

Five reasons to love Virginia's Roanoke Valley

BY LIZ CAMPBELL

The license plates say: Virginia is for lovers. They could have added: of history, of wine, of nature, and so much more. And nowhere are all these brought together more forcibly than in the Roanoke Valley.

In the heart of the spectacular Blue Ridge Mountains, this valley was a hub of travel for trail blazers like Daniel Boone who chopped their way through the wilderness to Kentucky, as well as for the earliest pioneers crossing the wide expanse of America on the Great Wagon Road, in search of a better life. A young George Washington passed this way in 1776 to inspect the frontier forts.

Standing on the top of Mill Mountain in the City of Roanoke, one gets a panoramic view of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the calmly flowing Roanoke River. One can almost picture lines of covered wagons slowly making their hopeful way west. At the top of this mountain is a giant star, perhaps in tribute to the stars which guided the early pioneers through this valley.

But the star might guide you here for a host of other reasons. Here are five I found most compelling:

Reason 1: The wineries

Most wineries offer tours, but in this area, there's food, music and even star gazing.

At Virginia Mountain Vineyards, we sample some lovely wines — my favourite is Trinity, a full-bodied blend of Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Merlot — dine on chili and bagels (where's the lox?), then head outside to get close-ups of the moon and stars, courtesy of the Roanoke Astronomy Club and their telescopes.

A good reason to visit the Blue Ridge Vineyard is a chance to meet its feisty owner and winemaker, Barbara Kolb. Her idea of a wine tour includes generous samplings of laughter along with the wine. In the barn, I sip a glass of their Big Bear Red, a bold Cabernet Franc blend, and devour a big plate of pulled pork and beans, while my toes keep time to bluegrass rhythms of Blinky Moon. Food, wine and music are a regular feature throughout the warm months.

At Château Morrisette, take the time to do a proper tasting and tour, then sit under the umbrellas in the warm sunshine for an afternoon of music. Their oak aged Cab Franc is a must try.

Reason 2: The Blue Ridge Parkway

Running for 750 kilometres through the Southern Appalachian Mountains, this highway meanders its way along, offering dozens of spots along its length that offer spectacular views of mist-shrouded mountains, wildflower strewn pastures and even waterfalls. Hiking trails along its route beckon and we tackle the gentle Roaring Run trail near Eagle Rock, a short distance from Roanoke. Crossing footbridges in easy stages we find ourselves at the splendid waterfall whose torrent gives this area its name. With each season, the trees offer a changing panorama of colour, from the soft greens of spring to the vibrant reds and yellows of the fall.

But this trail offers history too. Near its start is a

Spectacular views and fine wine abound



A trip for lovers

NO NEED TO WORRY: At first glance it may seem like the woman on the ledge at the Taubman Museum of Art may be in danger, but in fact, as a sculpture, she's just where she's meant to be.



BLUEGRASS AND RED WINE: Blue Ridge Vineyard's tour not only includes generous samples of its signature vintages like Big Bear Red, but also pulled pork and traditional mountain music courtesy of Blinky Moon.

furnace built in the mid-1800s to extract iron from hematite. Iron was needed then for the rapidly growing country for everything from farm machinery, tools and wagon wheels to muskets. Long since abandoned, Roaring Run is one of the few remaining furnaces standing on public land.

Reason 3: Roanoke

Roanoke started life as Big Lick, named for the large outcropping of salt that drew animals to the area. It was — thankfully — renamed Roanoke in 1882. This pretty, bustling town is small enough to walk around comfortably, though there's a free shuttle bus that circles the centre should your energy flag. My favourite spot is the central market square and the still thriving farmer's market. The Saturday market is so large it spills onto the streets in joyful enterprise, and with so many nearby boutiques and restaurants, I find myself wanting to take home too many things that simply won't fit in my airline bag.

In an effort to restrain the shopping gene, I head to the nearby Taubman Museum of Art, a few steps away. An eclectic collection of old and new, the Taubman seems to foster new, young artists by giving them an outlet for their creations. By the way, look up from outside and your heart will stop. It seems as if there's a young girl, her hair blowing in the wind, perched on the edge of the building. She's a sculpture!

Also near the centre of town is the Virginia Museum of Transportation. One of the earliest American railways, the Norfolk & Western Railway, linked the coast to the city of Roanoke which

became a hub. At the museum, a fascinating blend of history and big, big trains capture my attention. And there are little trains too — racing around the biggest, most exciting model railway complex I've ever seen. It's for the kid in all of us.

Probably my favourite museum of all time is the O. Winston Link museum which features the photography of this pioneer of the art. Link was a railway aficionado and went to extraordinary lengths to capture his passion in photos. It's a must-see.

Reason 4: The Hotel Roanoke

The days of the grand hotels are gone. But a few of these elegant ladies remain to remind us of a bygone age. This is one. Built in 1882, it started life as a Queen Anne building but the popularity of all things Tudor in the 1930s saw it remodelled with massive Tudor beams. Today it stands foursquare, at the top of a rise, dominating the landscape of downtown Roanoke.

If you can't manage to stay here, take the time to visit the grounds and the beautiful palm court, another throwback to the early part of the 20th century, when afternoon teas and a palm court orchestra were the order of the day.

The Regency Dining Room at the hotel is a must and your meal here must start with their famous peanut soup and spoonbread. For the cautious, chef Billy Raper makes a miniature taster served on a small board. I'm surprised to find I really enjoy this specialty.

Reason 5: Shopping

Now I'm not talking about malls



GREAT OUTDOORS: There are many beautiful, natural sites along the Blue Ridge Parkway including the waterfall at Roaring Run.

and outlets. And the city market is just the start. An iconic spot in this area that draws people from around the world is Black Dog Salvage. In the charming Town of Grandin, this spot really is a salvage centre with 3,700 square metres of architectural treasures, stained glass, antiques, junk and most importantly, Sally, the black lab for whom the whole operation has been named. I only manage a couple of hours but one could easily spend a contented day exploring this place.

Historic Grandin also boasts a great

second hand bookstore which rejoices in the name, Too Many Books and two spots for the foodie. Pop's Ice Cream bar is serving pumpkin ice cream the day we visit — yum — and sports the irreverent sign, "You've got a friend in cheeses." Around the corner, Viva la Cupcake offers us a taste of gorgeously light, airy cupcakes in incredible flavours. There's even a Guinness stout with a Jamieson glaze for the Irish tippler. Check their website if you don't believe me.

Virginia is definitely for lovers. I have to say, I loved it. 🍷