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Travel

NEXT SUNDAY IN TRAVEL

Quito's quite a cool place up in the Andes Mountains. Check out the highlights.



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FOREIGN CORRESPONDENCE



JOHN BORDSEN

Ireland is festive and affordable



Kelly

Marian Kelly, 55, is a native of Dublin, Ireland, who is a tour guide for Brendan Vacations (www.brendanvacations.com). Most groups she leads are tours of up to two weeks, between April and October.

Q. St. Patrick's Day may be wild in New York and Savannah, Ga., but it's traditionally a religious celebration in Ireland. Is that the case?

St. Patrick's Day celebrations have changed over the years. In Dublin, there's a festival that goes on for a whole week, with free concerts and fringe events. It culminates in a parade and fireworks display. It has become a festival where people let down their hair – as well as a religious event.

Q. Other festivals at other times of the year?

Most towns have a festival that celebrates something unique and special to them. Galway City has an arts fest during the summer. There's also the Galway Racing Festival, an oyster festival and other sorts of events.

My favorite is in County Kerry, in a town called Killorglin ("kill-ORG-lan") on the 10th through 12th of August. It's called the Puck Fair, and each day has a name: Gathering Day, Fair Day and Scattering Day. It's a festival that goes to pre-Celtic times: They capture a wild goat – this sounds bizarre but really isn't – and crown him King Puck. He is then paraded up the town and presides over the fair. On Scattering Day, the goat is released into the hills again.

It's a big livestock event, and restaurants and shops are open 24 hours a day.

Q. The goat is released to the wild? Yes.

Q. And nobody tries to recapture it? No. People wouldn't do that.

Q. So there are wild goats in Ireland?

Oh, yeah. Some wild people, too.

Q. Other festivals worth seeing?

The Strawberry Festival in Wexford. That's in June or July and goes on for several weeks in the biggest strawberry-growing region in Ireland, which has the most delicious berries in the world. There are lots of events. All these festivals have musicians and events at different hotels, pubs and venues.

Probably the biggest event is in August: the Rose of Tralee Festival. It's based on the old song of that name, which tells of a love story. The original Rose was a girl named Mary O'Connor, and Irish communities all over the world – quite a few from the U.S. – will nominate a girl to come here as their Rose.

Not always the most beautiful girl wins. It's more about finding the equal of the original Rose.

Q. The Irish economy is in trouble. What does that mean for tourists?

There's a silver lining to everything. A Euro costs \$1.28, a 24-cent improvement for you. Plus, prices are lower than they have been in a while. ... There are some fantastic deals to be had.



FAILTE IRELAND

This handsome guy was selected King Puck in Killorglin.

Fly direct

Starting May 6, US Airways begins direct seasonal flights between Charlotte and Dublin. www.usairways.com



PHOTOS BY SCOTT HARTLEY

Weymouth Woods Sandhills Nature Preserve is a 900-acre portion of a longleaf pine forest that once stretched from Virginia to Texas.

Hot FOR THE flames



For the forest to survive, it must burn. Planned fires devour leaves and pine straw, opening a clear, fertilized patch on which longleaf seeds can land.

WEYMOUTH WOODS FOREST SURVIVES AND THRIVES BECAUSE OF FIRE

BY AMBER VEVERKA
Special to the Observer

In most other forests, the tang of wood smoke raises a primal shiver of fear. At Weymouth Woods, it is the scent of new life.

Visitors hiking the white-sand trails of this Southern Pines-area preserve are walking in a woods that craves flame. That's because for this longleaf pine forest to survive, it must burn. Fire devours leaves and pine straw, opening a clear patch of fertilized ground on which longleaf seeds can land. It gives the longleaf the space it needs to become an emperor among pines, trees for which 200 years is middle-aged.

"A vast forest of the most stately pine trees than can be imagined," was how naturalist William Bartram in the 1700s described the longleaf forests blanketing the Southeast.

Longleaf once covered about 90 million acres, stretching from the coast of Virginia to Texas. Today, fewer than 3 million noncontiguous acres remain – and Weymouth Woods Sandhills Nature Preserve is a 900-acre portion of that surviving forest. One of the preserve's tracts is home to a 463-year-old longleaf, the oldest *Pinus palustris* in the nation.

On a recent hike through Weymouth, an eerie stillness hung over the open pine savanna. The drum of woodpeckers – the rare red-cockaded woodpecker relies on mature longleaf to nest – was the only sound, until a breeze rose. Then came a long, low rush of wind through pines, like the purr of surf.

Looking through the grassy savanna, pillared with pine trunks, it was easy to imagine the trackless wild a longleaf pine forest once was – a landscape so unchanging that early settlers traveling overland to Savannah, Ga., would get lost and miss the town.

"If they knew you were arriving, they'd shoot off a cannon in the direction from where you were coming, so you could find it," said Kim Hyre, Weymouth park ranger. "People would get disoriented because it all looked the same."

That sameness gave rise to the term "pine barrens." But longleaf forests like Weymouth are anything but barren.

Wildflowers freckle the grassland, revealing their beauty to a careful observer.

"There's pine barren gentians, which have the most beautiful blue on the planet," said Scott Hartley, Weymouth park superintendent.

"Gentian blooms October all the way to Thanksgiving. There's meadow beauty, a pink bloom in late spring through summer. There's wild indigo, which actually has a yellow flower." Weymouth's list of wildflowers also includes lupine, sandhills lily, orchids and asters.

Birds such as Bachman's sparrows, pine warblers and northern bobwhites share the open understory of the longleaf with fox squirrels – the larger, flashier cousins of the more common gray squirrel.

It's that savanna that gives the longleaf the light and space it needs to grow. The pine can spend a decade in the grass stage – when it looks like little more than bushy tuft. At that stage, the little tree is spending all its energy developing its root system. When mature, the pines don't have a massive girth but have tall, limbless trunks that rise to a flat crown of limbs bent like a bunch of arms with elbows akimbo, green with the 18-inch needles for which the tree is named.

The ingredient that makes all of Weymouth's species thrive is fire.

"This is what we call a 'fire-dependent ecosystem,' which sounds weird because we were raised on the idea that fire is destructive," Hyre said.

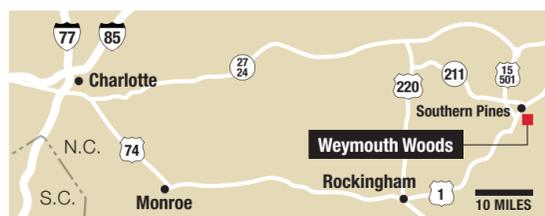
Forest managers planning fires write a prescription for them, "like a doctor writing a prescription for healing," Hyre said. The prescription sets parameters for

SEE FOREST, 9E



JOSEPH RODRIGUEZ - AP

Scientists from UNC Greensboro analyzed this Weymouth pine's rings and determined the tree was standing in 1548.



STAFF MAP

Nearby Notes

TODAY: WINTERFEST ■ SEAGROVE

Pottery region fires up again

Seagrove and nearby communities in Randolph County are famed for their long tradition of distinctive, handmade pottery. See for yourself today at the Seagrove Pottery Winterfest today. Many of the shops will debut new shapes and colors; some serve refreshments and offer demonstrations of pottery production. Seagrove is about two hours northeast of Charlotte, via N.C. 49 and Randolph County roads.

Details: 336-873-7887; www.seagrovepotteryheritage.com.

STARTS FRIDAY ■ CHARLOTTE

N.C. RV & Camping Show returns

The N.C. RV & Camping Show will be Friday through next Sunday at the Charlotte Convention Center, 501 S. College St. Featured attractions include more fuel-efficient, high-tech, lightweight RVs. Hours: 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Feb. 27. Admission: \$7 online, \$10 at the door; 12 and younger, free. After 5 p.m. Friday-Saturday, buy one adult ticket at the show and get one free. Buy show admission or same-day admission to the nearby NASCAR Hall of Fame and get a \$3 discount on admission to the other (just show your paid-ticket stub). Details: 800-441-0013; www.affinityrvshows.com.

SADDLE UP! FESTIVAL ■ PIGEON FORGE, TENN.

Buckaroos circle the wagons next weekend

Six chuck wagons bring the flavor of the Old West to Pigeon Forge for the annual chuck wagon cook-off on Saturday. The cook-off is part of Saddle Up! – a four-day celebration of the American West running Thursday through next Sunday.

From 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Thursday at Old Mill Square, champion cook Kent Rollins will prepare and dish up free samples of Dutch-oven cornbread.

Nightly concerts (\$15 each, at Smith Family Theater) feature Wylie & the Wild West, The Quebe Sisters Band, Jean & Gary Prescott, Brenn Hill, Chris Isaacs, Yvonne Hollenbeck and Ray Doyle.

The Saturday cook-off is 9 a.m.-2 p.m. at Clabough's Campground on Wears Valley Road. After the judging, lunch will be available for \$10 per plate from individual wagons.

Saturday's activities also include a Buckaroo Roundup, where you can ride a mechanical bull and hear cowboy poetry, tales of the trail and musical performances. Admission is free.

A free-admission Western Marketplace will operate daily. Details/schedule: 800-251-9100; www.mypigeonforge.com.

FOOD + WINE ■ CHARLESTON

Good eating, good times at March event

The BB&B Charleston Wine + Food Festival will be March 3-6 at various locations in that city. The central venue and main event is the Cullinary Village, at Marion Square, 2-5 p.m. Friday (March 4; \$55), 11 a.m.-2 p.m. or 3-6 p.m. Saturday (\$75 each) and 1-4 p.m. that Sunday (\$55). It includes admission to Grand Tasting Tents, the BB&T Hospitality Tent, the Certified S.C.-Grown Outdoor Living + Grilling Area, Thermador cooking competitions, cooking demos and the Charleston Cooks! book-signing tent. About 90 open-air food, wine and spirit stations will offer samples. Related food and music events (including tours, seminars and dine-arounds) are offered for \$55 to \$175 per event; check the schedule – www.charlestonwineandfood.com/events-tickets – for times, prices and ticket availability. — JOHN BORDSEN

FOREST

■ from 10E

burn – wind direction, temperature, humidity, moisture level.

Once the day comes when all parameters are met, a day-long fire is set in an area closed to the public and the fire is organized so flames don't reach above 3 feet. That protects pines with terminal buds on top.

"We do this in sections so that every unit is on a rotation (for fire) every two to five years," Hyre said. "And herbaceous layers thrive after this. In 24 to 48 hours after a seasonal burn, those herbaceous plant layers are springing back up."

Once, lightning strikes sparked the fires that kept Weymouth Woods healthy. Now, the Southern Pines area is filled with homes and golf courses, and fires must be managed by people.

A long burning history

Weymouth has a long history of human management.

Creek, Choctaw and Cherokee hunted there, Hyre said. Native Americans sometimes would burn large sections of longleaf to help create the airy forest attractive to deer and buffalo.

"This was great hunting land," Hyre said. "It was not a village. There was no permanent water here (because) the

small creeks come and go."

Arrowheads recovered in the forest show evidence of many different tribes following game through the area.

The mild management of the forest for hunting shifted to a much more intense use after European settlers arrived.

When Scottish Highlanders settled in the Sandhills in the mid-1700s, merchants looked at the 100-foot longleaf pines and saw the answer to the Royal Navy's shipping needs. Trees became masts. Trunks and branches were burned for tar to coat rigging and pitch to seal hulls. Resin collected from cuts in the trunks was distilled into turpentine to preserve wood and for use as an ingredient in medicine.

Longleaf's revival

That history is in plain view along the Weymouth's white-sand trails, which wind past old trees scarred with the inverted V that bled resin but kept the trees alive.

"North Carolina was No. 1 for 150 years for exports of the naval store industry before 1900," Hyre said. After the discovery of oil, the market for naval stores largely dried up. By then, much of the southern forest was played out. Trees scarred for resin lost their bark that protected them against fire; also, planters chose faster-growing pine species for lumber.

Day Trips

Where presidents hail to the church

BY DAVID MENCONI

david.menconi@newsobserver.com

Between now and whenever he leaves office, President Barack Obama will probably follow the commander-in-chief tradition of attending a Sunday service at Christ Church in Alexandria, Va. It might even happen today, on Presidents Day holiday weekend.

Distance

From Charlotte, Alexandria is about 297 miles (about 6½ hours), one way.

Getting there

Take Interstate 85 North to Petersburg, Va.; follow I-95 North to the U.S. 1 exit for Alexandria, near Washington. Christ Church is at 118 N. Washington St., in downtown Alexandria.

To see and do

"The tradition is that, around Washington's birthday, the church makes the invitation to the White House," said Dell Sanderson, a Christ Church docent, adding that since 1900, all but three U.S. presidents have put in an appearance at Christ Church during their terms of office. (She won't name the no-shows.)

Christ Church remains an active Episcopal church. It's also a living repository of U.S. history going back to the Colonial era. After services one summer Sunday in 1774, George Washington stood outside the sanctuary and advocated independence for the American colonies. About 87 years later, the church grounds were where Robert E. Lee was offered command of Virginia's army at the start of the Civil War.

Despite being on a busy thoroughfare, Christ Church feels like a time capsule. That starts with the well-kept graveyard, Alexandria's first and only cemetery until the early 1800s. It's estimated that 1,000 people were interred on the church's grounds over the years, and some of the weathered headstones make for fascinating reading.

Inside, docents give tours and lay the history on you. The sanctuary looks very much as it would have 200 years ago,

Details

Christ Church sanctuary and grounds are open 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, 8:45 a.m.-1 p.m. Sunday; closed Monday. Admission is free; donations (for upkeep) are appreciated. Info: 703-549-1450; www.historichristchurch.org.

down to the original hand-blown glass in the windows. The interior was restored in the late 1890s to its original Colonial style, which it maintains. Of particular note is the wineglass-shaped pulpit (with soundboard) installed in 1891.

The Lord's Prayer, Apostle's Creed and Ten Commandments adorn tablets on both sides of the pulpit, aged from their original white to a light charcoal shade. Plaques in memory of Christ Church's most famous members, Washington and Lee, are also on the front walls.

A silver plate marks Lee's pew, No. 46. It's across the aisle from No. 60, the box pew Washington bought for his family. It has been kept as it was in his time. No visit is complete without taking a seat where Washington listened to sermons.



CRAIG KEITH

Since 1900, presidential appearances have been regular occurrences at Christ Church in Alexandria, Va.

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Weymouth Woods

Weymouth Woods Sandhills Nature Preserve is made up of three tracts. The visitor center, with displays on the history of naval stores production and the wildlife of the forest, is on the main Weymouth Woods section. All the hiking trails are easy and under two miles.

Getting there: From Charlotte, 103 miles, about 2½ hours: take U.S. 74 East to U.S. 1 (at Rockingham); follow U.S. 1 North to U.S. 15/501 (at Aberdeen). Take U.S. 15/501 South to Raeford Road (a third of a mile); drive east on Raeford Road to Pee Dee Road and turn left. In 0.3 miles, turn right onto Bethesda Road, which becomes Fort Bragg Road. The entrance is at 1024 N. Fort Bragg Road.

Park hours: 8 a.m.-6 p.m. through March; 9 a.m.-8 p.m. April-October.

Admission: Free. **Resources:** 910-692-2167; www.ncparks.gov (type "Weymouth" in the search box).



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