

MINNESOTA GOOD AGE

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SAFE AT HOME

Measures that will allow you to stay in your home as long as possible

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ROANOKE GONE WILD

Though flooded and foggy at the time, Roanoke is still spectacular thanks to great hiking and history.



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HOME SAFETY

Our homes should be the place where we feel the safest and most secure.



Hiking and History

*There's plenty to
love about Virginia*

BY KATHLEEN STOEHR



I did not shoot the photo that opens this article. The weather I encountered the day I decided to hike a portion of the Appalachian Trail outside Roanoke, Virginia did not allow for such a nice view. Fog. Thick, lazy fog obliterated my view of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Roanoke and Catawba Valleys below, vapor so dense and humidity so high, my glasses were fogging up as I reached my destination: McAfee Knob, a finger of rock pointing toward the mountains in the distance.

At about mile three of the 3.9 miles we needed to trek to get to our destination, I said to my companion, "This better be good!" Not that I mind hiking, but the first half of this trip is predominantly an upward slope. Oh, my quadriceps.

I had always wanted to hike this trail, but the urge to do it increased after I read the book *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed, an autobiography documenting her 1,100-mile hike of reinvention along the Pacific Crest Trail. Not that the book resonated with me so deeply that I felt I had to take a similar life-transforming journey, but more so that testing the boundaries of my own physical being and stamina seemed like a fine thing to do at this point in my life. And I'd hoped to see some good wildlife, too.

The night I arrived in Roanoke, all hell had broken loose. The city received four inches of water in less than an hour and flooding had occurred — like nothing the city had experienced before. There were cars that had taken a highway exit for the downtown area turning around and heading back up the off ramp (caution: lake ahead!); I heard later that people were kayaking in the streets. I also saw a guy standing in the highway median strip, water up to his hips.

Thus, the fog later on as the area began to dry up.

In any case, I made it to the Knob, looked out, and laughed at the obfuscated landscape (normally a 270 degree panorama of beauty). Then I pulled out my trail mix and water bottle and celebrated climbing to one of the most photographed yet difficult-to-reach areas on the Appalachian Trail. And though I could not see far, nearby were spider webs covered with dew, lichens the color of lemons, and vibrant caterpillars inching their way along rocky ledges.

And then it was time to return to the car. Luckily (or maybe not so luckily) the return trip was downhill. Oh, my calf muscles!

I chuckled to myself, too, on the trip down as a young family passed me. Their little boy, maybe 10, was wailing, "I'm not going to make it!" as he dragged his feet dramatically over the rocky terrain. Believe me — if I can make the climb, little man, you can, too.

HUNGRY?

I did that hike a lot faster than most — about eight miles in four hours, which included the half hour I spent on the top. Number of steps? iPhone says 21,285. So anyway, I was HUNGRY upon return. Now, while most people would go straight to The Homeplace Restaurant, THE place for hikers and Virginia Tech students to put on the feedbag (they were actually closed for a vacation, of all things), I headed into town to Grace's Place Pizzeria to load up on carbs. This is good for two reasons. One, because I'd read that the wait at Homeplace can reach up to two hours at certain times of the day, and two — pizza by the slice, a fresh salad bar, and the nicest couple of restaurant owners and servers one could →

ever hope to meet. Plus, up the street a half block is Viva La Cupcake, with some of the craziest and delicious dessert confections in town.

Because of the rain, my half-day kayaking trip on the mighty James River had to be jettisoned. Water levels were very high and possibly concealing obstructions such as branches, rocks, and who knows what else. No worries — how about a wine tour instead? The valley has plenty of vineyards! The one I'd recommend above all others is Blue Ridge Vineyard, with its shabby chic decor and superior tasting wines. I wanted to stay all day, sipping wine and looking out at the mountains. The serving area is in an old barn, with most walls removed. Chandeliers drip from the ceiling, the tables are awash with flowers, and candles dot the area. So rain or not, you can sit in/outside and marvel at the mountains, spacious pasture, and maybe spy some wildlife. Plus, Jake the dog and his mate, Sam will wander through to keep you company, or entertain while trying to flush some critter out of the many trees aligning the property.

HISTORY

One of the most interesting aspects of visiting the south, at least for me, is the deep sense of history that pervades the

area. While Virginia wasn't admitted into the union until 1788, the Colony of Virginia was established in 1607 as one of the 13 colonies of the New World. Virginia was a focal point for many wars: the French and Indian, the American Revolution, the Civil War, to name a few. And, eight of our U.S. presidents were born in the state, including our first, third, fourth, and fifth (Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe).

I was able to explore a portion of Botetourt County (it's pronounced Bot-a-tot) including the town of Fincastle, which is nationally recognized and dedicated as a Lewis & Clark community and is truly a virtual museum of American architecture from the late 1770s and on; and had lunch at the White Oak Tea Tavern, a pub-style tearoom circa 1783. I was also able to gain access to the Botetourt County Courthouse to look at some of the historic documents: marriage registers from the 1700s, and papers with the signature of Thomas Jefferson upon them. I wish I could tell you about the amazing long bearded mountain man I spied sitting in a back room at the courthouse but without

a photo to accompany my tale, you'd never believe me. Nonetheless, mountain man — you were a true delight and surprise to behold.

Nearby is historic Franklin County that is home to the Washington National Monument — Booker T. Washington, that is, and the birthplace of this prominent educator and orator of the late 19th century.

There are also a great number of truly good museums in the area. There are three in Roanoke you should spend some time in: the O. Winston Link museum, dedicated to this fine railway photographer, the Taubman Museum of Art, and the Virginia Museum of Transportation with the largest collection of diesel locomotives in the South. Also, if you take some time at Center in the Square, a beautifully renovated building in downtown Roanoke, you can visit the Science Museum of Western Virginia on one level, the Harrison Museum of African American Culture on a different level, and the History Museum of Western Virginia on yet another level. Spectacular!



Details

Checking in: Try the Cambria Suites in Roanoke (cambriasuitesroanoke.com). It was very clean, well priced, and the staff very pleasant. I'd definitely stay there again. But if you are hankering for a little history, you should definitely stay at The Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center (hoteloranoke.com), dripping with antiquity. And bonus: its Regency Room has the very delicious peanut soup, on the menu year round. Save room for the whiskey sauced bread pudding, too.

Dining: Beyond what I mentioned above, you can have a big breakfast at The Roanoker, recently named one of Virginia's five best breakfast spots; a great rack of ribs at Blues BBQ; and be sure to go to Carlos Brazilian International Cuisine, sit out on their patio overlooking the mountains and order a caipirinha.

Don't miss this: Start at the Star — The Roanoke Star and Overlook for a bird's eye view of the city from this historic landmark on Mill Mountain. It has been in place since 1949 and shines brightly over the city. I could see it from my hotel window, many miles away.