

NICE CURVES!

EARLY SPRING ON VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY



Early morning view from the Stonewall Jackson Hotel in Historic Staunton

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THE NICE thing about New York is that we are not, say, Boston. There are a lot of reasons this is nice, one of the more important being that we are a lot closer to places where it is warm in early March. Think about it. Particularly this week, when it's freezing cold, and there's snow blowing everywhere.

PHOTOS: 50 States, Virginia

Point the car south, though, and within a few hours, you've got daffodils and crocuses (croci?). Some years, you don't have to go much further than Delaware. This is one of those times of year when Delaware makes itself quite useful.

Last week, in search of a little warmth without having to get on a plane, I picked Virginia. I'd heard there would be sunshine and 60-degree temperatures. This is also where I knew I'd find the northern end of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

The 469-mile road begins just an hour or so west of the Washington, DC, sprawl and ends in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains in deepest North Carolina. It is a lasting legacy of the famous Works Progress Administration. The WPA, of course, was FDR's famous New Deal agency that put millions of Americans to work in the aftermath of the Great Depression.

What better time than now, as we look to jumpstart the economy again, to revisit the Parkway? Gearing up to celebrate its 75th birthday in 2010, the road is one of those projects that, if proposed today, would surely be railed against as needless pork.

Scratch that - the same argument was made over 75 years ago. While it's hard to imagine Virginia without the Parkway today, plenty in Congress had no trouble doing so back in the day. There was little doubt in their minds that the world would keep on spinning without the winding, 45-mph byway that offers some of the most stunning views in the eastern United States.

Why, said opponents, should we rubber-stamp a project that was going to only benefit (at least immediately) the states of Virginia and North Carolina? This all sounds rather familiar as you listen to critics of the stimulus bill speaking out against components such as the \$8 billion to begin work on a high-speed rail network. The project, if it gets off the ground, will employ countless bodies. This has not stopped plenty of people from slamming it as unnecessary.

What is necessary, really? The construction of the Parkway certainly wasn't, but on a sunny, clear day in late winter, when the road is so empty and relaxing it can put you in a trance if you're not careful, it is difficult to imagine anyone in opposition to the project. (Back then, as now, the concept of legacy-building appears to have been equally hard to grasp.)

Only in the United States, I like to think, could we have built a road purely designed to make us relax: Along the Parkway, there are few unwelcome distractions. Most of the time, simple pullouts and observation points are what pass for entertainment. It's like hiking in the forest, except you are in your car. This appeals, particularly considering that Shenandoah National Park is said to have one of the highest black bear counts in the country.

You could drive the Parkway end to end without too many stops, but that'd be unwise - there are simply too many detours worth making along the way. The National Park Service's recommendation of a full day and a half to complete the drive is absurd. Try a week. I spent nearly that and barely scratched the surface. To help you manage your time, here's a list of musts along the way within the state of Virginia.

By the way, I didn't see daffodils until I hit Tennessee, but I suppose that's what you get when you go looking for spring in the mountains on the last weekend in February.

8 ESSENTIAL STOPS ON THE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY

1) Luray Caverns

If you drive through Virginia on I-81, you'll see cavern come-ons aplenty. Luray is the one you want. Okay, so it gets crowded, but hey - four words: World's Largest Musical Instrument. Oh, yeah. Called the Great Stalacpipe (get it?) Organ, it was conceived years ago by a Pentagon employee from suburban Washington, Leland Sprinkle, who, upon seeing that

stalactites made noises when you tapped them, had a dream of hooking rubber mallets up to a whole bunch of stalactites. (Awesome.) It took 36 very long years to get 'r' done. But done it got, and there you have it.

Get there: Travel on Route 211 West of Skyline Drive for 10 miles.

Info: Admission \$21, www.luraycaverns.com

2) Charlottesville

Worth the trip on its own, but just because there's too much to do on a short visit (the food and wine scene is a weekend alone) in this appealing university town, doesn't mean you should leave it for some other time. Heck no. Charlottesville, quite simply, is fantastic. Progressive and smart without getting on your nerves like some similar college towns we might mention, Charlottesville is modern and productive, but at the same time laid-back (despite the fact that the famous pedestrian-only downtown mall is a mess of construction right now). If you do one thing here, besides snap a picture of the famous Rotunda on the University of Virginia campus, it should be a trip out to Monticello, just a short hop from the city center.

Get there: Route 33 from Swift Run Gap on Skyline Drive, then Route 29 South. Total trip is 30 miles.

Info: www.charlottesville.org

3) Staunton

It's the point of origin for country luminaries the Statler Brothers. It's also famously the birthplace of Woodrow Wilson - his presidential library is here, on the campus of Mary Baldwin College. Alternately forward-looking (there's a budding restaurant scene here) and rooted in tradition (Stop by Marino's Lunch on North Augusta Street, Tuesday evenings, for the bluegrass jam), Staunton, which sort of spills down the side of a steep hill, is a true comeback kid. Consider that the town's appealing Stonewall Jackson Hotel was not all that long ago on its last legs, while the walkable downtown, centered along West Beverley Street, was essentially dormant for years. A real charmer.

Get there: 12 miles west of Rock Fish Gap on I-64.

Info: www.visitstaunton.com

4) Wintergreen Resort

Ski Virginia! Or not. At this 11,000-acre mountain resort just off the Parkway, we're all about the tubing. Home to "The Plunge!" (emphasis theirs, but we concur), Virginia's largest tubing park is a great way to have some fun with any potential late-winter weather you may be experiencing. Ten-stories high and longer than three football fields, according to their calculations, it's pretty darn fun to slide down the hill without having to worry about falling over. You also don't have to worry about getting back up to the top to go again (and you will want to) - there's a conveyor lift handy. For summer fun, there's golf. For anytime, there's a spa. The accommodations are fine, if not overwhelmingly fabulous.

Get there: 1 mile from the Reeds Gap exit on Route 64 East.

Info: Inquire in advance regarding openings and closings during March. \$18 weekdays (2 hour session), \$25 weekends. wintergreenresort.com

5) Lexington

Picture-perfect doesn't begin to describe this busy little town that's home to Washington & Lee University and the Virginia Military Institute. This creates an interesting sort of energy, considering one's a liberal arts college and the other isn't really. Either way, the downtown sparkles and is an essential stop, particularly for lunch or dinner at The Red Hen, a bite-sized restaurant that's just one of many along the way that's hip to the whole farm-to-table ethic. Come to think of it, you can eat better along this route than just about any US road trip that doesn't go through major cities or, say, the Napa Valley.

Get there: Route 60 West from Indian Gap, about 10 miles.

Info: www.lexingtonvirginia.com

6) Roanoke

The largest town along Virginia's Blue Ridge backs right up to the parkway, but bulk of what there is to see and do is found right in the city's compact downtown. The Center in the Square Market district hums with activity all day long, while nearby, the O. Winston Link Museum documents the Brooklyn-born shutterbug's obsession with the railroads that blossomed into a full-blown hobby. His photography brings to life a very different era in Roanoke, when the Norfolk & Western was king around these parts. Across the tracks from the Link is the new home of the Taubman Museum of Art; if it looks like a Frank Gehry creation, that's because architect Randall Stout worked for Gehry at the beginning of his career. Don't leave without dinner at the old-school Regency Room at the Hotel Roanoke - they do a tasty She-crab soup, along with other Virginia specialties such as spoonbread and peanut soup. Of course, you also can't miss crawfish and shrimp and grits with tasso cream (or whatever else they've got going) at Alexander's on Jefferson Street. There are more restaurants, but start with these two.

Get there: 5 miles to downtown from the Parkway via Route 116

Info: www.visitroanokeva.com

7) Chateau Morrisette

Virginia's wine has been knighted by the food and drink press in recent years, but quite frankly, it isn't close to the best wine you can drive to from New York. (That honor won't be wrested from Ontario for years to come.) Still, it's just wrong to pass through the state without tasting the local tippie. This Parkway-adjacent winery makes a nice stop south of Roanoke, on your way to the state line. Famously obsessed with dogs, they've even got wines that benefit canine-related causes, such as the training of service dogs. Stop by for lunch, dinner or just a taste.

Get there: Milepost 171.5, near Floyd

Info: www.chateaumorrisette.com

8) Floyd

Talk about out on your own. More than 20 miles from anywhere, this hilltop town is old, slightly weatherbeaten and full of hippies. A popular stop on the state's Crooked Road music trail, this is a great place to spend a night as you wind down the Virginia segment of your trip. While at first glance Floyd seems like a bit of a dead end, stick around and you'll find the locals to be a friendly, often quite creative bunch. There's said to be a dozen live music venues in town - we lost count halfway through. There's also plenty of local art to check out. The thing to do, of course, is hit the Friday Night Jamboree at the Floyd Country Store on Locust Street - three hours of fun. Then there's always their Sunday afternoon jam session. The Friday wingding is often SRO, so get there early. Details at www.floydcountrystore.com.

Get there: 5 miles on Route 8 North

Info: www.floydvirginia.com