

TRAVEL

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What a Trip: Virginia's Blue Ridge rolls out the green carpet

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POSTED: 11/07/2013 01:19:34 PM PST

UPDATED: 11/07/2013 01:19:37 PM PST

Remember the television show "Mayberry RFD?" You may be surprised to know that Mayberry is a real community in Patrick County, Va. The 1960s sitcom, filmed in the town of Mount Airy along the Virginia-North Carolina border, 12 miles southeast of Blue Ridge Parkway milepost 200, could just as easily have been filmed in the Roanoke Valley, Botetourt or Floyd County, Va.

While driving along Virginia's back roads, I half expected to run into the fictitious Opie Taylor, fishing for trout, when I stopped to hike beside Roaring Run Creek in Eagle Rock, Virginia. There are so many ways to experience Virginia and the Blue Ridge Parkway -- from Mini Cooper to motorcycle and RV to B&B.

Steam trains may no longer be running through Roanoke Valley, but train buffs will be able to take in more than 50 pieces of rolling stock, including steam locomotive 1218, at the Virginia Museum of Transportation. Families with children should take a walk along the Railwalk, an easy half-mile walk with interactive displays, detailing the railroad history in Roanoke.

Plan to stop at Virginia's Explore Park and learn about the 469-mile parkway and their greenway plans. Take in the 30-minute movie exploring the parkway's history, this ribbon of road surrounded by mountains older than the Himalayas, and chat with the knowledgeable staff. Be sure to detour off the Parkway to experience the regional foods, crafts, music and wine.

As Explore Park Executive Director Deborah Pitts explains, "When I travel, I always look forward to returning to the Blue Ridge Mountains. The mountains reach out and hug you."

SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY

"It's like having dinner with your neighbors."

That's how a retired couple from nearby Blacksburg, Va. described their weekly pilgrimage to The Homeplace Restaurant, a 1907 farm house, located in Catawba, serving family-style southern specialties like crispy fried chicken and salty Virginia ham with dirt cheap prices to match.

During my fall foliage visit, I encountered plenty of Southern hospitality, from waitresses at the Roanoker Restaurant serving the lightest biscuits with gravy to the regional specialties peanut soup and spoon bread at The Hotel Roanoke.

VIRGINIA WINE COUNTRY

While sweet tea is the beverage of choice in Roanoke Valley, Virginia is currently the fifth largest wine-producing state, behind California, Washington, Oregon and New York. The Wine Trail through Botetourt County reminded me of Livermore Valley in the early days, where owner/winemakers still visit with guests and pour small-lot wines at affordable prices.

Chateau Morrisette, the granddaddy of Virginia, takes up residence in a large timber-framed building, producing 80,000 cases of wine, the largest winery in the state. I was pleasantly surprised with their Chateau Morrisette Blackberry Wine, and drooled over the ham and Brie grilled sandwich served at the winery restaurant.

VIRGINIA'S HERITAGE MUSIC TRAIL

While Virginia may be for lovers, it's also for photographers, music and art lovers. I enjoyed poking around the tiny town of Floyd, part of The Crooked Road, Virginia's Heritage Music Trail and a quick stop at Mabry Mill. This grist mill, built around 1910, has been restored by the National Park Service and is the most photographed feature on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

I would have liked to have spent more time in Floyd, this eclectic community of artisans, farmers and musicians, but as the saying goes, "always leave them wanting more."

Visit Nancy's blog at www.nancydbrown.com (<http://www.nancydbrown.com>)

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Botetourt County Office of Tourism: www.Botetourt.org (<http://www.Botetourt.org>)
- Chateau Morrisette: www.TheDogs.com (<http://www.TheDogs.com>)
- Virginia's Blue Ridge: www.visitvablueridge.com (<http://www.visitvablueridge.com>)
- Virginia's Explore Park: www.explorepark.org (<http://www.explorepark.org>)
- Virginia Museum of Transportation: www.vmt.org (<http://www.vmt.org>)

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