June 23, 2021

Dear Media Representative:

Life is now opening up as we enter a period when the pandemic's growth rate seems to be slowing down. Many families will be taking vacations. Travel researchers say they will drive, not fly. They will avoid "hot spot" big metropolitan areas and seek the safety of rural areas that have had minimal virus outbreaks. They want to be outdoors instead of indoors. The Blue Ridge Parkway, America's most popular and beloved scenic drive, checks all the vacationers' boxes. And the parkway is not that far from you.

Fifty years ago, celebrated outdoor writer, the late Michael Frome, a founder and former president of the Society of American Travel Writers, wrote a series of four articles about the parkway for the Blue Ridge Parkway Association (BRPA). We recently updated them with current information (at the Dropbox link and pasted below) so that they are still relevant to today’s traveler but retain Frome’s journalistic style and intent. *Many* of the places mentioned in the articles are opening to the public, but as is common now, each location is opening on a different schedule with varying degrees of facilities and services available, so it would behoove the traveler to confirm details with the sites prior to visiting.

Frome received the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Award for his Strangers in High Places--The Story of the Great Smoky Mountains. His National Park Guide was published through 29 editions. Frome's love for the parkway and the land it traverses, along with his wonderful ability to express himself through the written word, made him the perfect person to write these parkway articles. The fact that his original articles from 1970 have had only minor updates demonstrates the timelessness of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

We hope you will pass on to your readers Michael Frome's articles and our supporting photography (copy and paste the link into your browser: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/u7sx635wlewmq8w/AAB8GvLrLqRMIzDp65p4J0hja?dl=0>). We think the popularity of the articles will attract local advertisers, as well as advertisers from the communities and businesses along the parkway, to support your publication. If you have any questions about the articles or photography, please contact Amy Ney at BRPA at 828-670-1924 or [amy@blueridgeparkway.org](mailto:amy@blueridgeparkway.org).

Part of BRPA's mission is to support the National Park Service in serving the American people by preserving natural and cultural resources for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of current and future generations. Families are already thinking about where they are going to take their vacations, and no place better fits their need for a safe, wholesome outdoor experience than the Blue Ridge Parkway which freely offers enjoyment and inspiration to all travelers.

Sincerely,

Tubby Kubik

Tubby Kubik, TMP

Executive Director

Blue Ridge Parkway Association

Blue Ridge 1

FROM SHENANDOAH TO SMOKY — A HAVEN FOR LEISURELY TOURING

Originally by Michael Frome; updated in 2020

SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK, VIRGINIA — The high road from Shenandoah to Smoky is like a long corridor in a gallery, its alcoves lined with treasures of nature's own art. One cannot rush onward through such a grand outdoor museum. He or she must allow eye, senses and intellect time for seasoning and steadily deepening perception. For the forested valleys, flanks and crest of the Blue Ridge and the spur ranges unfold an ancient life story -- yes, these Appalachian highlands are older by millions of years than the Rockies, Sierras or Cascades, their cousins of the West.

The road constitutes the longest and finest of its kind on earth. I daresay there is nothing to compare in design and landscaping. It bears scant resemblance to the high-speed congested freeways that sprawl over the countryside and cityside. In contrast, it provides for leisurely touring of a day, a weekend or longer, free of high-rise commercial development, and free of commercial truck traffic as well.

Over the years I've traveled this route many times, sharing its pleasures with family, friends, rangers and strangers, and always finding something new and special. But this road between Shenandoah and Smoky is far more than a road, even more than a parkway.

From its northern gateway at Front Royal, Virginia, you can travel in an unbroken chain more than 600 miles through western North Carolina to Gatlinburg, Tennessee; through Shenandoah National Park, the Blue Ridge Parkway and Great Smoky Mountains National Park, three of the most popular units of the National Park System. Yet these are only the core of a broader recreational kingdom embracing multiple national forests, state parks, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and private lands, sharing a unity born of the hills.

From seventy-six parking overlooks along the Skyline Drive, visitors can touch and feel the high country by stepping into it. No two overlooks are ever the same. They enable one to photograph dawn over the Piedmont Plain stretching eastward, to hike the wilderness where streams tumble into roaring waterfalls, to count the golden shadows spreading over the Shenandoah Valley and the waves of mountain ranges rising beyond it.

Shenandoah National Park with its highland boulevard, the Skyline Drive, is not only a place to go but also a place to stay. It was a favorite hideaway of President Herbert Hoover, who fished the quiet pools and riffles in the streams as a respite from White House duties; a hiking trail now leads to the fishing camp he once owned, and travelers can explore his Rapidan Camp via a ranger-guided tour. For today's travelers, motel-type lodging, cabins and four campgrounds are readily accessible along the drive.

At Rockfish Gap, between Charlottesville and Waynesboro, the road changes in name to the Blue Ridge Parkway and continues so for the next 469 miles. The roadway is designed with gentle curves and grades to encourage comfortable driving at 45 miles per hour, a welcome relief to speed-weary motorists. It also provides challenge and reward to bicyclists. The parkway varies in elevation from 649 feet where it crosses the historic James River approximately 50 miles north of Roanoke, Virginia to 6,053 feet at Richland Balsam near Maggie Valley, North Carolina. In some sections the road runs along a narrow, knife-like crest, opening vistas on both sides, and in other sections it runs through a dark forest, but always unfolding a story of plants, trees, people and native wildlife.

The Peaks of Otter, near Roanoke, are twin mountains within a recreational complex, complete with interpretive visitor center, nature walks and a strenuous hiking trail to the summit for one of the choice scenic views in the Virginia Blue Ridge. In pre-Civil War days, Mrs. Polly Woods operated a log cabin inn, or "ordinary" (which still stands near the picnic grounds), where she bedded tourists for the night and served bear steak, wild turkey, buttermilk, and biscuits. Today a modern lodge occupies a beautiful setting at the edge of a man-made lake surrounded by forested mountains.

Farther south, in North Carolina, 7,000-acre Doughton Park is the setting of another historical mountain cabin and farmstead, as well as thirty miles of pleasant walking trails, some involving stream crossings. The historic Bluffs Restaurant, also located at Doughton Park, has undergone restoration and is scheduled to reopen in 2020 after 10 years of closure.

Many recreation opportunities are available to the motorist at Moses H. Cone Memorial Park and Julian Price Memorial Park by Blowing Rock, North Carolina. Then at Milepost 304, travelers find an international engineering marvel. The Linn Cove Viaduct is one of the most photographed views of the Blue Ridge Parkway. The quarter-mile serpentine bridge hugs the rugged eastern slope of Grandfather Mountain while still protecting the fragile habitat beneath it. The completion of this final section of the parkway in 1987 brought and end to the construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway, a project begun in 1935. Trails wander under and around this bridge over land, beginning at a museum and visitor center at the southern end of the viaduct.

The late John D. Rockefeller, Jr., landscapist, lover of natural beauty, and benefactor of parks, considered this road a favorite and traveled it on special occasions. Today motorists are reminded of his generosity and foresight as they camp or picnic under shady trees and enjoy the trails to lovely Linville Falls and the wild and mighty Linville Gorge, eastern America’s “Grand Canyon,” which he purchased and presented to the National Park Service.

South of Asheville, North Carolina, those who travel the parkway's full length will find the second lodge, Pisgah Inn, at the base of Pisgah Ledge west of Asheville and close to Cold Mountain of Civil War fame. There is also a campground nestled in rhododendron just across the parkway from the Inn. In addition to these facilities, resorts, motels, B&Bs and private campgrounds are located in surrounding communities.

I find inspiration everywhere along the road. A favorite setting is the point where the Blue Ridge joins the Great Smokies. The parkway rises above 6,000 feet, sometimes coursing through wispy clouds, and between remnant spires of fir and red spruce, the "Canadian" forest normally found much farther north. The most sweeping view unfolds from the open crest of Waterrock Knob, a 360-degree vista over the main ranges of Appalachia. The misty Blue Ridge outlines its route into Georgia, and straight ahead rise the Smokies, the greatest height and mass in eastern America.

The Smokies are unbroken for a distance of 70 miles astride the North Carolina-Tennessee border, except for the trans-mountain link with the Blue Ridge Parkway. Road viewpoints reveal the continuing vistas of wilderness, occasionally screened by the bluish or smokelike haze from which the mountains derive their name, caused by the terpenes released by the conifers of the Smokies.

Bird watcher, flower lover, nature photographer, hiker, bicyclist, fisherman — all find the Blue Ridge and Smokies sheer delight. So too does the tourist motorist. And the season matters little; the road is a year-round experience. Spring brings a procession of wildflowers, dogwood, flame azalea and rhododendron. Summer invites picnics, hiking, camping, and relief from the heat of lower elevations. Autumn is typified by the beauty of brilliant foliage, including red maple, "color king of the Appalachians." Finally, winter is the time for solitude and quiet adventure (though parkway sections may be temporarily closed because of snow and ice). At Cone Park, near Blowing Rock, North Carolina, and other snowy high points where state-maintained roads cross the unplowed parkway, cross-country skiers enjoy the southern Blue Ridge's natural snow.

This region lies within a day's drive of more than half the nation's population. Yet in the Appalachian Empire a man or woman can escape momentarily the speed and crowding of modem life. "I am taught the poorness of our inventions, the ugliness of towns and places," Emerson wrote in his renowned essay on nature. In the sanctuary of the high places one learns what he meant.

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Blue Ridge 2

SIDE TRIPS ARE PART OF THE FUN OF GOING PLACES IN THE SOUTHERN HILLS

Originally by Michael Frome; updated in 2020

ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA - Take the Blue Ridge Parkway south. Then, as the Lord directed Moses, go to the top of Pisgah and view the promised land.

It was near pyramid-shaped Mount Pisgah - the one in North Carolina - that George Washington Vanderbilt erected his hunting lodge in order to enjoy the unlimited vistas. Lofty Pisgah, over a mile high, was part of the more than 125,000-acre estate that Vanderbilt acquired before the turn of the century.

Today's visitors on the parkway are welcome to share much of the same glorious scenery known only to native mountaineers born to it and men of wealth who bought into it. But in addition, as I travel over this route it strikes me that the parkway and its northern link in Virginia, the Skyline Drive, constitute more than a road, more than a recreation area in their own right, but also a gateway to such regions as the vast forested bowl spread out below Pisgah.

Many opportunities for side trips present themselves. They furnish close-ups of mountain culture, scenery, history, and of mountain communities in a time of transition. A few well-chosen digressions are in order; they complement the drive and add extra qualities to it.

For instance, the road down from Pisgah leads to the Cradle of Forestry, a 6,500-acre outdoor museum commemorating the site where forestry was first practiced and taught in America. The visitor center and restored mountain cabins -- the "campus" -- recount George Vanderbilt's sponsorship of pioneer efforts in conservation. Along the trail, hands-on exhibits, crafters at work, an old logging locomotive and portable sawmill add to the picture of what life was like.

Much of Pisgah National Forest in this vicinity is devoted to recreation and scenic enjoyment. Sliding Rock, a sixty-foot-long cascade, is at its best when it earns its name, sending swimmers splashing into a clear pool below. Just beyond, Looking Glass Falls is one of the most beautiful waterfalls of the southern mountains, whether to contemplate or photograph. At the Pisgah Center for Wildlife Education and adjacent state fish hatchery, families can learn about the importance of mountain streams, where water and life begin, and how brown, brook and rainbow trout are spawned, raised, and stocked.

The story of George Vanderbilt, scion of wealth, patron of art and culture, is intriguing and worth pursuing. While Pisgah National Forest was developed around the nucleus of his estate, his headquarters were in Asheville, where the Biltmore House, his cozy 250-room French Renaissance chateau, remains largely intact, a monument to the age of opulence. If the tapestries, paintings, porcelain and other old world treasures fail to impress the visitor, the bordering gardens contain more than 250 varieties of roses, thousands of oriental azaleas, and a collection of native American azaleas. Add to that a working winery that produces award-winning wines available for tasting and a quaint village that takes its guests back to the days of the Vanderbilts, plus dining and recreation opportunities, and Biltmore Estate is definitely a full-day adventure.

Other homes of note are in the area, too. A North Carolina state historic site contains the Asheville boyhood home of Thomas Wolfe and an adjacent visitor center, both of which interpret Wolfe's life and work. Though his epic *Look Homeward, Angel* at first was banned from Asheville's public library, the book has remained popular since publication in 1929 and this home a part of the nation's literary history. The Urban Trail in downtown Asheville links thirty points of interest, including the art deco city hall and the Pack Place cultural center.

Another noted author, Carl Sandburg, spent the last twenty-two years of his life in Flat Rock, outside Hendersonville. Connemara, his home and farm, now a national historic site, is too good and too close to miss, remaining largely as he and his wife left it, reflecting his immersion in poetry and history and hers as a breeder of prize goats. Nearby Flat Rock Playhouse, the state theater of North Carolina, provides quality theater productions.

At the outskirts of Asheville (parkway exit at French Broad River, Milepost 393.6), a major point of interest, the North Carolina Arboretum, includes 434 acres of gardens, greenhouse and educational displays, with miles of hiking and biking trails. The arboretum, "a natural cradle of plant cultivation," was chosen as site of the World Botanic Gardens Congress in late June 2000. And another major facility alongside the parkway, the Billy Graham Training Center at The Cove, covers 1,500 acres with impressive buildings and landscaped grounds meant for spiritual retreat.

East of Asheville lies Chimney Rock with its ancient monolith, 404-foot waterfall, hiking trails and awe-inspiring views overlooking the charming villages of Chimney Rock and Lake Lure. South of Chimney Rock lies Hendersonville with its beautiful village-like downtown and Brevard with its waterfalls and summer music series. Adjacent to both towns is the DuPont State Recreational Forest with miles of hiking and biking trails and multiple scenic, easily-accessible waterfalls.

The Blue Ridge Parkway terminates in Cherokee, North Carolina, where it intersects a federal highway (US 441) to cross the Smoky Mountains into Tennessee. The Qualla Boundary, the home of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, has become a point of interest in its own right. The Museum of the Cherokee Indian, the outdoor drama "Unto These Hills," and the recreated 18th century settlement called Oconaluftee Indian Village reflect determination to safeguard and interpret Cherokee culture and heritage.

Overnight accommodations, campgrounds, tourist services and attractions of various kinds are accessible via side trips from the parkway. On the North Carolina side of the Great Smokies, community services are provided in Waynesville, Maggie Valley, Sylva and beyond, and on the Tennessee side in Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge and Sevierville.

North of Asheville, the motorist explorer can take a five-mile side trip off the parkway to Mount Mitchell State Park, the highest mountain in eastern America, or stop at the resort community of Little Switzerland and visit the Museum of North Carolina Minerals. Towns like Black Mountain, Burnsville and Mars Hill are cradled by mountains and surrounded by gorgeous views. Country inns, bed and breakfasts, craft fairs and music festivals perpetuate tradition in a modern age.

The parkway north of Little Switzerland welcomes vacationers to the North Carolina High Country, a four seasons playground. Appalachian Ski Mountain and Beech and Sugar mountains offer snow sports for the beginner to the afficionado. Several famous attractions nearby are worth a visit: Linville Caverns, The Blowing Rock, Tweetsie Railroad, Mystery Hill, the outdoor drama “Horn in the West,” and Grandfather Mountain with its Mile High Swinging Bridge. Two schools, Appalachian State University and Lees-McRae College, provide excellent cultural programs and concerts. The village of Blowing Rock is the only town physically located on the Parkway.

Crossing into Virginia, the Shenandoah Valley provides many side trips. The Roanoke River Parkway provides direct access to Virginia's Explore Park in Roanoke, with displays about early settlement and numerous outdoor adventure opportunities. Among other points of interests, the Virginia Museum of Transportation is one of the country's largest collections of steam railroad engines and vintage vehicles.

Another possibility is to leave the parkway on the scenic road into Cave Mountain Lake Recreation Area, a part of Jefferson National Forest, then continue to the historic Natural Bridge, one of the natural wonders of the world which is now a Virginia state park. Nearby Lexington is one of the most interesting, inviting and significant small cities of the South. The Virginia Military Institute (VMI) and Washington and Lee University both have notable campuses associated with heroic personalities, but the whole town and countryside around them are heroic in their way, trying to conserve a traditional scene and to make it useful in a modern context.

A few miles north in Raphine, a restored blacksmith shop and demonstration farm memorialize the life of Cyrus Hall McCormick, whose invention, the mechanical grain reaper, revolutionized farming. At Staunton, the house where Woodrow Wilson's father served as a minister, and a future president was born, has been restored as a national shrine at the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library and Museum, a worthy introduction to Wilson's career and age. From this point it is possible to drive directly to Rockfish Gap, the junction between the Blue Ridge Parkway and Skyline Drive, and resume the high road -- or head down the foothills to visit Charlottesville, with the homes of two other presidents, Jefferson and Monroe, and the campus of the University of Virginia, which Jefferson designed.

On the other hand, Rockfish Gap and Staunton can be the start of another side trip, first heading north into an area known for vividly colored limestone caverns, several of which are open as private attractions. At New Market, the Battlefield State Historical Park marks a singular episode in history, the stand of young VMI cadets against seasoned Union troops at a time when Shenandoah Valley was the "breadbasket of the Confederacy."

Turning east, the loop leads across the Massanutten Mountain, a great ridge fifty miles long, where the George Washington National Forest has developed picnic areas, campgrounds and trails. Then it continues to Luray, site of the noted Luray Caverns in Page Valley, before climbing to Thornton Gap on Skyline Drive, with recreational facilities of Shenandoah National Park at hand.

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Blue Ridge 3

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS BECKON WITH TRAILS FOR WALKERS AND HIKERS OF ALL AGES

Originally by Michael Frome; updated in 2020

ROANOKE, VIRGINIA - In less than an hour an entire family follows a footpath from a warm, humid valley into a high evergreen forest. Parents and children pass rosebay rhododendron plants as tall as trees, but blooming with clusters of white flowers unlike any trees they have ever seen. Sunlight filters through the leaves to illuminate wildflowers and salamanders scurrying across the rocks.

To walk unhurriedly in the quiet places of the Blue Ridge and Great Smokies and intimately embrace such sights is one of the delights in visiting the haven of the outdoors that spreads across portions of Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. The combinations, alternatives and possibilities for hiking, camping, fishing, bicycling, bird watching and flower study are limitless, all in a world of mountains, streams, and woodlands.

Trails in the parks and forests of the region are for visitors of all ages. Even persons with a disability can thrill to rare wonder and beauty in the Appalachian highlands; for it really isn't a matter of how much distance one covers, but how much he or she absorbs. All my experience in the outdoors has taught me that a slower pace expands the dimensions of time.

The best-known route in the hills is the Appalachian Trail, the longest hiking-only footpath in the world, created and maintained for the use of all comers through voluntary efforts of hiking clubs and their members. The "footpath in the wilderness" currently covers 2,193 miles between Maine and Georgia but reaches its highest elevations in the Blue Ridge and Great Smokies. Virginia alone has 554 miles of the trail, more than any other state.

The Appalachian Trail is favored by experts, completely familiar with its overnight campsites, shelters, and cabins, but it is also a welcome place for beginners and day hikers. The trail is within reach of visitor centers, picnic areas and campgrounds in the national parks and national forests through which it passes; anyone can sample it for an hour or two according to his or her skill and ability level.

Hikers should take note also of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, which ultimately will extend almost 1,200 miles from Clingmans Dome in the Great Smoky Mountains to Jockey's Ridge State Park on the Atlantic coast. More than 700 miles have already been constructed, but a hiker can traverse the entire trail using temporary routes on backroads and bicycle paths. Sections already complete parallel the Blue Ridge Parkway and are close to it.

There are many other trails and outdoor opportunities in all these areas. Great Smoky Mountains National Park alone is laced with 850 miles of woodland footpath, including at least a dozen self-guided nature trails of varying length and walking ease.

Highlights of spring in the southern Appalachians are nature-based. In late April and early May, visitors flock to Gatlinburg, Asheville, Roanoke and other towns to enjoy wildflower viewing, nature walks, scenic drives, photographic clinics, bird watching and illustrated talks centering on mountain flora. Excellent walking trails are available in Boone and Blowing Rock and an eight-mile trail connecting the two towns is in the works.

With a valid fishing license or permit, fishing is allowed year-round on all of the streams in the Smokies but is especially popular in spring. A daily limit and size limits apply, and a few streams may be closed to protect fish locally and increase their numbers.

Also in spring, LeConte Lodge, the highest resort east of the Mississippi and the only overnight accommodations in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (except for campgrounds and Appalachian Trail shelters) -- opens to guests willing to hike in and make do with simple facilities. Six trails of differing lengths and varying difficulties lead to 6,593-foot-high Mount LeConte, a place to watch the sun rise and set over the ridgetops and where the loudest sounds are the serenades of high-flying birds.

The Smokies are the heart of an outdoor wonderland. On the Tennessee side, Cherokee National Forest has opened nearly a hundred campsites, plus nature trails and scenic drives. In North Carolina, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians maintains thirty miles of stocked trout streams, as well as several campgrounds. Pisgah National Forest includes 88 miles of Appalachian Trail, many campgrounds and trout fishing. A very special place, Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, a part of Nantahala National Forest, offers trails winding among towering giants several centuries old.

Pathways in these mountains are as varied as the abundant trees, plants and wildflowers. The Shining Rock Wilderness Area, within forty miles of Asheville, is a worthy component of the National Wilderness Preservation System - from mid-August to frost it becomes "blueberry heaven." Linville Gorge, eastern America’s “Grand Canyon,” is another popular area, where accessible trails lead through virgin forests to the rim of lovely Linville Falls, cascading nearly 100 feet in two levels. Wilderness areas are not signed or maintained like other developed areas, so hikers should exercise caution and know their skill level before venturing into the depths of the gorge.

Forty miles from Linville Falls, a motor road leads to the 6,683-foot summit of Mount Mitchell in the Black Mountains, the highest point in the East, and part of a network of trails. Grandfather Mountain, the highest peak in the Blue Ridge, also lies adjacent to the parkway. Some of its spectacular crags are reached only by trails that sometimes climb ladders over sheer cliff faces, but one can also drive to the top to traverse the landmark Mile High Swinging Bridge. Here Andre Michaux, the early French botanist, once thought he had scaled "the highest peak in all North America." When famed naturalist John Muir ascended Grandfather Mountain, he was so mesmerized by the view that he “couldn’t hold it in, and began to jump about and sing and glory in it all.”

Then at Roan Mountain, astride the North Carolina-Tennessee border, the world's largest natural rhododendron gardens stretch over expanses of grassy meadows, or "balds." The Appalachian Trail crosses Roan Mountain, but so does a paved trail so this scenic treasure is accessible to persons of all ability levels.

Every traveler can pick his or her own trail of discovery along the parkway route. On the Virginia side, one of the most pleasant opportunities is afforded at the Peaks of Otter, a few miles from Roanoke. Starting from the visitor center, the strenuous Sharp Top Trail leads upward to the twin crags of Sharp Top and Buzzards Roost for one of the choice views in the Blue Ridge. I have found it particularly rewarding in early morning and late afternoon. There is also shuttle access to Sharp Top Mountain if time or ability prohibits you from hiking all the way, but there still remains 1,500 feet of climb from the shuttle drop-off point.

Farther north, in Shenandoah National Park, another favorite trail—the Limberlost—once led through a grove of virgin hemlocks that has now been devastated by the hemlock woolly adelgid, then climbs Whiteoak Canyon, a wild, water-splashed garden of rock, vines and shrubs. Then there's the hike to Old Rag, a bit of a challenge but great fun in winding around massive boulders to reach the summit and its expansive vistas. Rangers stationed at key points on the Blue Ridge Parkway and Skyline Drive can help in choosing the right hike to match available time and skill.

Any walk or hike or climb, or bicycle ride, should be physical exercise, but something more besides. Consider that plants, flowers and trees are to the Smokies and Blue Ridge what granite domes are to Yosemite, geysers to Yellowstone and the wide, deep chasm to the Grand Canyon. The observant and thoughtful traveler can hardly fail to feel there is more here than a place, but some indefinable purpose, a spirit of nature to carry home and treasure.

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FOR SAFE AND COMFORTABLE HIKING

Bernard Elias, an advocate for nature conservation who grew up in Asheville, led hundreds of trips for the Carolina Mountain Club, and hiked thousands of mountain miles, provided the following helpful hints:

Footwear comes first. Lightweight leather hiking boots are best, but high sneakers are acceptable for short, casual trips. Break in brand new footwear before any trip of several miles or more.

Always take along a sweater or jacket on all-day and half-day trips in the mountains (even in summer) and some kind of rainwear (if only a pocket-size emergency plastic poncho). Carry lunch, plenty of water, compass, map, matches in waterproof case, flashlight (with extra bulb and batteries), first-aid kit and toilet paper. If allergic to yellow jacket or other insect stings, carry preventive medication on even the shortest mountain trails.

Long trousers and long-sleeve shirts are important for combating briars, insects, poison ivy and sunburn. Wearing glasses will protect eyes from bushes and limbs.

Snakes are rarely seen along the parkway and its trails, so snakebite kits do not seem necessary.

Include a foil space blanket in case warmth is needed for first aid or if hikers are lost overnight.

Blue Ridge 4

RURAL CRAFTS PRESERVE LIVING HISTORY IN THE SMOKIES AND BLUE RIDGE

Originally by Michael Frome; updated in 2020

GATLINBURG, TENNESSEE — The mountains are spiced with lively place names given by the native Cherokee and early white settlers. In one small section alone the traveler encounters Gingercake Mountain, Dogback Mountain, Sitting Bear, Hawksbill, Table Rock and Devils Hole Branch. And such expressive titles are applied to features in every cove and hollow of the Blue Ridge and Great Smokies.

These are reflections of times past, when pioneer families made their self-reliant way, generally in sheltered valleys. The man hunted game and built his cabin of rough-hewn logs. His wife made the family clothing. She cooked in a black pot hanging on a hook over the fireplace, and baked cornpone in a covered iron oven that sat in the ashes. The pioneers doctored themselves with roots, herbs and dyes.

Ancient ways have faded, but they do not die. From early spring to late fall, handicraft fairs are major events in towns of the Southern highlands. Hundreds of craftspeople set up looms, benches and wheels. Visitors gather to watch an artisan in metals hammer out an iron chinquapin leaf on an anvil to tunes of his own devising, an old mountaineer making chairs of maple, hickory and white oak with a knife and ancient form of shaving horse. And virtually everything is for sale, from inexpensive cornhusk dolls and folk toys to classic pieces of furniture, pottery and musical instruments.

The region has attracted talented crafters from other parts so that many items are stylish and modern. They blend with mountain traditions still pursued by local home folks, who prove they can be modern and sophisticated, too. Encouraged by the Southern Highland Craft Guild, an amazing variety of rural arts has been produced over the years by country people who cherish their heritage.

The National Park Service, which now administers much of the high crest extending from Virginia through North Carolina and Tennessee, has also endeavored to protect, in place, original remains of the old culture, ideal for learning and photography, and for inspiration for buying what you want where it was created.

Starting from the north, on Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park, for instance, a leisurely trail leads to Nicholson Hollow, lined with old log structures, fences and weathered gravestones left by struggling mountain people who farmed this stony land before the coming of the park. The Harry F. Byrd, Sr. Visitor Center at Big Meadows contains exhibits on their lives and times, when the rule was "make it yourself or do without."

South of Waynesboro, at Humpback Rocks on the Blue Ridge Parkway, another trail weaves among a cluster of pioneer log buildings, complete with bear-proof pigpen. The Roanoke River Parkway at Milepost 115 provides access to Explore Park, featuring a variety of historic buildings, demonstrations and artisan fairs. At Mabry Mill, fifty-five miles south of Roanoke, an iconic water-powered gristmill grinds cornmeal and buckwheat flour with crude iron gears and shafts just as it has done for decades. Farther south, in North Carolina, 7,000-acre Doughton Park is the setting of another historical mountain cabin and farmstead.

The parkway spans 469 miles between Rockfish Gap, Virginia, and Cherokee, North Carolina, a distance greater than between Washington and Boston, with a sequence of craft demonstrations and shops along the way. These include the Northwest Trading Post, near Glendale Springs, with everything from homemade cheeses and jellies to other traditional crafts, and the Parkway Craft Center at Moses Cone Manor, near Blowing Rock, with daily demonstrations of weaving, basketry, rug making, gem cutting, and wood carving. Near Oteen, at the edge of Asheville, the Folk Art Center, headquarters of the Southern Highland Craft Guild, features exhibits, demonstrations, multimedia shows and a retail shop. Even the bridges and tunnels of the parkway itself are a craft form; most of the stonework along the parkway was completed by Spanish stonemasons. The rock was quarried within 50 miles of where it was used and then split by hand to meet specific size requirements.

More craft venues are available off the parkway. In Clifton Forge, Virginia is the Alleghany Highlands Arts and Crafts Center, and the Ashe Arts Center in West Jefferson, North Carolina houses work from more than 100 regional artists in its gallery shop. South of Linville and Grandfather Mountain is the famed Crossnore Weavers, and further south, the Museum of North Carolina Handicrafts is located at the historic Shelton House in Waynesville.

Today’s traveler can string together numerous craft sites and artisan studios like these along a Blue Ridge Craft Trail, stewarded by the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, choosing from any of four regions that parallel the parkway across western North Carolina. The scenic towns are brimming with talented artists ready to share their experience of making local craft inspired by the rich culture and beauty of the North Carolina mountains and foothills. Even Gatlinburg, Tennessee has an eight-mile loop Arts & Crafts Trail filled with artists and craftsmen eager to showcase their products to visitors.

Traditional schools of craft such as Penland School of Craft outside tiny Penland, North Carolina, John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina and Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee continue to teach folk crafts and skills to new generations of craftsmen.

The oldest crafters in the hills, in point of tradition, are the Cherokee, working on their lands at the eastern edge of the Great Smokies. In this last stronghold of the once far-flung Cherokee domain, women still collect river cane, split oak, and honeysuckle, and painstakingly develop dyes from roots and leaves in making beautiful baskets that would make their grandmothers proud. And more than 200 Cherokee men and women merchandise their wares through the Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, a showcase of quality workmanship.

While in Cherokee, the Oconaluftee Indian Village, an authentic re-creation of a 250-year-old native settlement, comes close to being a must-see. Along the path, craftsworkers practice ancient ways. Women do basket weaving and pottery making, decorated and fired in full view. A brave fashions blowguns and darts. At the seven-sided council house, the guide explains the meaning of hand carved masks used in the traditional eagle dance.

Although Great Smoky Mountains National Park is essentially a natural area, it too features cultural displays. On the North Carolina side of the park at the Oconaluftee Visitor Center, travelers can view historic buildings moved there from local areas that showcase a typical homestead of an early settler in the region. In a lowland near Gatlinburg, on the Tennessee side of the park, an eleven-mile loop road leads through Cades Cove, which continues to present the scene of open fields and farms, water-powered gristmill, homesteads and frame churches.

Cades Cove is very popular, plainly reflecting a strong public desire to look back to an American age of self-reliance and simpler ways. Busy tourist weekends are not the best days to explore Cades Cove – better to choose a quiet time. Generally speaking, however, in any season mountain crafts bespeak of culture and tradition. There could hardly be a better place to find relief from high-paced modern tempo and technology than in these hills.

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