



JUST A REGULAR GUY:
'TRUE GRIT' STAR MATT DAMON LOVES HIS ROLE AS FATHER; PLUS EXPERTS PICK BEST NEW TOYS FOR HOLIDAYS. INSIDE

Christmas is right around the corner

Some local shoppers have lots still to do

By Richard Gould
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HICKORY

There are 13 shopping days left until Christmas and while some early birds have already wrapped up their shopping and holiday preparations, many haven't even begun to prepare.



Fondren

Several shoppers spent their Saturdays shopping at the stores on Union Square.

"We did most of our shopping on Union Square because I hate the Hickory mall," said Megan Fondren, 28, of Hickory. "We're almost done. We've got 12 people on the list this year."



Eller

Local businessman John Eller, 43, of Hickory said he's planning to buy local this year, too.



E. Kincaid

"I haven't started," he said. "My list isn't that big — probably 10 to 15 items. I'll probably knock it out tomorrow. I'm going to keep my shopping local this year."

The local mall is still a prime destination of many holiday shoppers.

"We just came from the mall," said Elissa Kincaid, 45, of Hickory.



YEAR-ROUND TRAVELER

CATAWBA

North Carolina boasts hundreds of destinations



By Larry Clark
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Most folks know where they're bound over the Christmas holiday, but what about the rest of the year?

North Carolina isn't called Variety Vacationland for nothing.

From the mountains to the sea, there are hundreds of enticing places to visit and many interesting people to meet.

Lots of people will hit the highways and byways this holiday, but travel in North Carolina is a year-round experience.

Touring by car or camper, biking, hiking, canoeing, boating and going by rail are ways North Carolinians and out-of-state guests see the sights — natural and man-made — the Old North State has to offer.

You can go on the cheap, or spend big bucks. But the enjoyment factor is always off the chart.

One of the newest attractions is the Carolina Thread Trail, a series of hiking/biking routes that connect a number of counties, including Catawba County.

Access and the views are free. Actually, all you have to do is fuel up and drive for many grand tours.

Of course, the cost of accommodations, dining and admission will vary.

Like it plush, spartan or roughing it? No problem.

Want to pack a sandwich and day trip? Equally easy.

The North Carolina Department of Transportation website is a great place to discover travel opportunities, no matter what time of year.

What you can find:

- "North Carolina Scenic Byways," a book that details 51 picturesque routes for

SEE TRAVEL, A8





PHOTO COURTESY OF CAROLINA THREAD TRAIL

A map (draft that will be updated) shows part of the Thread Trail.

TRAVEL: Route maps, schedules available

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motorists and bicyclists. Go to ncdot.gov/travel/scenic.

- Free maps of established bicycle routes, urban, rural and off-road. Go to ncdot.gov/travel/mappubs/bikemaps.

- Information on the Wildflower Program. Go to www.ncdot.gov.

- Amtrak schedules for those who like to ride the train or want something different. Amtrak has program now where you can take your bicycles to your destination. Cars, too, but

DETAILS

- **For general information**, go to www.ncdot.gov. NCDOT also has a YouTube Channel, and is on Twitter and Facebook.

- **For more on the Carolina Thread Trail**, go to www.carolinathread-trail.org.

those routes are limited. Go to www.bytrain.org.

- The ferry schedule for when you go to the Atlantic coast. Go to www.ncdot.gov/ferry.

- The newest North

Carolina map with descriptions of some destinations. The 2011 map, with urban insets and other features, will be available in January. Go to www.ncdot.org/travel/mappubs/state-transportationmap.

- The NCDOT also has the Driver's Handbook, just in case someone needs a last-minute gift for that special someone who's learning to drive (it does not come with a test car).

Much of the information can be downloaded. Maps, books and videos can also be ordered online.

Like fishing? The water's fine from the Outer Banks to the highest mountain stream.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF N.C. DIVISION OF TRAVEL AND TOURISM



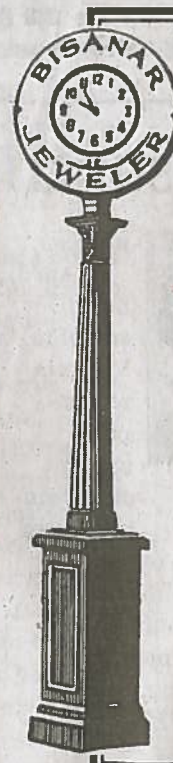
PICTURED FROM PAGE A1: At top, Spencer Shops has old steam engines and much more on railroading; snowboarding at one of the High Country's many ski slopes; and frescoes at Glendale Springs draws many visitors.

BELOW: All is bright in Wilmington over the Christmas holiday; Jumbo treat is the elephants at the N.C. Zoo in Asheboro; and biking along a rural mountain road in autumn.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF N.C. DIVISION OF TRAVEL AND TOURISM



A favorite sight on the coast are the wild ponies, like this one at Shackleford Banks.



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