

Embracing fall colors on Appalachia's Blue Ridge Parkway



• **Mabry Mill, at Milepost 176.2, is often referred to as the most photographed spot on the Blue Ridge Parkway. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier***

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My legs shook as I crossed the swinging bridge stretching across a deep gorge on Grandfather Mountain. At the midpoint, I heard applause from the far side of the steel span. Were fellow bridge-walkers cheering me on, or congratulating those ahead who'd successfully crossed?

Drawing closer, I saw a couple standing on a boulder at the end of the bridge and witnessed the embrace, the kiss, the nod "yes." Smart guy, choosing this spot and this season to pop the question. A mountaintop in North Carolina at the peak of fall colors makes a perfect place to propose marriage as the gemstone hues of reds, oranges and golds light up the surrounding slopes.

But you don't need to plan nuptials to embrace fall along the Blue Ridge Parkway. Just say yes to a mid-October road trip on this two-lane ribbon of asphalt where the speed limit maxes out at 45 mph. I drove through tunnels of technicolor trees, stopped at roadside lookouts to gawk at the misty Blue Ridge Mountains draped in autumn hues and hiked the web of forest trails spiraling off America's longest linear park.

Built as a work project during the Depression, the parkway meanders 469 miles on the backbone of the Appalachian Mountains. Operated by the National Park Service, it links Shenandoah National Park on the north with Great Smoky Mountains National Park on the south. Stanley Abbott, the parkway's landscape architect and first superintendent, envisioned a highway laying gently on the land with few straight stretches. No billboards. No big commercial vehicles.

Taking detours

Driving the entire length of the parkway could take more than a week depending on stops along the way. I had only a few days, so I chose to navigate the middle section between southwest Virginia and northwest North Carolina. Detours not only led to worthwhile attractions but to road-trip necessities because there are no gas stations on the parkway, food and lodging are scarce and cell service is nearly nonexistent. Lacking a reliable GPS, I used the parkway's Mileposts to mark distances. Numbers begin at zero on the north end and increase traveling south.

I began my journey in Roanoke, Virginia, largest metro area on the parkway. At Milepost 120.4, I detoured at Mill Mountain to stand at the base of the Roanoke Star. At 88.5 feet tall, the metal structure claims to be the world's largest free-standing illuminated man-made star. It was constructed in 1949 as a holiday decoration and became a symbol of Roanoke sitting 1,045 feet above the city. I took time to enjoy the view before visiting nearby Mill Mountain Zoo. Marking its 70th anniversary this year, the zoo serves as a sanctuary for rescued animals.

Sections of the parkway close for repairs as I soon learned when signs warned me heavy rains caused a slope failure forcing a detour from Milepost 121.4 to Milepost 135.9. Updates on closures are posted on the parkway website, [nps.gov/blri](https://www.nps.gov/blri).



Fall colors usually peak around mid-October on the Blue Ridge Parkway, starting at the highest elevations. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Ups and downs of leaf-peeping

I arrived on Oct. 12, 2021, at Mabry Mill, Milepost 176.2, expecting to see stunning fall colors at the most photographed spot on the parkway. Sadly, the leaves had only begun to turn. Elevation on the parkway varies by more than 5,000 feet and trees turn first at the highest levels. Mabry Mill, at 2,913 feet, had yet to reach its peak autumn display. No matter. The still-working 1903 mill did not disappoint, nor did Matthew's Cabin where national park rangers sat spinning wool and working a loom as pioneers here once did.

Just down the road, I detoured to my lodging for the night, Primland. Founded as the 12,000-acre private estate of a French billionaire, it is now among the Auberge Collection of luxury resorts. I arrived in time to experience perhaps its most unusual amenity, a mountaintop observatory where two massive telescopes are trained on stars and planets.

On the road again, the Blue Ridge Music Center merited a stop at Milepost 213. I could have spent all day at the "Roots of American Music" exhibit learning about traditional Blue Ridge instruments and tunes of long-ago inhabitants who shared their African, Scottish, Irish and English cultures. A band played on the breezeway of the Center; full concerts are held on weekends in an amphitheater.

About those weekends: Avoid them during the fall. This section of the parkway, from the Music Center south through North Carolina, gets twice as much traffic as in Virginia. Autumn is high season and weekends bring the biggest crowds of leaf-peepers like me. Cars, motorcycles and RVs compete for space at scenic overlooks and slow traffic to a crawl.

Elevation climbed as I drove south and autumn began to reveal more of its finery. When construction of the parkway began in 1935, the terrain had been scarred by logging, fires and erosion caused by floods. Workers planted birches, oaks, red maples, dogwoods, sassafras and black gum trees. Now they blanket mountain slopes in a riot of autumn colors.

High points

At the town of Blowing Rock, North Carolina, Mileposts 293 and 295, I couldn't resist seeing the natural phenomenon for which it is named. The state's oldest tourist attraction, The Blowing Rock, sits on a jagged cliff perched above a 3,000-foot-deep gorge. Rock walls form a flume causing winds to blow back light items tossed over the edge. The air was calm that day, so I contented myself with the view from the observation platform before heading to nearby Chetola Resort. At the entrance, I was pleased to see fall foliage at its peak mirrored in a lake on the 78-acre property. After a comfortable night's stay, enjoyable dinner and hearty breakfast at the resort's Timberlake's Restaurant, I was ready to hit the road again.



Timberlake's Restaurant occupies the ground floor of the former manor house at Chetola Resort in Blowing Rock, N.C. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

At Linn Cove Viaduct, Milepost 304, I was stunned not only by the brilliant fall colors but by the feat of engineering required to create this 1,243-foot-long section of roadway wrapped around a steep mountain slope. The challenge meant the viaduct wasn't completed until 1987, making it the last link of parkway to open 52 years after construction began.

Another detour took me a few miles off the parkway to Banner Elk, North Carolina, known for its Woolly Worm festival drawing more than 20,000 attendees on the third weekend of October. The worms -- really woolly bear caterpillars -- are said to predict the severity of winter sort of like Punxsutawney Phil on Groundhog Day. Though it counts less than 1,500 residents, Banner

Elk has several fine-dining restaurants, Sorrento's Italian Bistro and old-school Stonewall's among them, making it a solid base camp for exploring North Carolina's high country, woolly worms or not.



Chairlifts transport autumn visitors past trees displaying fall colors at Sugar Mountain near Banner Elk, N.C. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

At Sugar Mountain Resort, a chairlift glided past a bright line of trees to the 5,300-foot summit where I watched mountain bikers set off on trails down the ski run. I had my brief bout of acrophobia at Grandfather Mountain on the Mile High Swinging Bridge extending 228-feet across an 80-foot-deep chasm. Halfway across, a slat in the bridge floor marks the elevation at 5,280 feet, a mile. Tamer experiences at this nonprofit attraction include hiking trails, a nature center and wild animal enclosure where I watched black bears lumbering along a boulder-strewn lawn at feeding time.



The Mile High Swinging Bridge ranks as the most popular spot at Grandfather Mountain, an attraction in North Carolina's High Country. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

I had one more mountain to climb. At Milepost 355.4, I left the parkway near the entrance to Mount Mitchell State Park where a drive up switchbacks and a hike to the summit took me to the highest point east of the Mississippi River at 6,684 feet. On a clear day, the view from Mount Mitchell stretches 85 miles as the Blue Ridge Mountains transition to the Black Mountains along the crest of the Appalachians south toward Asheville, North Carolina.

I'd been told to plan my trip for mid-October. Now on Oct. 15 I'd reached the end of the week, experienced the peak of fall foliage and the highest elevation along the parkway. Time to leave the leaf-peeping to weekenders and head home.

If you go

Information sources:

Blue Ridge Parkway: nps.gov/blri
Virginia's Blue Ridge: VisitVBR.com
Visit Banner Elk: bannerelek.com

Where to stay:

Primland, Auberge Resorts Collection: aubergeresorts.com/primland/
Chetola Resort: chetola.com
Best Western Banner Elk: bestwestern.com

Where to eat:

Timberlake's Restaurant: chetola.com/dining-2
Sorrento's: bannerelevillage.com/sorrentos-italian-bistro
Stonewall's: stonewallsrestaurant.com

• Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored by lodgings, attractions and visitor bureaus along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

<https://www.dailyherald.com/entlife/20220918/embracing-fall-colors-on-appalachias-blue-ridge-parkway>