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NORTH CAROLINA

Appalachians' Blue Ridge Parkway a majestic meander

Driving the main artery of the southern Appalachians is a breathtaking trip to bountiful: gorgeous scenery, impressive waterfalls, eye-dazzling wildflowers and historic settlements.

By Kelly Gray, Special to The Los Angeles Times

March 6, 2008



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You can't hurry on the Blue Ridge Parkway. The speed limit on the main artery through the southern Appalachians is 45 mph, and it was built for meandering. Along its 469 miles, drivers will find hundreds of detours from the road: scenic overlooks with amazing views, trails that lead to waterfalls, wildflowers bursting with color and some of the oldest settlements in the country.

It's not uncommon to see deer grazing along the parkway and hawks riding thermals overhead.

Beginning in April, the wildflowers in places such as Craggy Gardens near Asheville, N.C., blooming with Catawba rhododendron and flame azaleas, give the flamboyant autumn colors a run for their money.

Neighboring Transylvania County is home to about 250 waterfalls, including Upper Whitewater Falls. The highest waterfall east of the Rockies, Whitewater plunges 411 feet. In summer, thousands zip down Sliding Rock, a 60-foot natural water slide that drops visitors into a 7-foot-deep pool at the base.

You can easily lose yourself in these mountains, so don't wander far off the well-marked trails. Or choose popular ones like Chimney Rock's Skyline-Cliff Trail Loop, which leads to the top of Hickory Nut Falls.

Families with children should check out Tweetsie Railroad, about 2 miles north of the parkway's Boone exit, and ride historic steam Engine No. 12. "Tweetsie" ran the rails of the Blue Ridge Mountains from the 1800s until 1940. It's also a theme park and packed with activities for kids of all ages. It's open from May to November on select days, so visitors should call ahead to confirm days of operation.

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