



American Adventure
Roanoke Valley, Virginia

Southern Hospitality

Rolling It Out Along
The Blue Ridge

BY PAMELA COLLINS

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Formal invitations usually aren't necessary for motorcyclists. Just knowing that a destination offers winding roads, scenic views, and/or just-gotta-taste-it cuisine provides enough impetus to jump on our bikes and set off like Chris Columbus into the wild, paved yonder. But when our target destination rolls out a rider-friendly welcome mat, it ups the fun factor. An overnight stay at Grandma's becomes more like a motorcycling version of New Year's Eve in Times Square.

Such was the case for hubby Tim and me when we pointed our handlebars toward the Roanoke Valley region in southwestern Virginia. This area offers fantastic roads worth exploring — not the least being the rider-revered Blue Ridge Parkway — mixed with artwork-inspiring scenery, a storied history, and a variety of activities, and then tops this sundae with the ultimate cherry: real Southern hospitality.

For instance, take the swanky Hotel Roanoke, a Tudor landmark that sits on a hill, prim and proper, with nary a motorcycle in sight or rumbling exhaust within earshot. Upon riding a Triumph Bonneville to its formal front entrance, a valet scurried to assist us, pointing to our “preferred” parking place — a covered (!) sidewalk near the front doors under the constant, watchful eyes of staff. Nice.

Or consider that the area’s visitor’s bureau distributes maps made just for motorcyclists, highlighting the scenic riding roads in the region. Or that Roanoke now hosts its own rally every summer, the Blue Ridge Bike Rally (August). Or that many area hotels offer discounted room rates to motorcyclists.

Additionally, the Roanoke Valley provides a huge list of activities, such as art browsing, history gathering, wine tasting, nature watching — whatever you like. We happen to enjoy all of the above, so our visit featured just that.



Top, Hotel Roanoke; Left, Pam and Tim; Right, Chateau Morrisette

Star City

Downtown Roanoke offers a lot to do in a little space. The aforementioned Hotel Roanoke and Conference Center conveniently sits at downtown’s edge. The Norfolk and Southern Railroad originally built the hotel to serve passengers in 1882; since then, it’s been burned, rebuilt, abandoned, remodeled, and restored, and now sits again in glory overlooking the city. It makes a great headquarters for exploring the region, offering its own restaurant and lounge in addition to elegant accommodations.

Downtown Roanoke is reminiscent of downtowns of yore. It bustles, it hustles, it houses great restaurants and nightclubs, shopping, and cultural endeavors, but without an uber-metropolitan, steely attitude. It’s warm, friendly, and eminently Southern. And on any night, you’ll find lots of motorcycles lining the streets. Here you’ll find such treasures as the historic Roanoke City market, the oldest continually operating open-air market in Virginia, and the Center in the Square, part-museum and part performing stage, where art, history, theater, and science coexist under one roof. Nearby, the visually stunning Taubman Museum of Art showcases contemporary, modern, folk, and decorative arts.

Travelers and gearheads should especially appreciate the Virginia Museum of Transportation. Located in the historic Norfolk and Western Railway Station, this place inspires imaginary sojourns on vehicles with more wheels than just two. Railroading is encoded into Roanoke’s DNA. This was the last

railroad in the last city in the US to make the switch from steam to diesel engines. Here, rolling stock is measured in tons, and you get a close-up look at some well-preserved steam engines. Go ahead, make the chugga-chugga noise of the train and woo-woo of a whistle — it’s appropriate. Being a museum of transportation, you will find other modes of movement on display, too, including antique cars and a few motorcycles.

Roanoke is nicknamed “Star City of the South.” A look eastward in the night sky confirms that, for on top of Mill Mountain rises nearly 90’ of neon sparkling in the shape of a star. What began as a temporary Christmas promotion decoration in 1949 proved too endearing to tear down, and this star now gleams every night as the city’s best-known landmark. You can see 60 miles from this vantage point on the mountain, and while you’re up there you should consider exploring Roanoke’s other attractions such as its zoo, hiking paths, and nature discovery center. The Blue Ridge Parkway sits a stone’s throw away.

Navigating some trails might cause you to work up an appetite, so ride on down to the Roanoker Restaurant, servicing the area since 1941. Enjoy some of its renowned red-eye gravy and biscuits in a railroad-themed dining room, named by *Southern Living* magazine as one of the five best places to eat breakfast in the South. You know the food has to be good because the local Harley Owner’s Group has a breakfast meeting here twice a month.

Wining & Riding

With both our bellies and gas tanks fueled, a good ride seemed in order, so we pointed the bikes toward neighboring Botetourt County, northwest of Roanoke. *Meandering* best describes the roads here, as they lazily twist and turn in this beautiful valley, through farm and pastureland, woods, historic towns, and over the James River. The county publishes a wine trail guide that also makes a great route map, following US Route 11 and 220, State Route 43, and various country roads. Virginia is still one of the most prolific wine-producing states in the US, and riding along you can easily believe things haven't changed much since the days of Thomas Jefferson, one of our country's first great wine connoisseurs.

Speaking of Jefferson, farther north don't miss stopping at Natural Bridge, a destination that combines elegant and motorcycle-friendly accommodations with history, natural beauty, and a dab of kitsch. Jefferson once owned this tract of land containing one of nature's works of art, a 20-story-high bridge whittled and sculpted from stone that's truly a breathtaking sight. Another of Virginia's famous sons, George Washington, originally surveyed this national historic landmark in his prepresidential days (you can see his survey mark), but its origins run eons older than that. The creek running beneath the bridge carved the span over time, and the whole place is truly inspiring. In fact, this formation was once considered one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World. Natural Bridge also offers a variety of rooms, restaurants, exhibits, gift shops and the like, as well as a discount for motorcyclists staying there.

In fact, Natural Bridge lays just a 20-mile ride from the Blue Ridge Parkway, which makes it a great base for exploring the renowned road. I entered the parkway near its northern end and its lowest elevation by the James River. From there, rolling through its curves, we saw the world's appearance change as we climbed in elevation. Frequent



The Blue Ridge is an artists playground.



Natural Bridge, Virginia

overlooks provided ample reasons to stop and drink in the views, whether of distant mountain chains, low lying valleys, or sometimes just simply the clouds.

"America's Favorite Road"

The Blue Ridge Parkway stretches for 469 miles, and rises from about 600' elevation in Virginia to over 6,000' in North Carolina. The section near the Roanoke area offers riders a feast for the senses as bountiful as a Thanksgiving Day table.



The variety of terrain, abundance of beauty, and entertaining curves provide a riding experience comparable to the finest meal, leaving a motorcyclist looking to let a few notches out the proverbial belt from overindulgence. During this section through Virginia, don't forget to stop at the Peaks of Otter Area (at milepost 86), which offers lodging, a restau-

On the Wine Trail of Botetourt County.



rant, and visitor's center. Also be sure to hit the Parkway's Visitor Center and Virginia's Explore Park, just a jaunt off the Parkway at milepost 115. Here you can learn the history of the parkway and see a cool, large-scale topographical map of the entire road. Make sure to pull into the turnout at milepost 114, hop off your bike, and enjoy the view of the Roanoke River below.

Though scenic at any time of the year, the Roanoke area and Blue Ridge Parkway really explodes color in the fall. The russet and yellows lie over the mountains' folds like a cozy afghan blocking the nip of autumn's chill. Allow yourself plenty of time to meander and savor the cornucopia of colors; hurry has no place here.

Near milepost 171.5, we turned left onto Black Ridge Road for a delicious lunch at Chateau Morrisette. You'll think you found France in the heart of the Parkway, for its restaurant and winery resemble grand French estates and overlook the beautiful valley below. It serves food and wine fine enough to please any French nobleperson, but titles aren't necessary here. Near here you'll also find the



Crabtree Falls

motorcycle-only campground, Willville Motorcycle Camp.

The eastern side of the Blue Ridge gave us a different view of the area — an aquatic one. Here, southeast of Roanoke, sits Smith Mountain Lake. This Army Corps of Engineers project is 40 miles long with 500 miles of shoreline. It sits like a blue jewel in the midst of Virginia's mountains, offering visitors a seashore town vibe. Getting there is half the fun for motorcyclists because none of the roads leading to or around the lake offer any straight sections. However, they do lead to some excellent accommodations and dining, and scenic cruises, too, should you want to try out your sea legs. Smith Mountain Lake sits just 35 miles from Roanoke but feels an entire era away. This is a land of country roads and small-town living, mountain music and moonshine (called "Fulton County refreshment" in these parts). But that's the fun of travel-

ing the Roanoke Valley region: its variety offers motorcyclists so many different reasons to ride, all in one terrific area, with one of the most famous roads in the country linking them together — no formal invitations or RSVPs required. **RB**

Blue Ridge Bike Fest www.BlueRidgeBikeFest.com	Smith Mountain Lake 800/676-8203 www.VisitSmithMountainLake.com	The Wine Trail of Botetourt County www.BotetourtWineTrail.com
Chateau Morrisette 540/593-2865 www.ChateauMorrisette.com	The Blue Ridge Parkway 828/298-0398 www.NPS.gov/BIRi	The Natural Bridge Hotel and Attraction 800/533-2121 www.NaturalBridgeVA.com/Motorcyclist
Historic Roanoke City Market and Downtown 540/342-2028 www.DowntownRoanoke.org	The Hotel Roanoke and Convention Center 866/594-4722 www.HotelRoanoke.com	Virginia Museum of Transportation 540/342-5670 www.VMT.org
Roanoke Valley Convention and Visitor's Bureau 800/635/5535 www.VisitRoanokeVa.com	The Roanoker Restaurant 540/344-7746 www.TheRoanokeRestaurant.com	Willville Motorcycle Camp 276 952/CAMP www.WillvilleBikeCamp.com