "nothin' but hippies and homosexuals."

I was flooring it past our dry county's line by sunset.

There is, of course, more than tie-dye and swish in Eureka – a nine-hour drive from Dallas or one-hour flight into Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport. Founded in 1879 largely on the promise of the healing waters that bubble up from local Basin Spring, the mountainside town now boasts a quirky and cluttered downtown area, its steep and winding streets filled with coffeehouses, art galleries and groovy gingerbread houses turned restaurants and bed and breakfasts.

All of which makes it cute for honeymooners, RVing seniors and Passion Play theatergoers in town to witness Jesus' last days. Eureka Springs also holds more sophisticated charms. In addition to being designated one of 12 distinctive destinations by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the town also boasts a modern wonder, Thorncrown Chapel (above). The nondenominational worship center, designed by Arkansan E. Fay Jones and based on Paris' Sainte-Chapelle cathedral, opened in 1980 with soaring wooden trusses, 6,000 square feet of glass and 425 windows. Get this: The American Institute of Architecture placed Thorncrown fourth on the group's Top 10 Buildings of the 20th Century.



Lodging options include any number of B&Bs and the historic, castle-like Crescent Hotel. Or have a quieter Ozark experience at the Anedodi Lodge (left), about an hour away. Billed as a "luxury eco-lodge" with recycled tile, bamboo bedding, rainfall showers and headboards that appear locally



grown, the three-bedroom lake house offers crazy beautiful views of Lake Norfolk and the surrounding mountains. The isolated, cedar-clad retreat sits on a steep hill, with two levels of decks and terraced steps leading to a heated pool. The house is set up for groups (pingpong table, a comprehensive Blu-ray catalog), and so are the prices. Weekly rates are \$2,500 until May 29, when high season starts and prices double.

Among the Eureka Springs residents with North Texas ties is the mayor and TCU grad Dani Joy, and Dallas-based interior designer John Phifer MARRS, who keeps a second home on nearby Beaver Lake. "These days, I can't wait to get back," says MARRS, a native Arkansan. "It's just magical to me. The four distinct seasons, the natural terrain, the artists It's really this microcosm of a large city on a small scale."

MARRS' cozy three-bedroom – christened Camp Laughing Bear, how Bruce Weber is that? – is furnished with weekend naps in mind and featured, along with his more formal Bluffview digs, in *Designers Here and There* (The Monacelli Press, \$50), out this month.

"There's an energy here that I can't explain," says MARRS, who suggests parking the car and just walking or using the trolley. "And bring comfortable shoes."

Eureka! John Phifer MARRS shares his Victorian secrets

See John eat

"When I'm downtown, I take friends for coffee, muffins or a good ol' breakfast to **Mud Street Cafe** (22G S. Main St., 479-253-6732, mudstreetcafe.com)." Lunch is usually the "very local" **Sparky's Roadhouse Cafe** (147 E. Van Buren St., 479-253-6001, sparkysroadhouse.com), where MARRS goes for burgers, shakes and the establishment's 99 available beers. Speaking of drinking, **Dr. Baker's Lounge** at the top of the 1886 Crescent Hotel and Spa (75 Prospect Ave., 479-253-9766, crescent-hotel.com), provides views of the mountains, the hotel's old-school rose gardens and Eureka's Christ of the Ozarks statue. Dinner is just a few blocks away at local fave **Ermilio's** (26 White St., 479-253-8806, ermilios.com). "It's in a lovely old house but be prepared to wait on the porch. There's always a line – that lasagna is really good." MARRS recommends two steak places "as good as any place in Dallas. I like **Gaskins Cabin Steakhouse** (2883 Highway 23 North, 479-253-5466, gaskinscabin.com) because they have a full bar." **The Horizon Restaurant** (304 Mundell Road off 187, Holiday Island, 479-253-5525), where he always has the filet, "hangs on a cliff right on the lake, with outdoor dining. It's worth the 20-minute drive for the sunset. And, by the way, the gorgeous Thorncrown Chapel is on the way."

See John shop

"Surprisingly enough for this jaded Dallas designer," says MARRS in mock deprecation, "this little hippie town has some very sophisticated shops." Two favorites he's used to decorate his own Eureka home, as well as some of his Dallas clients, **Vintage Cargo** (41 Kings Highway, 479-253-5943, vintagecargo.net), in the renovated, 4,000-square-foot Eureka Medical Clinic, offers English Empire canopy beds, Jan Barboglio tableware, Vietri cast-brass lamps and guardian angels. MARRS purchased his porch furniture at **Something Simple** (107 E. Van Buren St., 479-253-2068,

[somethingsimpleonline.com](#)), a Victorian house filled exclusively with cream and white – "seriously, everything is white" – wicker and slipcovered furniture, glass bottles, painted metal stars and kooky found-object assemblages.

"And obviously," Marrs says, "there are tons of art galleries. I've bought oil paintings and several engravings at **Eurekan Art Studio & Shop** (150 N. Main St., 479-253-0928) but the fun thing to do is to get out and look."

Fashion isn't a Eureka industry, but former costume designer Mark Hughes has a thriving boutique and online business. **Regalia** (99 Spring St., 479-253-2202, [regaliahandmade.com](#)) offers comfortable, natural fiber clothing with a look, Hughes says, "at the intersection of Flax and Eileen Fisher."

See John clap

"There's an opera," Marrs says, laughing. "It sounds so funny that you would go to Eureka for opera." He pauses for effect, letting the idea of the area's **Opera in the Ozarks** (16311 Highway 62 West, 479-253-8595, [opera.org](#)) hang in the air. "You can hear a different opera on Friday and Saturday nights," during the company's regular season, mid-June through mid-July.

Eureka embraces the creative year-round, but goes full-on this month with the **May Festival of the Arts** ([mayfestivalofthearts.com](#)), with live music, gallery walks, chili cook-offs and the highly festive Artrageous Parade. "And of course you've got **The Great Passion Play**," Marrs remembers, referring to the seasonal Christian theatrical production (935 Passion Play Road, 479-253-9200, [www.greatpassionplay.com](#)) that re-creates the last 10 days of Christ's life.

If your taste runs to camp, Marrs gleefully reports, "they show Bette Davis movies and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* on the side of the Basin Spring Bath House building" at the **Lucky 13 Starlight Cinema** (1 N. Main St., 479-981-1135, [lucky13cinema.org](#)), otherwise known as a parking lot. Beware: costumes are encouraged.

See John sleep

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When Marrs' lake house is full, he sends guests to **The 1886 Crescent Hotel and Spa** (left; 75 Prospect Ave., 479-253-9766, [crescent-hotel.com](#))

"It's a grand hotel at the top of the hill, and supposedly haunted." Indeed, the nearly 125-year-old hotel offers ghost tours during which you may meet, um, residents of the former girls' school and hospital. Marrs enjoys the hotel's lounge "with a big fireplace and quote from Shakespeare carved into the mantel. ... It's not brand new and shiny. It's gently worn, faded elegance. It's like ruined finery. That's not an insult. I've devoted a great

deal of my life to ruined finery."

Eureka teems with Victorian houses turned bed-and-breakfasts. Though Marrs finds most a bit too intimate ("I don't like feeling like I'm sharing a bedroom with the owners"), there are two he recommends. **Peabody House** (7 Armstrong St., 479-253-5376, [eurekaspringspeabody.com](#)) overlooks Eureka and offers "higher-end amenities, larger rooms and touches of whimsy." **The Inn at**

Rose Hall (56 Hillside Ave., 479-253-8035, innatrosehall.com) is, take note, a re-creation of an 1880s Victorian mansion, but what it lacks in authenticity it gains in "modern plumbing, better air-conditioning and, most importantly, large suites with their own bathrooms."