

GARDEN & GUN

Blue Ridge Parkway: Head for the Hills



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BY DAVID HANSON - DEC 09/JAN 2010

Explore the hidden gems along the Blue Ridge Parkway

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The Blue Ridge Parkway, like the Natchez Trace, is an icon of roadside culture in the South, steeped in the traditions of the regions it runs through. The Scenic, as old-time locals call it, meanders through gaps and knobs and balds, high above drive-throughs and swimming holes, Scotch-Irish settler cabins and rural churches, and

acres of hardwoods and conifers. For 469 miles it outlines the curved spine of the Appalachians of North Carolina and Virginia. In 2010 it turns seventy-five, a birthday to celebrate engineering, conservation, community, and, above all, perseverance. And no matter what season you plan to visit, here are twelve stops you simply shouldn't miss. Now hit the road.

Inn at Little Washington

If you want to start your trip off right, stay a little off the beaten path at the Gamekeeper's Cottage, the first of several new accommodations the Inn at Little Washington will be adding over the next few years. The cottage, originally part of the Mayor's House (built in the 1740s), was recently renovated and now features a dining pavilion with amazing views of downtown Washington and the surrounding mountains. Dinner across the street in chef and proprietor Patrick O'Connell's dining room is a must. Middle and Main St., Washington, Virginia; theinnatlittlewashington.com

Staunton Grocery, Milepost 0

The new face of farm-to-table cuisine lies a few miles off the parkway at an unassuming little restaurant called Staunton Grocery in historic downtown Staunton, Virginia. Chef Ian Boden never looks far for his menu: sumac-dusted quail (Green Fence Farms, five miles), young carrots (Rachel Effinger, fifteen miles), and wonderberry pepper sauce (Janet's Garden, fifteen miles). Be sure to ask for the table by the kitchen window so you can watch Boden and his team at work. 105 West Beverly St., Staunton, Virginia; stauntongrocery.com

Oddfella's Cantina, Milepost 164

When you pull into Floyd, and you will pull into Floyd, because it's the parkway's geographic intermission, go to Oddfella's Cantina. It's in a century-old soapstone building on Locust Street at the only light in town. It's quirky but charming, and you'll probably find a businessman, a hippie, and a farmer sitting side by side. Try the Highland beef burritos and something from the organic, local wine list. 110 N. Locust St., Floyd, Virginia; oddfellascantina.com

Rock Castle Gorge, Milepost 167

The best way to enjoy the parkway involves getting out of the car. It's the only way to see the colorful array of oak, hickory, maple, tulip, maple, basswood, and aspens up

close, in all their glory. And Rock Castle Gorge is the place to do it. The perfect all-day hike starts at the subalpine summit of Rocky Knob (or lower down at Grassy Knoll), wanders through tunnels of rhododendrons, and ends near the beautiful dark-water pools in Rock Creek. If you fish, bring along a fly rod. On a warm winter day cast for a ten-inch brook trout with a size-twelve Royal Wolf. If it's cold, try drifting a nymph.