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Step back in time at Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains

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MCCLATCHY-TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

ROANOKE, Va. _ You don't have to pop into Doctor Who's phone booth or hitch a ride in Doc's DeLorean to experience time travel today. A visit to Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains can take you back to a simpler time when the stirrings of country music bounced off log cabin walls and Indian footpaths beckoned Lewis and Clark.

With the city of Roanoke as your hub, there are all kinds of sites to explore. Head south on the Blue Ridge Parkway, 469 miles of pristine landscape unblemished by billboards and gas stations.

From Highway 220 ease on down the 40 along the fabled Crooked Road, Virginia's musical heritage stretch, where impromptu music fills the byways. It was in this Appalachian region that the Germans introduced the dulcimer, West Africans brought the banjo, Europeans the fiddle. This ethnic music was amalgamated into what we know as bluegrass or rockabilly.

That legacy remains all along these 333 miles, where you can discover music at the Dairy Queen, the barbershop or the bookstore.

Ferrum College, 40 miles south of Roanoke, houses the Blue Ridge Institute & Farm Museum. Its Folklife Festival in October is the largest in the area and it hosts music sessions all year long. The little museum traces the area's unique folk culture. Mid-May through mid-August you catapult back to 1800 and become one of the farm hands churning butter, mending fences and stoking the fire on the hands-on farm tour. Check the website www.blueridgeinstitute.org for info.

In the town of Floyd, the Country Store jams on Fridays at 6:30 p.m., Saturdays at noon and Sundays from 2-4 p.m. Art tours may be arranged by calling (540) 239-8509, lodging at Hotel Floyd and the Oak Haven Lodge.

You can still find remnants of these folk cultures in the food today. The Blue Ridge Restaurant in Floyd still features cat-head biscuits (yep, the size of cats' heads) and crunchy fried potatoes. In Rocky Mount, the Hub still serves brains and eggs _ a legacy of the British. Desserts especially persevere. Among the English, white coconut cake was customary, also molasses stack cake, while the Germans' contribution was fried apple pie.

There are dozens of antique shops in this area, the massive Smith Mountain Lake, and the Chateau Morrisette winery, the largest in Virginia. A short jaunt from here churns the photogenic Mabry Mill, built in 1910 and still turning after all these years.

Heading north, make a pit stop at Ikenberry Orchards, where they have been growing apples for 200 years. With 14 varieties on 400 acres, the apples are available all year long. May through October the family hosts an old-timey Farmers' Market from 8 a.m. to noon. Christmas trees, wreaths and gift baskets are sold through Dec. 23.

Nearby is the historic town of Fincastle, where its original brick courthouse was designed by Thomas Jefferson, replaced twice and rebuilt in the classic style in the 1970s. To arrange a court tour, call Tom Moore at (540) 473-8274. If you're lucky, maybe he'll dress the part.

Lewis and Clark outfitted here. In fact, it was at the 200-year-old Santillane plantation that William Clark first spied the love of his life. Told by her father to come back in four years (she was only 12), Clark did. They married and had five children. Four rooms are set aside for B&Bs. (540) 473-3898.

A home tour of the town's unique historic quarter is held in December. Information (540) 473-1167. www.visitbotetourt.com

Nearby the James River (once surveyed by George Washington himself) courses through the terrain, a perfect playground for the family. You can paddle along its peaceful banks, catch and keep your chubby striped bass or just soak in the beauty of yesteryear. Twin River Outfitters can arrange your trek down river. (540) 261-7334. www.upperjamesriverwatertrail.com,

Tobacco growing was once the paying crop and still exists in the eastern quarter. But the biggest money-maker is moonshine (white liquor), now a cash crop on a large scale, sold mostly to "nip" joints (shots cost 50 cents) in Baltimore and Philadelphia.

There's plenty to do in Roanoke itself. The town, crowned by an iconic 100-foot star on Mill Mountain, was once a bustling railroad center. The railroad still hauls coal from the southwest but other industries abide: General Electric, banking and a massive medical clinic. Virginia Tech sits 35 miles away and is a major player in the town's ethos.

The O. Winston Link Museum reflects the city's romance with the railroad. Link was a photographer in love with steam engines and the museum chronicles his extraordinary black-and-white photographs of the steam engine's last hurrah. Open Monday-Sunday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; January and February, noon to 5 p.m. (540) 982-LINK. Admission \$5.

The Taubman Museum of Art not only boasts modern art _ including two-story installations _ but is housed in a spaceship-like building that devours the landscape around it. Open Tuesday-Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Sunday and Monday. Free.

Places to stay include the triad, the Comfort Inn, MainStay Suites and Best Western, near the airport and five minutes from town _ all provide hefty continental breakfasts. Prices range from \$85 to \$125. Phone (888) 227-6639.

The "in" hostelry is the Tudor-style Hotel Roanoke. It sat empty for years following a fire and re-opened in 1938. From its art deco murals to its English walnut panels, you feel like you're adrift in "Citizen Kane." Rooms start at \$139. (800) 560-7753.

There are grand places to eat. Locals love Thelma's Chicken and Waffles, the River and Rail (specializes in local ingredients), Carlos Brazilian International Cuisine, the historic Billy's and the Wildflower Market & Bakery.

If you don't mind an hour-plus wait and masses of people, try the Homeplace in Catawba, 16 miles from Roanoke. The old-fashioned Southern cooking is worthy of any Confederate kitchen. At \$14 per person there's fried chicken, biscuits, slaw, beans and cobbler _ all served family style. Open Thursday-Sunday. Alas, they don't take reservations.

IF YOU GO:

Weather: Average high in December is 48 degrees, snowfall, 21 inches; wildflowers in March, fall colors October and November. Annual rainfall, 40 inches.

Population: Roanoke Valley region: 300,000.

Transportation: Roanoke Regional Airport serving airlines United, Delta, Allegiant, US Airways.

Car rentals: Avis and Budget, medium-sized car about \$34 a day.

Explore park on the Blue Ridge Parkway: www.explorepark.org

Information about the Santillane plantation: www.santillane.com

Information about the town of Fincastle: www.visitbotetourt.com.

O. Winston Link Museum: www.linkmuseum.org.

The Crooked Road: www.thecrookedroad.org.

Taubman Museum of Art: www.taubmanmuseum.org.

Downtown Roanoke: www.downtownroanoke.org.

The Blue Ridge Institute: www.blueridgeinstitute.org. Group tours available by calling April through October. (540) 365-4416.

Roanoke Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau: (800) 635-5535; www.visitroanokeva.com, 101 Shenandoah Ave., NE, Roanoke, VA, 24016.

Roanoke County Parks, Recreation and Tourism: www.roanokecountyva.com.