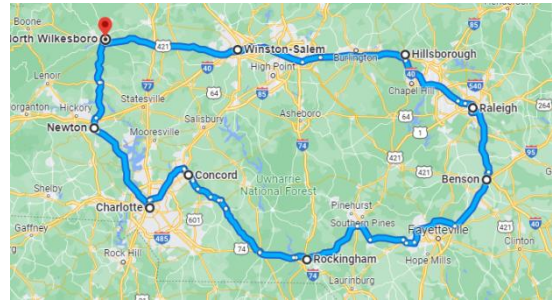


## Where Moonshine and Motorsports Meet

**RALEIGH, N.C.** — Of all the places in [North Carolina](#)'s moonshine and motorsports story, [Wilkes County](#) earns a giant "X" on the map. Here, in the "moonshine capital of the world," local legend Junior Johnson steered a course to fame as a hooch hauler and to victory at North Wilkesboro Speedway, an original NASCAR track that sees its first major action in 26 years as host of the [2023 All-Star Race](#).

If the remarkably revived speedway and Wilkes' legendary stills denote the start of a journey, travelers can build a full itinerary via the state's new [Moonshine and Motorsports Trail](#), developed by the [N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources](#). Between landmarks from history through modern times, the story unfolds with eight sites where markers will be placed.

Travelers can add stops to flavor the trip and to roughly shape the route as a speedway oval with Wilkes as starting point and finish line. A coastal spur takes in the story of Buffalo City, a moonshine capital that became a ghost town. The spirited mix of trail sites includes racetracks, museums, distilleries and cocktail bars plus a reminder to pace yourself as you drive and sample, whether you go the distance or tackle just part of the tour.



### Wilkes County

In the North Carolina foothills, whiskey makers co-opted steam engine technology from the railroads to build stills that produced exceptional 'shine. They delivered their premium hooch in cars re-engineered for speed and nimbleness to help them outrun federal agents. NASCAR was a natural consequence. Exhibits at the [Wilkes Heritage Museum](#) trace the journey, which includes recent moonshine-revenuer reunions.

[North Wilkesboro Speedway](#), a Moonshine and Motorsports Trail site that opened in 1948, fell off NASCAR's list of Cup-worthy tracks in 1996. The speedway returned to action in 2022 with a grassroots [Racetrack Revival](#) championed by NASCAR great Dale Earnhardt Jr., and the event's wild success prompted the All-Star Race decision as part of the association's 75th anniversary celebration. Outside of this main event in May, travelers can check the [speedway website](#) for other events and activities. Another option for action: [Wilkesboro Dragway](#), the state's oldest dragstrip, which opened in 1955.

As for moonshine, the modern spirits quest leads to [Copper Barrel Distillery](#) and [Call Family Distillers](#), owned by the son of the late Willie Clay "The Uncatchable" Call, a bootlegger friend of Junior Johnson. Both distilleries treat tasters to elevated cocktails as well as straight-from-the-bottle pours. Call also displays photos and memorabilia plus modified cars that gave the revenuers a run for their money.

For a different glimpse of moonshine history, drive 25 miles north to [Stone Mountain State Park](#), another trail stop. Known for its 600-foot granite dome and history-rich Hutchinson Homestead, the park was once a choice location for the moonshine trade. Heed the “[Stick to trails](#)” principle and resist temptation to hunt for artifacts.

## **Newton**

Find an off-trail stop in Newton. In 1955, Junior Johnson scored his first Cup victory at [Hickory Motor Speedway](#), a short track that earned the reputation “birthplace of the NASCAR stars” for the wins by Johnson, Lee and Richard Petty, and Ned Jarrett, who like singer Tori Amos was born in Newton. The current race lineup includes the NASCAR Advance Auto Parts Weekly Series.

Tap into spirits history at [South Mountain Distilling](#), just up the road in Connelly Springs. Named for a remote Appalachian remnant, the distillery draws on whiskey and brandy recipes from owner Don Smith’s family, who arrived in the mid-1700s. Book a tour to hear the stories and sample the craftsmanship. In Hickory, make an appointment to tour [Gunpowder Creek Distillery](#) and taste Stillhouse Forty-Four Corn Whiskey and other small-batch spirits.

## **Charlotte**

Permanent ink marks the Queen City’s place on the motorsports map. It was the site of NASCAR’s first Strictly Stock Series race (now the Cup Series) in 1949 and is home of the [NASCAR Hall of Fame](#), part of the Moonshine and Motorsports Trails. Charlotte also anchors a region with a majority of NASCAR’s teams in residence.

The Hall of Fame, which opened in 2010, stands as a must-visit site for entry-level interest, die-hard dedication and everything in between. Among the highlights: a custom-built still from Junior Johnson; storied racecars displayed on [Glory Road](#), a track banked at angles found at speedways; a hands-on pit crew challenge; and a racing simulator with a training center for qualifying.

As for moonshine, craft beverage thrives in Charlotte. While most distillers favor refined spirits, [Great Wagon Road Distilling](#) harnesses moonshine’s raw power in its Drumlish Poteen Carolina Whiskey. Also check cocktail menus for drinks such as the Moscow Muleshine at [The Cowfish](#) or Bramble On at [Midwood Smokehouse](#).

From Charlotte, it’s a 30-mile shot up Interstate 77 to Mooresville, home of the [N.C. Auto Racing Hall of Fame](#), [Memory Lane](#) museum, and race shops including [JR Motorsports](#), [Kyle Busch Motorsports](#) and [Team Penske Retail Store](#). Surrender to the need for speed at the [GoPro Motorplex](#), where NASCAR drivers have been known to take a lap. Keep going to reach Statesville, touted as the “liquor capital of the world” in the 1880s, where [Southern Distilling](#)’s unaged white whiskey whispers “moonshine” from a line of refined spirits. On the return trip, swing by [Joe Gibbs Racing](#) in Huntersville.

## **Concord**

Don’t be misled by the name: [Charlotte Motor Speedway](#) is in Concord, which might be the most motorsports-centric [destination](#) on Earth. Even driving the circumference of the [Concord Mills](#) outlet mall/entertainment complex invokes a speedway oval.

At Charlotte Motor Speedway, race fans fill the stands for the Coca-Cola 600, the Bank of America ROVAL 400 and other NASCAR events. The 2,000-acre complex includes the ZMAX Dragway, the country's only all-concrete, four-lane dragstrip, plus a clay oval for dirt racing. Find your way to the Speedway's quad oval, Victory Lane or the infield with a [tour](#); line up on the [Kart Track](#); or accelerate with a [racing school](#) experience. Prep for a visit to this trail stop by watching "Days of Thunder," "Speedway" and other [projects shot here](#).

Check more race shops off your list at [Hendrick Motorsports](#), [RFK Racing](#) and [Stewart-Haas Racing](#) in neighboring Kannapolis. Find the superstar of automotive movies at the [Mustang Owner's Museum](#), a stellar collection at the [Morrison Motor Car Museum](#), and a motorsports-music mix in Kannapolis at [Curb Motorsports Museum](#), which houses the [N.C Music Hall of Fame](#). The most compelling reason to visit Kannapolis is Dale Earnhardt Plaza in the heart of the hero's hometown. Centerpiece of [The Dale Trail](#), the plaza displays a 9-foot, 900-pound bronze statue that sculptor Clyde Ross Morgan loaded with symbolic touches reflecting the life and career of the supremely popular driver (here's a [cheat sheet](#)).

For a one-of-a-kind moonshine experience, plan a behind-bars tour and tasting at [Southern Grace Distilleries](#), located in a former prison in Mount Pleasant. The line includes the surprisingly smooth 130-proof Sun Dog 130 corn whiskey.

## **Rockingham**

The name might be the [Rockingham Speedway and Entertainment Complex](#), but race fans call it The Rock. A key stop on the Moonshine and Motorsports Trail, it opened in 1965 as the North Carolina Motor Speedway. Junior Johnson drove his last race here in 1966 (he came in fifth). The track's final Cup Series race was 2004's unforgettable Subway 400, which saw driver Carl Young escape unscathed from a wild crash and one of NASCAR's closest finishes with Matt Kenseth beating rookie Kasey Kahne by 0.010 seconds.

The next decade saw action for the track as a test site, location for "Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby" and host of the inaugural Camping World Truck Series race in 2012. Today, The Rock is undergoing a revival and renovation as a venue for racing and other events. Just across U.S. 1, the [Rockingham Dragway](#) maintains a full schedule. Travelers can book an on-track or ride-along [experience](#).

## **Benson**

Wilkes County has Junior Johnson, "The Last American Hero." Johnston County has Percy Flowers, "King of the Moonshiners," who garnered his Saturday Evening Post headline in 1958, seven years before Tom Wolfe rechristened Johnson in Esquire. Miles from the Blue Ridge Mountains, "farmin' in the woods" was a tradition for North Carolina's fertile Coastal Plain.

Jeremy Norris, who traces his moonshiner lineage back five generations, embraces the family craft at [Broadslab Distillery](#) off Interstate 40. At North Carolina's only distillery that grows and harvests the corn that goes into its hand-crafted still, travelers can tour and taste moonshine that was featured on the PBS series "A Chef's Life."

Three miles from Broadslab, get a racing fix at [GALOT Motorsports Park](#), a National Hot Rod Association member. The track, which dates to 1957 (by coincidence the year Percy Flower went to prison), features car shows as well as competitive events.

## Raleigh

In the state capital, find context for moonshine and motorsports heritage at the [N.C. Museum of History](#). The collection at this trail stop includes a No. 3 car driven by Dale “The Intimidator” Earnhardt and a No. 43 car driven by Richard “The King” Petty. On the museum’s third floor, the [N.C. Sports Hall of Fame](#) gets visitors behind the virtual wheel on storied tracks while honoring champion drivers and motorsports movers-and-shakers.

South of downtown, the [Wake County Speedway](#) earned the nickname “America’s favorite bullring” for its tight-cornered quarter-mile track. It hosts NASCAR’s Advance Auto Parts Weekly Series. [On-track experiences](#) are available.

If you want to sample moonshine, Raleigh’s the right neighborhood, starting with [Pinetop Distillery](#), which is served at [Whiskey Kitchen](#) along with other North Carolina brands. Additional culinary destinations for the pursuit of hooch: [MoonRunners Saloon](#) in Garner with more than 40 moonshine options; and the Angus Barn’s [Wild Turkey Lounge](#), where the Troy Manhattan is made with [Troy and Sons](#) Oak Reserve Moonshine from Asheville’s Troy Ball, the country’s first woman to score a whiskey distilling license.

## Hillsborough

Hikers as well as motorsports fans are drawn to the [Occoneechee Speedway](#), the only remaining dirt track from NASCAR’s inaugural 1949 season. On the 44-acre site, preservationists have maintained the 1-mile oval that led to victory for Junior Johnson, Ned Jarrett, and Lee and Richard Petty, who won the track’s final race in 1968. The grandstands at this trail stop remain among the pines and sycamores that enhance the appeal of the Occoneechee Speedway Trail, which offers access to the Eno River and Hillsborough’s [Riverwalk](#) greenway.

Engines continue to roar in nearby Rougemont on the [Orange County Speedway](#), billed as “America’s fastest  $\frac{3}{8}$ -mile race track.” A former Xfinity Series venue, the speedway is known for its 19-degree banked turns and affordable fun.

To add moonshine to the mix, venture to Chapel Hill and [TOPO Organic Distillery](#), the South’s only certified organic and fully local distillery. Its sophisticated line includes Carolina Moonshine Whiskey. Tours are available by appointment, and TOPO spirits are served at [Top of the Hill Restaurant & Brewery](#), TOPO’s sister.

## Winston-Salem

NASCAR history lives it up in a city celebrated for its Moravian roots and tobacco heritage. [Bowman Gray Stadium](#), named for a former R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. president, was NASCAR’s first weekly track. For 33 years (until 2003), the association’s top series carried the name “Winston” by way of title sponsorship promoting the popular RJR cigarette brand, which was better known than the city’s namesake Revolutionary War hero.

The downtown stadium, whose 75th season begins in April 2023 on a newly resurfaced track, ranks as the longest-running NASCAR-sanctioned track. In its Cup Series days, which ended in 1971, winners included Junior Johnson, Lee Petty and son Richard, who claimed his 100th victory on the quarter-mile course. The city-owned stadium, part of the Lawrence Joel Veterans Memorial Coliseum Complex, is also home to Winston-Salem State University's football team (the Rams).

Three miles from the stadium, the [Winston Cup Museum](#) glories in the era with exhibits, photos, and an assortment of cars driven by Dale Earnhardt, Jimmy Spencer, Wendell Scott and others. A well-timed visit might coincide with the monthly Cruise-In with Cars and Coffee.

[Broad Branch Distillery](#) honors moonshine tradition with Nightlab, which is crafted along with other spirits. For a deep dive into spirits history, follow U.S. 421 to [Old Nick Williams Farm & Distillery](#) in Lewisville. There, the owners continue their family's 2½-century-old story with a goal of reclaiming the pre-Prohibition status and worldwide distribution the distillery once enjoyed.

To complete the journey, U.S. 421 leads directly back to North Wilkesboro.

### **Coastal spur**

It's a long haul to the coast from North Carolina's NASCAR heartlands, but the moonshine story will tempt travelers who love history. For the Moonshine and Motorsports trail stop, set your GPS for the Museum of the Albemarle in Elizabeth City for a Buffalo City exhibit.

Buffalo City occupied a marshy expanse on the Albemarle Sound and Alligator River near Manteo. For eight decades after the Civil War, Russian immigrants and Black laborers worked for the Buffalo Timber Co. to harvest juniper, cypress and pine. By the time Prohibition arrived, the woodlands were depleted, and residents turned to moonshine, which was distributed throughout the Eastern United States by the same mules and boats that had transported timber. Prosperity ended with Prohibition's repeal, and the town was abandoned. It's now the [Alligator River Wildlife Refuge](#), a destination for wildlife lovers.

A 90-minute drive connects the refuge and the Museum of the Albemarle. Add motorsports to the mix at [Dixieland Speedway](#) in Elizabeth City, where the ¾-mile dirt oval celebrates its 40th anniversary in 2023, and the [Outer Banks Speedway](#) in Creswell, home of a ¼-mile dragstrip.

For more ideas and inspiration, cruise over to [VisitNC.com](#).