

# ADVENTURES

## ALONG THE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY



PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Grandfather Mountain with its Swinging Bridge is a busy visitor attraction when fall colors peak in October.

Plan a leisurely drive down the Appalachia highway – taking detours along the way

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As road-trippers, some motorists behave like hares, some tortoises. Hares push the speed limit on the interstates to pass semi-trucks and slowpokes while tortoises stick to back roads, dawdle to enjoy the scenery and take detours.

I played tortoise and scored a fairy-tale win on the Blue Ridge Parkway through southwest Virginia and northwest North Carolina. While the hares raced down Interstate 81 that roughly parallels the parkway, I eased into a leisurely pace on this two-lane ribbon of asphalt where the speed limit maxes out at 45 mph. At roadside lookouts, I gawked at the misty Blue Ridge Mountains and took time to hike the web of forest trails spiraling off this long, skinny national park.

### Linking national parks

The parkway meanders 469 miles between Shenandoah National Park and Great Smoky Mountains National Park and draws road-trippers in spring, summer and autumn. Construction began in 1935 as a work project during the Depression. Landscape architect Stanley Abbott envisioned a scenic highway lying gently on the land, following the ridgeline with few straight stretches. No billboards, no big commercial vehicles.

I began at Milepost 0 where Shenandoah National Park ends and the parkway begins. Temperatures in the valley on that July day hovered around 90 degrees but dropped to the 70s on the ridge. After moseying along for 122 miles, I fell in love with the drive and decided to return in October to continue an additional 182 miles during fall-foliage season.

My first stop at Milepost 5.8 took me to the outdoor farm museum at Humpback Rocks, one of several places on the parkway offering snippets of Appalachian history and culture. Walking past a log cabin and pioneer outbuildings I came to a trail leading to the distinctive Humpback Rocks, a landmark guiding wagon trains in the 1840s. The short, steep path to the rocks joins the rugged Appalachian Trail meandering 100 miles along the Virginia stretch of the parkway.

### Take detours

I chose to save my legs for a hike in Natural Bridge State Park, just off the parkway. As I walked under the 215-foot-tall limestone bridge, the remains of a collapsed cave, I craned my neck to make out initials carved by George Washington when he surveyed the site. Another future president, Thomas Jefferson, bought the bridge and surrounding land from King George III in 1774 for the equivalent of \$2.40.

Another detour at Milepost 85.9, the Peaks of Otter Visitor Center, took me to the National D-Day Memorial outside Bedford, Virginia. This small town



A detour from the Blue Ridge Parkway leads to Natural Bridge State Park and a 215-foot-tall limestone bridge once owned by Thomas Jefferson.

### If you go

**Blue Ridge Parkway:** [nps.gov/blri/index.htm](https://www.nps.gov/blri/index.htm)

**Primland, Auberge Resorts Collection:** [aubegeresorts.com/primland/](https://www.aubegeresorts.com/primland/)

**Chetola Resort:** [chetola.com](https://www.chetola.com)

**Sorrento's:** [bannereitkvilleage.com/sorrentos-italian-bistro/](https://www.bannereitkvilleage.com/sorrentos-italian-bistro/)

**Stonewalls:** [stonewallsrestaurant.com/](https://www.stonewallsrestaurant.com/)

suffered the highest per capita loss of inhabitants during this turning point in World War II. A plaza ringed by bronze plaques bearing the names of 4,415 Allied troops who died during the invasion was especially moving. An impressive 44.5-foot arch loomed over the names of the five beaches where the battle raged in Normandy, France.

Parkway detours not only lead to Blue Ridge attractions, but also to road-tripping necessities. You won't find gas stations on the parkway; food and lodging are few and far between; cell service is spotty. Sections of the road close when it snows or need repair. One such detour routed me around Roanoke, Virginia, biggest city on the parkway and the place where my summer road trip ended and my autumn one began.

### Leaf-peeping on the parkway

I timed my return to Roanoke in mid-October for peak fall foliage, but learned parkway elevation, which varies 5,000 feet, means trees turn first at the highest levels. At Mabry Mill, Milepost 176.2, elevation 2,913

feet, fall colors had just begun to frame the historic mill, often cited as the most photographed spot on the parkway. While I waited for a table at the tiny restaurant, I walked the Mountain Industry Trail where national park rangers demonstrated pioneer tasks.

My lodging for the night took me off the parkway to Primland, a 12,000-acre estate, part of the Auberge Collection of luxury resorts known for fine dining at Elements and its variety of lodging choices, including treehouses. The Blue Ridge vista from my cottage on the edge of a gorge took my breath away as did the otherworldly view of planets and galaxies from telescopes in the resort's mountaintop observatory, perhaps the most unusual in its broad menu of facilities and activities.

Appalachian tunes prompted me to pull over at Milepost 213, the Blue Ridge Music Center where a band played on the breezeway. These casual weekday performances happen May to October with larger concerts in an amphitheater on weekends. Inside the center's Roots of American Music exhibit, I learned traditional instruments and songs of the Blue Ridge evolved from African, Scottish, Irish and English influences.

### On to North Carolina

Crossing into North Carolina, more fall colors emerged as the elevation climbed, as did the number of vehicles sharing the road. This stretch of the parkway gets twice as much traffic as the Virginia section.

At Milepost 294, Moses H. Cone Memorial Park reveals how the upper crust lived on the Blue Ridge at the turn of



Motorists on the Blue Ridge Parkway detour to Bedford, Virginia, where the National D-Day Memorial honors 4,415 Allied troops who died during the World War II invasion.



The Roots of American Music exhibit at the Blue Ridge Music Center, Milepost 213 on the Blue Ridge Parkway, details the evolution of traditional songs and musical instruments of the region.

the last century. Once the 3,500-acre estate of a denim manufacturer, its 23-room mansion houses the Parkway Craft Center devoted to the work of regional artists.

One of the estate's old carriage roads connects to Chetola Resort, my home for the night. Fall foliage near peak ringed a lake on the 78-acre family vacation property in Blowing Rock, North Carolina, one of the few towns right on the parkway. Along with modern condos and lodge rooms, guests can stay in a 1940s-style bed-and-breakfast in the resort's former manor house, site of the popular Timberlake Restaurant.

I couldn't pass up a chance to see the town's namesake and the state's oldest tourist attraction, the Blowing Rock. This jagged cliff hangs over a 3,000-foot-deep gorge forming a flume where winds blow back items tossed over the edge. No wind that day, so I peered across the gorge to distant Mount Mitchell, the highest point east of the Mississippi River at 6,684 feet, and Grandfather Mountain, 5,946 feet, my next destination just a mile off the parkway.

A nonprofit attraction approaching the summit of Grandfather Mountain has a nature center, wild animal enclosures and a café serving juicy, two-patty Mile-High Burgers. Its biggest draw, the Mile High Swinging Bridge, stretches 228-feet above an 80-foot-deep chasm. About halfway across the steel suspension bridge, a marker informs walkers with shaky legs they have reached an elevation of 5,280 feet — yup, that's a mile — at this point on

the mountain. Once I found my footing, I paused to enjoy a 360-degree view of slopes cloaked in peak fall finery.

I made my basecamp for exploring Grandfather Mountain in Banner Elk, North Carolina, a one-stoplight town with a surprising number of highly rated restaurants. Family-run Sorrento's Italian Bistro makes a stuffed eggplant dish I still dream about. On a Friday night at Stonewall's, a long-running restaurant with an old-school vibe, a server slid a juicy slice of prime rib in front of me while I giped about the crowds of leaf-peepers.

"Just wait until the weekend," she said.

She was right. Saturday brought a surge of traffic on the parkway. Cars, motorcycles, RVs vied for parking at scenic overlooks where a panorama unfolded in a kaleidoscope of colors. Driving over Linn Cove Viaduct hugging Grandfather Mountain, I imagined word bubbles emerging from vehicles in a spill of adjectives: amazing, gorgeous, stunning.

The viaduct, a 1,243-foot-long engineering marvel at Milepost 304, was the last link in the parkway to be completed. It opened in 1987, 52 years after the first shovel in this 469-mile-long project bit the earth.

Parkway construction finished here and so did my journey. I knew the most popular stretch of parkway still lay ahead, south toward Asheville, North Carolina. Even a tortoise can lose patience with crowds during peak fall foliage season. I headed for the nearest interstate highway and hightailed it home.