

Getting A Grip On Roanoke

By KATELYN WESSELL Journal & Topics Travel Writer | Posted: Tuesday, January 24, 2012 7:09 pm

I was holding on for dear life as the driver accelerated steadily up the massive Virginia Blue Ridge Mountain, named Sharp Top, which I had heard so much about.

As I clutched the door handle and prayed that a deer wouldn't jump out in front of the car on the steep ledge, all that I could think of was, "Which will be worse? The drive up or down?"

Clearly, I am not a wilderness girl. However, after only a couple of minutes and a few reassuring comments from my guide, I realized what was really happening. The Blue Ridge Parkway isn't the sort of site one can experience around Chicagoland. Sharp, the tallest of the "Peaks of Otter," a series of three rounded, weathered mountains, stands tall at approximately 3,862 feet, and is actually only one of a plethora of mountains in the Blue Ridge Range.

Shortly after the initial sensation of ascending the rugged ridge did I relax, look out my window and take in what to me is true American outdoor splendor. It was pretty obvious that an escape into the quietness and radiance of these mountains, in the midst of crisp, fresh air that actually smells and looks clean was exactly something that everyone should feel and experience.

We continued to drive along the eerily quiet mountains of the Blue Ridge, losing track of time, watching the pre-twilight sun escape through the tops of leafless trees that were so compacted with branches that it would be a tree climber's Mecca, until finally it was time to make our descent.

The mountains, located primarily in Bedford County, neighbor to Roanoke, were only a short, and rather splendid panoramic drive from my lodgings at the famous nationally historic registered landmark, The Hotel Roanoke. Their peaks were clearly visible from nearly any point in Roanoke. If a drive along the Blue Ridge Highway isn't in the cards, a visit to the famous Roanoke Star should be. It was constructed in 1949 and sits proudly atop Mill Mountain. It is easily accessible and definitely worth the view of an enormous stretch of the Virginia Blue Ridge in western Virginia.

Nestled among such serene views you will find the charming town of Roanoke. Making quite a comeback in the past five years and providing locals and visitors with a strong variety of dining and shopping options, downtown Roanoke holds a rich sense of community, quiet living and progress. It is truly a contemporary town.

If staying at Hotel Roanoke, the obvious historical jewel of the area, all one has to do is merely exit the Tudor style lodgings and select from an incredible number of cultural activities in the area. Visitors can encounter such hot spots as the Virginia Museum of Transportation or the incredible Taubman Museum of Art, which features anything from Rockwell to a variety of American pieces, and photography from Roanoke's finest. Any of these activities can be done against a backdrop that looks like art itself.

Downtown Roanoke is certainly a place of the future in that it continues to develop and advance. However, stepping right outside its borders, in the county of Bedford where the stunning Peaks of Otter are accessible, any traveler may find a multitude of options in expanding their historical interests with some notable spots well worth exploring.

The modest architectural gem, which was Thomas Jefferson's vacation home, Poplar Forest, is definitely worth a visit for anyone interested in our nation's third and perhaps most cerebral president. Shaped as an octagon and topped with Jefferson's trademark dome, Poplar Forest, served as Jefferson's getaway from post-presidential life. If really

feeling up for it, it is possible to travel from Jefferson's most famous home, Monticello, back to Poplar Forest in one day. Poplar Forest, one will quickly notice, is much more peaceful, and purposefully smaller. Today, archeologists are locating the exact original sites of trees and brush planted on the estate and replanting. The house itself continues to be restored to its original state for visitors.

If interested in something a bit more modern and more visually and emotionally stunning, a visit to the D-Day National Memorial, also located in Bedford County, a short drive from downtown Roanoke, is an absolute must see. This memorial, dedicated to those who served at and died on the beaches of Normandy on June 6, 1944, offers breathtaking views, and a place for tranquil reflection of all that was sacrificed. It is divided into three different parts: the first a representation of the preparation that went into the invasion; the second, the invasion itself; and third, a remembrance of all lives lost. In truth, it is more than a memorial to D-Day. It is really a memorial to World War II. Even on the bone-chilling cold day that I visited, there were an impressive number of people taking their time strolling around the massive grounds. This memorial also serves as a reminder to many of the locals of Bedford County, including the Bedford Boys, a group of young men from the area, who perished during the invasion. The state of Virginia suffered more casualties than any other American state on D-Day.

Immersed in plentiful cultural and historical activity, with a drop dead stunning background of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Roanoke and neighboring Bedford County offers travelers a refreshingly clear portrait of old fashioned beauty in a progressive environment. With much to do and learn in this close-knit community, which offers enough leisure and variety to last a sufficient stay, Roanoke and Bedford counties will impress any traveler looking to relax, take in a vast panorama of breathtaking nature, and grow culturally.

To learn more about the region or to make a reservation at the Hotel Roanoke, visit www.hotelroanoke.com or call 540-985-5900. To learn more about the city of Roanoke and what it has to offer visit its website, www.roanokeva.gov. To explore what more Bedford County has to offer its visitors, check out <http://www.co.bedford.va.us/>. Contact www.taubmanmuseum.org or call 540-342-5760 for any additional information regarding the Tubman Museum of Art. For more information on D-Day National Memorial visit www.dday.org. To discover more about Poplar Forest, visit www.poplarforest.org.