THE FALL ISSUE | VIRGINIA AND NORTH CAROLINA

A quilt of autumn hues, history

Along the Blue Ridge Parkway, fall colors meet traditional culture and food.

KELLY MERRITT
REPORTING FROM
THE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY

When the Blue Ridge Parkway beckons me, I answer, especially in autumn, when I long for its twists and turns, its waterfalls, natural gardens, forests and upland meadows that dot its nearly 500 miles in Virginia and North Carolina.

Little has changed here in the 75 years since parkway construction began, permanently linking Virginia's Shenandoah National Park in the north and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the south. It took 52 years and hundreds of workers to complete this public works project, which helped Appalachia climb out of the Great Depression.

Thanks to varying elevations, a drive in October and even into early November will yield good views of fall hues. Hickory, tulip poplar and ash are ablaze with yellows, and reds burst forth from dogwood, maple, sumac and sourwood trees. This year mountain ash trees at higher elevations have an outstanding crop of bright red berries. To hear a fall color report, call (828) 298-0398 and press 7.

It may tell you about the leaves, but it won't tell you about the loaves of homemade bread. And apple and pumpkin butter. And mountain honey and homemade pies. Wayside gourmets will find a bounty in mountain cafes and fresh market stands in tiny mountain communities just off the roadway. Add an order of fried chicken, a picnic blanket and a scenic overlook, and you've got yourself a respite unlike any other I've experienced.

I've spent a lot of time in the area. My family used to pile in the car for fall color drives along the parkway, and I even went to summer camp here. In fact, I met a boy here when I was 13, and even though our families made the annual pilgrimage to see the change of seasons, our paths didn't cross again until we were well into our 30s. In fact, 27 years to the day we met, we married.

But ours is not a singular romance; others have a fondness for this region, which attracts visitors from all over the world. Margaret and John Sidaway, for instance, recently traveled from their home in West Midlands, England, to vacation along the Blue Ridge Parkway. They flew 4,000 miles and drove 200 more.

"We did not stop at every highlighted spot as it would have taken us forever, but enough to take in the overlooks and view the wonderful scenery," Margaret Sidaway said. They stopped in Roanoke, Va., which has a thriving downtown historic district and some fine dining.

That's part of the joy of the parkway. You can stop hither and yon, at church picnics or community festivals. You won't find these on the Internet; you may find them advertised in the local barber shop. My advice is to take a plan with you, but go without an agenda because you never know when you might stumble on an antique car show or a mountain auction.

The Sidaways got a satisfying taste of Appalachian culture at historic Mabry Mill, one of the most photographed stops on the parkway, and Humpback Rocks. Mabry Mill, about a 90-minute drive south from Roanoke, is a step back in history to a time of gristmills, sawmills, woodworking and blacksmith shops. National Park Service employees and volunteers demonstrate skills as diverse as basket weaving, seat caning, spinning and weaving.

A Sunday stop at Mabry Mill during the color season affords a special mountain treat: the making (and tasting) of homemade apple butter and the playing of old-time music. (Weather may affect some activities; see *www.blueridgeparkway75.org* for details.)

The massive rock formation known as Humpback Rocks near Waynesboro, Va., served as a landmark for wagon trains traversing Virginia's Howardsville Turnpike, used to transport goods across the Blue Ridge Mountains during the 1840s. A single-room log cabin and outbuildings at the Humpback Rocks visitor center (at Mile 5.8) represent 19th century life. From late May through October, costumed role players show visitors how weaving, basket making, gardening and other tasks occupied the lives of settlers.

"We found it very interesting to think of the hard life they must have endured, carrying water up and down a steep slope compared with today's running water," Margaret Sidaway said.

But, oh, what a backdrop.

To learn more, go to *www.blueridgeparway.org* or *www.nps.gov/blri*.

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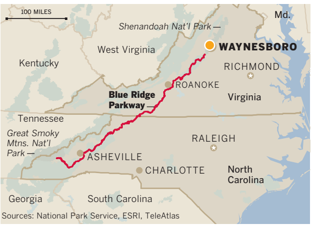
KELLY MERRITT

MILESTONE: There are scenic waterfalls and sites along the parkway, which celebrates its 75th anniversary in 2010. Construction began in September 1935.

Virginia Tourism Corp.

STAR: The Roanoke Star on Mill Mountain is meant to symbolize the Virginia town's progressive spirit.



Los Angeles Times

Scenic road trips in U.S.

Northwestern U.S. and Canada

The Northwestern U.S. and Canada are veined with 10 unique roadways and four connecting trails along what has become known as the Top 10 Scenic Drives in the Northern Rockies.

If you're intent on doing one of these drives, you can start at such gateway cities as Spokane, Wash., Salt Lake City; Boise, Idaho; Billings, Mont; Denver; or Calgary, Canada; and rent a car, SUV, RV or motorcycle to explore the nearest drive.

Among them, the 400-mile Montana Scenic Loop reveals the majesty of Glacier National Park.

For part of the year, the Beartooth All-American Road in Montana and Wyoming is flanked by lush forests that lead into sugary alpine tundra at the Northern Rockies' highest elevation roads.

Info: *www.drivethetop10.com*

Louisiana

In southwestern Louisiana, the changing of seasons brings a change in the number of birds and species that thrive here. Roadside birding attracts avian enthusiasts from intermediate to advanced birders.

Nearly 90% of Louisiana's 456 species of birds have been recorded in the southwestern corner of the state.

Just 15 minutes from Lake Charles, upland mixed pine-hardwood forest, riparian hardwood forest, backwater swamp and open river land are home to waterfowl and allies, herons, egrets and riparian woodland songbirds.

Drivers won't want to miss Sam Houston Jones State Park or Holbrook Park. Among the hedgerow and scrub thickets, crested caracara and other diurnal raptors, including Swainson's hawk and Ferruginous hawk, make regular appearances.

Wise drivers gas up and bring snacks and beverages when driving and birding throughout this rustic part of Louisiana because populated stops are sporadic. The Visit Lake Charles organization offers a birding guide to help drivers build an itinerary. Don't forget to take along good binoculars. And remember: No trip to Lake Charles is complete without some of Louisiana's famous gumbo.

Info: *www.visitlakecharles.org*

The Southwest

A seemingly endless ribbon of mammoth red rocks, cactus and spellbinding views, the drive from Phoenix to Jerome, Ariz., seems to melt everyday anxieties.

Make time to stop along the way to photograph the thousands of cactuses, their arms thrown in the air.

The 900-year-old masonry walls of the Montezuma Castle National Monument in Camp Verde, Ariz., enclosed the cliff homes of the Sinagua (meaning "without water") tribe.

The drive to Jerome also takes travelers through the colorful red rocks of Sedona. Early mornings and dusk are the best times here.

Little surprises also make this drive a pleasure: a tiny fountain built into the side of a *casita*, and an ancient-yet-still-colorful graveyard of antique trucks.

Info: *www.visitsedona.com; www.azjerome.com*

— KELLY MERRITT

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