It's easy to swing into the fun at Charlotte's Freedom Park, with such events as free movie night — popcorn included — on the second Friday of each month through August.

A Walk In The Park

Even amid the hubbub and skyscrapers in our three largest cities, you can escape to the peacefulness of a park.

WRITTEN BY JANET C. PITTARD
I judge a city by its parks.
Growing up, we had no air conditioning, so the swings were a good way to cool off. If you pumped hard enough, your toes touched the sky. And if you got up the nerve to jump out on the way down, you could fly like Superman.

That was a lot of skinned knees ago, but I still love the outdoors, and when I’m in a big city, the first thing I look for is the park. Three of my favorites, each with its own personality, are Raleigh’s Pullen Park, Freedom Park in Charlotte, and City Center Park in Greensboro.

Old-Fashioned Fun at Pullen Park
The laughter of generations of children skips across the playground at Pullen Park in Raleigh. The 72-acre stretch of farmland, donated to the city in 1887 by prominent local businessman Richard Stanhope Pullen, was one of the first public parks in North Carolina and holds many memories for longtime residents and their offspring.

“When I first came to Raleigh in 1952,” says Peggy Mordecai, “I ran a Raleigh Junior Athletic Club at Pullen, with about 20 of the greatest kids. We had dances and games. There was so much going on — still is.” In later years, Mordecai and her husband, Bill, brought their own children to play at the park and, not so long ago, their grandchildren.

Adjoining the campus of North Carolina State University and only a short distance from downtown, the state government complex, and several other college campuses, the park is a busy place during all but the dead of winter. There are swings and playground equipment for the kids, scenic walkways and lush landscaping for joggers and walkers, picnic tables and shelters just waiting for the paper plates and napkins, plus ball fields, tennis courts, community center, arts center, aquatic center, and theater.

Pullen blossoms into full amusement park status in the summer, and chief among its attractions is a circa 1900 Dentzel carousel, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Children of all ages experience the old-fashioned wonderment of riding one of the carousel’s beautifully restored, hand-carved menagerie, to the slow grind of a Wurlitzer 125 Organ. There are kiddie boat rides, and for the grown-ups, rental pedal boats for leisurely cruises around the pond.

Drawing the most excitement from a group of rowdy little boys, however, is the miniature train that loops through the park, transporting its squealing fare through a tunnel and over two trestles. “When our kids, Bill and Beth, were little, they loved the train,” Mordecai says with a smile. “And our grandson, Michael, always had to ride the train. It was absolutely a necessity.”

The only thing left to top off a day of old-fashioned fun at Pullen is a trip to the concession area, where the headliner is a frosty snow cone, reminiscent of hot summer days gone by and red and purple tongues.

Freedom to roam
Charlotte’s Freedom Park is another old family favorite. “It’s been there as long as I can remember,” says Jennie Bush, who frequented the park as a child and later with her husband, Fowler, and their two boys. “Fowler jogged; I walked; we took the boys to soccer practice and games. Little children loved feeding the ducks and geese at the pond.”

The 98-acre Freedom Park opened around 1947 as a memorial to those who served in World War II. Located just south of Charlotte’s city center, the park is easily accessible from the Dilworth and Myers Park neighborhoods. “Freedom Park is a wonderful respite in the middle of the city — concerts, festivals, adjacent to a nature museum, a great park for picnicking,” Bush says.

The park does seem to have it all: four soccer fields, a dozen tennis courts, four baseball diamonds, two batting cages, two playgrounds, a basketball court, two volleyball courts, seven-acre lake, amphitheater, band shell, sheltered picnic areas, concession stand, pavilion, banquet hall, nature museum, and miles of trails and
Center City Park (top) is a welcome break in the Greensboro cityscape, while Freedom Park (below) offers Charlotte’s south side miles of tree-lined paths and open space.
Generations of children like Tito Cruz have climbed aboard Raleigh's Pullen Park carousel and been swept away to the far reaches of their imaginations.
paths. Instead of a miniature train, children racing ahead of their parents are welcome aboard a 1920s Seaboard Air Line Railroad locomotive, among the last steam engines that were in regular service in the area.

The park is brimming with activities. A pair of trim joggers pace themselves along the Little Sugar Creek Greenway, a popular walking and biking trail running through the park. A happy black lab, his tongue hanging out, hoping for a drink from the water bottle, lopes alongside his owner. Boys and girls swinging bags of stale bread watch wide-eyed as the ducks deftly retrieve the largess they toss. Great blue herons and kingfishers are here, too, although not as eager to join the fray.

Capping off the many offerings at Freedom Park is Festival in the Park, a Charlotte tradition since 1964. Every September, 150 arts and crafts exhibitors and more than 1,000 performers pack the park for this free four-day community affair that provides a variety of live music and entertainment for the family.

**Greensboro's downtown oasis**

Late in the afternoon in Greensboro's Center City Park, Audrey Freeman sits reading, waiting for her bus to go home. The 1.9-acre park is across the street from where she works at the Greensboro Historical Museum. "The scenery is gorgeous," she reflects. "I like to meditate and unwind."
Center City Park’s whimsical pitcher by Seagrove artist Fred Johnston (above) and the bright caboose at Pullen Park (left) call to city residents, “Come outside, and unwind.”

from a long day.” Parents who bring their children by the park at the end of the day join her, but the happy noises don’t disturb her reverie; they enhance it.

The park she enjoys is new and compact, and, true to its name, sits slap dab in the middle of downtown. Located between North Elm and North Davie streets, with buildings towering around it, the park is convenient to the nearby Greensboro Cultural Center, Greensboro Historical Museum, and YWCA. The park opened in December 2006 after four years of community planning and construction. A popular urban oasis, the park is a monument to community involvement. Its design reflects the community’s identity, merging the city’s arts, history, and recreation interests.

The landscaping is uncluttered and organized into a series of distinct outdoor spaces capable of accommodating both small groups and large events. The Great Lawn extends toward Davie Street, overlooking
Freeman’s favorite feature at the park, a fountain representing the seasonal stream beds of the Piedmont. The headwaters are marked by an eight-foot-tall urn sculpture created by blacksmith and metal artist Jim Cooper in his downtown Greensboro studio.

Brides pose in front of the fountain for their wedding photographs, and children run under arched jets shooting water over the walkway into the center of the fountain. In the evening, the park dons a different look with extensive lighting. Theatergoers stroll through the park and enjoy the magic of the illuminated features.

Public art, much of it produced by local artists, maximizes the visual impact of the park’s space. Often integrated with seating along the paths connecting the park’s various features, the artwork compliments the environment, its accessibility allowing visitors to experience art firsthand. Children and grown-ups are fascinated with an oversized clay pitcher by Seagrove potter Fred Johnston. The pitcher, shaped like a bird, represents the city’s hospitality, and the two-foot-tall “chicks” situated around it offer a fun place to sit and take in the full Greensboro experience.

Janet Pittard lives in Raleigh and West Jefferson and enjoys walks in the park with her dog, Bear, every day, rain or shine.

if you’re going

Pullen Park
520 Ashe Avenue
Raleigh, N.C. 27606
(919) 831-6468

Freedom Park
1900 East Boulevard
Charlotte, N.C. 28203
(704) 432-4280

Center City Park
200 North Elm Street
Greensboro, N.C. 27401
(336) 379-0821

For links to websites for Pullen Park and Freedom Park’s Festival in the Park, go to www.ourstate.com, and click on “This Month’s Issue.”