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Traversing the Appalachian Trail

By: RoseAnna Schick, Travelations**Posted: 06/11/2014 9:37 AM | Comments: 0**

PHOTO BY ROSEANNA SCHICK

[Enlarge Image](#)*Roaring Run Falls, part of the Roaring Run Recreational Area in Botetourt County, Va.*[Photo Store](#)

When the railroad came to Virginia's Roanoke Valley in 1852, an entire nearby town uprooted, moved to the tracks, and renamed itself.

It quickly became the crossroads for the Norfolk and Western Railway, and bustling marketplace. Today, Roanoke is still a centre for transportation and trade, and a gateway to fascinating history, stunning scenery, outdoor recreation, and the biggest star in the world. Literally.

Perched atop Mill Mountain is Roanoke's stellar attraction: the world's largest man-made star. This 30-metre-high structure is made of illuminated steel and concrete, visible at night from nearly 100 kilometres away. It's a longtime landmark for aviators, and earned Roanoke the nickname "Star City of

the South."

In the middle of Roanoke is Center in the Square, containing museums, a theatre, rooftop pavilion, and an indoor 6,000-gallon living coral reef aquarium — the largest in the mid-Atlantic. Within it live 250 colourful marine fish, numerous sea creatures, and 150 live coral. It grows and changes over time, meaning no two visits are ever the same.

A downtown walking tour reveals the historic Roanoke City Market, one of the oldest markets in the country. The one-kilometre railwalk is a pathway along an outdoor museum detailing the history of the railroad. The Virginia Museum of Transportation is home to automotive and aviation exhibits, the largest collection of diesel locomotives in the South, and the wonderfully restored steam engine No. 1218.

Just minutes northwest of Roanoke lays the Appalachian Trail, one of the world's most well-known adventure destinations. The trail measures 3,508 kilometres and spans 14 states, traversing crests and valleys of the Appalachian mountain range from Georgia to Maine. While two-to-three million people visit the trail annually, only a handful attempt to "thru-hike" — or travel the entire thing.

One of these thru-hikers is Vince, our guide for a day of hiking to McAfee Knob. This stunning overhang at 954 metres juts out into thin air like a diver's platform, and is one of the most photographed sites on the entire trail. Reaching McAfee Knob from the parking area is a steady climb of 518 metres in just over 6.4 kilometres, and an awesome workout. Most of the gain is in the final third portion, so if the beginning ascent is hard, it only goes up from there. The journey is worth every step, though, and the nearly-panoramic view from the top is simply breathtaking.

You'll find easier hiking for the whole family at Roaring Run Recreational Area in Botetourt County. Go in one direction and come across an historic 19th century iron furnace. In the other direction, the trail skirts cascading rapids, crosses five footbridges, lines canyon walls, and eventually, reaches the picture-perfect Roaring Run Falls, one of the most beautiful, easily-accessible spots I've ever seen.

We got to glimpse more idyllic outdoors during a paddle on the Upper James River Water Trail, the scenic tributary that winds through the valley of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Those same mountains that John Denver sang about.

For an outdoor adventurer, almost heaven indeed.

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