

2005

# Best of the Road



"Face jugs" stare out from display shelves at the Appalachian Craft Center.

## Meandering through the Mountains

For a full map of North Carolina and Tennessee, see pp. 74-75 & 94-95 of Rand McNally's 2005 Road Atlas.



On a clear day, the entire area covered by this Best of the Road trip can be seen from atop Clingman's Dome, the 6,643-foot peak that sits on the Tennessee-North Carolina border. The route winds through a realm of ancient mountains mellowed by time, of deep hollows harboring isolated farms, of forests that stretch unbroken to the horizon, and of national treasures such as historic Asheville, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Public markets, a subterranean lake, and fine dining are all here in the Editor's Picks, shown in bold, our way of sharing with you those special things we call "Best of the Road."

The trip begins in Asheville, a popular resort since the mid-1800s and site of the famous Biltmore Estate. Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains at an elevation of 2,200 feet, the city offers an unusual combination of Appalachian charm and cosmopolitan sophistication. Its devotion to the arts and culture earned it the nickname "Paris of the South."

Asheville's lively downtown streets brim with eclectic shops, top-notch restaurants, and elegant buildings that date back to the city's Gilded Age heyday. One such building, the Gothic Revival-style Grove Arcade, was renovated and reopened in 2002 as the **Grove Arcade Public Market**.



Fresh vegetables and fruit tempt shoppers at the Grove Arcade Public Market.

A pleasant anachronism in this age of chain stores and strip malls, the market consists of some 40 owner-operated businesses, many of which sell products and foods made or grown in western North Carolina. Food lovers flock to the stalls in the Portico Market, where vendors offer organically grown fruits and vegetables, locally made cheeses, exotic spices and herbs, and gourmet pies. (The blueberry-peach pie is a favorite.)

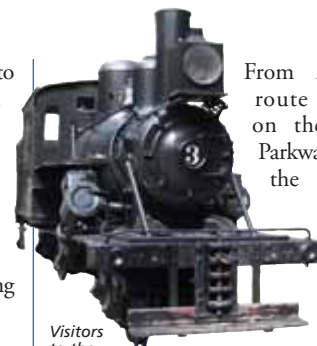
The best-known spot for arts and crafts shopping in the area is the Southern Highland Craft Guild's Folk Art Center, located five miles east along the Blue Ridge Parkway. An excellent and less pricey alternative sits just off Pack Square in downtown Asheville. The Appalachian Craft Center specializes in authentic mountain handicrafts, especially traditional pottery made by local artisans. A large

part of the store's ample space is devoted to casserole dishes, plates, and pitchers, as well as the scary-looking "face jugs" once made by African-American slaves to ward off evil spirits. Among the other handicrafts on display are wooden bowls, "friendship" brooms, quilts, looper rugs, and rustic furniture. Many of the items come from the region's best-known artisan families, including the Coles, Owensens, and Teagues.

The Asheville area boasts several world-class gardens, most notably those at Biltmore and at the North Carolina Arboretum. It also has a number of "hidden" gardens — little-known places that are well worth a visit. One of these is Jarvis Japanese Garden near Mars Hill. Created by Jack Jarvis, a landscaper who became smitten with Japanese gardens after designing one for a client, the five-acre garden incorporates the traditional elements of water, stones, and plants. Pathways wind around five koi-filled, lotus- and lily-covered ponds, past a large bonsai collection, and among a riot of colorful flowers, shrubs, and exotic trees such as a Chinese pistachio and a dwarf cherry from Mt. Fuji. Jarvis, who confesses that his neighbors in rural Madison County don't quite understand his obsession, is glad to show visitors around when he's available. Admission to the garden is free.



A miniature Japanese temple overlooks lush vegetation at Jarvis Japanese Garden.



Visitors to the Cradle of Forestry can climb aboard a 1915 logging train.

From Asheville, the route heads west on the Blue Ridge Parkway, then south to the Cradle of Forestry. This 6,500-acre section of the Pisgah National Forest commemorates the beginnings of forest conservation in the United States. It lies some 20 miles from the Biltmore Mansion but, incredibly, it falls within the estate's original boundaries. At the Forest Discovery Center, visitors can examine forestry-related exhibits and watch an 18-minute film that tells how the once-deforested landscape was nursed back to robust health by Gifford Pinchot and Dr. Carl A. Schenk around the turn of the 19th century. Two paved paths, each a mile long, meander through the surrounding woodlands, and guided tours introduce visitors to basic forestry concepts.

A few miles down the road, a turn-off leads to perennially popular Sliding Rock. Here, the waters of the Davidson River shoot 60 feet down a slanting stretch of smooth granite and into a 6-foot-deep pool. On hot summer weekends, this natural waterslide often attracts crowds in the hundreds. Stepping into the frigid waters and scudding down the rock face takes some courage, and the word "foolhardy" might come to the mind of onlookers on the observation deck, but the experience is exhilarating.



The route continues south through Brevard before climbing to the “High Country” resort towns of Sapphire, Cashiers, and Highlands. Heavy local rainfall feeds rivers and streams that cascade down the steep Blue Ridge escarpment and give this area its other nickname, “Waterfall Country.” One of the most notable cataracts is the curiously named Dry Falls, a 75-foot plunge along the Cullasaja river just west of Highlands. The falls are impressive enough when seen from the front, but a walkway allows visitors the bracing experience of walking behind the thundering curtain of water, where mist and air currents swirl against the black rock face.

Franklin, the next stop, has a rich gem-mining history that traces back to the 1870s. Today numerous commercial mines offer amateur gem hunters the chance to find — and keep — rubies, sapphires, garnets, and amethyst. The Franklin Gem and Mineral Museum, housed in an old brick jailhouse near the center of town, displays stones and minerals from North Carolina, the other 49 states, and around the world. One of its highlights is the Fluorescent Room, where mineral specimens glow in a bright rainbow of colors under black lights.



An old-time gasoline pump stands amidst a clutter of antiques, knick-knacks, toys, and gifts at the Best L'il Corner Ice Cream Parlor.

West of Franklin, the road enters sparsely populated Clay County and rolls through a wild, densely forested landscape where the pavement is often the only sign of human presence. Eventually, a Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center welcomes travelers to Hayesville, population 308, the county seat and largest town. Next door sits another welcoming place, the Best L'il Corner Ice Cream Parlor. Soda jerks at the old-fashioned soda fountain serve generously sized milkshakes, sodas, and sundaes. On Saturday nights, local musicians gather at 7 PM for a few hours of “country pickin’.”

The **John C. Campbell Folk School** in nearby Brasstown ranks as Clay County’s most famous attraction. People from all over the country come to the rustic campus to learn traditional Appalachian crafts such as quilting, wood carving, and pottery, as well as arts like watercolor painting and photography. Visitors are invited to shop in the excellent craft shop, observe classes in progress, wander the wooded pathways along Little Brasstown Creek, and have lunch or dinner in the sunny dining hall (reservations are required).

A student works to make a rocking chair at the John C. Campbell Folk School.



Bruce the cheese-maker and Karen the potter pose in front of their shop in the Yellow Branch valley.

Zigzagging northward, the route passes through Robbinsville and on to Yellow Branch, a bucolic valley that slopes down to Fontana Lake. This off-the-beaten-path spot is home to Yellow Branch Pottery and Cheese. Husband and wife Bruce DeGroot and Karen Mickler use milk from their small herd of Jersey cows to make a delicious farmstead cheese and three variations: pepper, basil, and natural rind. Mickler’s studio, where her hand-thrown stoneware is displayed and sold, also serves as cheese shop and tasting room.

Nestled within the National Forest just west of the Santeetlah Lake is a pocket of arboreal paradise called the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. Through a combination of chance, falling lumber prices, and the foresight of the Forest Service, this 3,800-acre tract of virgin hardwood forest escaped logging. It was dedicated in 1936 to the poet who penned the famous lines, “I think that I shall never see / A poem lovely as a tree.” The two-mile-long Joyce Kilmer National Recreation Trail shows off many of the most spectacular trees, including yellow poplars that measure more than 100 feet tall and 20 feet in circumference.

The road out of the forest leads to the Cherokee Scenic Skyway. Completed in 1996, this National Scenic Byway stretches some 50 miles between Robbinsville and the Tennessee town of Tellico Plains. True to its name, the Skyway climbs more than 5,400 feet into the sky as it twists along high mountain crests. More than two dozen overlooks provide expansive views of the surrounding mountains and of forest-blanketed valleys that seem untouched by civilization. Best of all, the Skyway is practically undiscovered, and travelers can feel as if they have it entirely to themselves.

After dropping out of the mountains to Tellico Plains, the route heads north to Sweetwater, home of The Lost Sea. In 1905, a 13-year-old boy discovered this large subterranean lake while exploring the extensive Craighead Caverns. Today, guides lead 75-minute tours that descend through spookily lit chambers and past unusual rock features. Reaching the lake, visitors board glass-bottom boats for a slow cruise across the lake’s still, dark waters.

Knoxville is the next stop along the way. East Tennessee’s largest city offers plenty of things to see and do, including the University of Tennessee, the National Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame, World’s Fair Park, and a lesser-known place called Ijams Nature Center. Lying along the Tennessee River just a few miles from downtown, this 150-acre preserve is a pleasant place to escape the noise and congestion of the city. Six miles of hiking and nature trails lace its hilly woodlands and meadows, and a boardwalk trail offers excellent wildlife viewing along the river’s edge.



The Tennessee River flows quietly past the boardwalk trail at Ijams Nature Center.

The main route from Knoxville to Great Smoky Mountains National Park passes through the tourist mecca of Gatlinburg. This village of 3,382 people draws 4 million visitors each year, thanks to its proximity to the park and to attractions such as Earthquake-The Ride, Ripley’s Believe It or Not Museum, and Treasure Quest Miniature Golf. Visitors looking for something a bit more “Appalachian” can hop on the Arts & Crafts Trolley and head north to the Great Smoky Arts & Crafts Community. The studios, galleries, and shops of more than 70 artisans line a winding, 8-mile-long loop road in a quiet area known as the Glades.

From Gatlinburg, a sinuous drive along the Little River and Laurel Creek leads to one of the most popular spots in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Cades Cove is a small, scenic valley encircled by 5,000-foot mountains and dotted with preserved homes, schools, and churches dating back to the 19th century. Most visitors drive the valley’s 11-mile loop road, which means that cars are often bumper-to-bumper and the trip can take two to four hours. A more enjoyable and often faster way to tour the valley is to rent a bicycle at the **Cades Cove Campground Store**. Bicycles are allowed on the road at all times, but the best times are Wednesday and Saturday mornings from May through September, when the road is closed to motorized traffic until 10:00 AM. (Rentals are \$4 an hour for a one-speed cruiser, \$6 an hour for a fully geared bike.)



After backtracking to Newfound Gap Road, the route heads up over the crest of the Smokies, descends on the North Carolina side, and heads west for a side-trip to Nantahala Outdoor Center (NOC) deep in the Nantahala Gorge. One of the best-known names in outdoor adventures, NOC offers whitewater-rafting trips on the Nantahala and other rivers in the area. But even for people with no interest in rafting, NOC is fun to visit. For



Rafters race down the river toward Nantahala Outdoor Center.

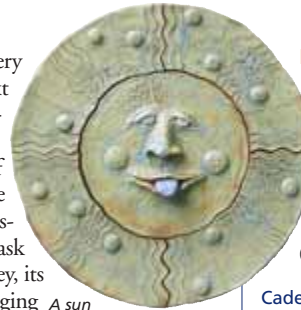
starters, there's always an interesting mix of river rafters, Appalachian Trail hikers, mountain bikers, locals, and tourists. The "campus" has an outfitter's store, a bike-rental shop, and a restaurant called River's End that overlooks the river. A low pedestrian bridge over the Nantahala provides an excellent vantage point for watching rafters.

Some visitors and rafters arrive at NOC on an excursion train called the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad. Built in the late 1800s, the railroad runs 53 miles between the towns of Dillsboro and Andrews, passing through two tunnels and over 25 bridges along the way. It has appeared in numerous movies, including *The Fugitive*. Passengers take in the mountain scenery from reconditioned coaches, open-air cars, and dining cars.

A short walk from the railroad station in Dillsboro is a small cluster of shops and galleries called Riverwood Shops at Craft Circle. The upscale, tastefully decorated Oaks Gallery displays fine bowls, pottery, kitchenware, and jewelry. Riverwood Pottery offers their own line of handmade pottery, while Riverwood Menagerie creates custom-made stained glass, and Kathie Roig's shop sells decorative pieces, clothing, and accessories—all of them hand-woven by the owner.

A mile or so east of Dillsboro lies Sylva, the Jackson County seat. From atop a hill, the handsome, cream-colored County Courthouse presides over Main Street and one of the region's best-known restaurants. **Lulu's Café** is a surprisingly sophisticated place to find in such a small town. Its eclectic menu draws from all around the culinary globe with offerings such as Indonesian chicken satay, tropical pork tenderloin, Szechwan salad, and that American staple, the hamburger. High ceilings, brightly painted walls, and comfortable booths create an inviting atmosphere in the spacious interior. Near the front of the restaurant, large glass doors open up for *al fresco* dining.

Mud Dabber's Pottery and Crafts, the next stop, sits unobtrusively along the highway west of Waynesville. The first thing to greet visitors is a large sun mask affixed to the chimney, its purple tongue hanging out and its mouth frozen in a loopy grin. The mask is a fitting introduction to the work of potter Brad Dobson, whose parents started the business back in the 1970s. Dobson's other whimsical creations include face jugs, mountain gnomes, and impish creatures he calls "wood spirits." The shop also sells attractive tableware and kitchenware made by other members of the Dobson family.



A sun mask welcomes visitors to Mud Dabber's Pottery and Crafts.

The last two stops on this trip fall in Waynesville, one of the most appealing towns in western North Carolina. Whitman's Bakery is located among the galleries and boutiques on the town's handsome, brick-façaded Main Street. Dating back to 1945, Whitman's is an old-fashioned bakery where everything is made on the premises. Upon entering the store, customers are immediately tempted by a variety of pastries and baked goods arrayed in two glass display cases. There are Danishes, doughnuts, napoleons, apple turnovers, éclairs, and "fried pies" — a regional specialty and perennial bestseller — which feature peach, chocolate, or coconut filling in a half-moon-shaped pastry crust.

To find the **Grace Cathey Metal Art Gallery**, just head to Waynesville's Frog Level district and look for the "Phillips 66" sign. Cathey, an award-winning sculptor, displays her nature-themed art in the waiting room of her husband's service station. Frogs are a favorite theme, but she also sculpts various other animals as well as leafy lamps, trellises, and benches. Along the edge of the parking lot, she has created a small sculpture garden with flowers, bushes, and a waterfall.

From Waynesville, the route heads back to Asheville, its endpoint. The drive takes only a half hour or so, but that's enough time to savor the highlights of this trip through a mountain wonderland.

#### For additional information:

**Appalachian Craft Center**, 10 N. Spuce St., Asheville, NC 28801, (828) 253-8499, [www.appalachiancraftcenter.com](http://www.appalachiancraftcenter.com)

**Best L'il Corner Ice Cream Parlor**, 4 Yellow Jacket Drive, Hayesville, NC 28904, (828) 389-0164

**Cades Cove in Great Smoky Mountains National Park**, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, 107 Park Headquarters Rd., Cades Cove, TN 37782, (865) 448-9034, <http://www.nps.gov/grsm/>

**John C. Campbell Folk School**, One Folk School Rd., Brasstown, NC 28902, (800) 365-5724, [www.folkschool.org](http://www.folkschool.org)

**Grace Cathey Metal Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden**, 136 Depot St. (in the Walker Service Station), Waynesville, NC 28786, (828) 456-8843, [www.catheyart@msn.com](http://www.catheyart@msn.com)

**Dry Falls**, U.S. Forest Service, Highlands Ranger Dist., 2010 Flat Mountain Rd., Highlands, NC 28748, (828) 526-3765

**Great Smoky Arts & Crafts Community**, P.O. Box 807, Gatlinburg, TN 37738, (800) 565-7330, [www.artsandcraftscommunity.msn.com](http://www.artsandcraftscommunity.msn.com)

**Franklin Gem and Mineral Museum**, 25 Phillips St., Franklin, NC 28734, (828) 369-7831, [fgmm.org](http://fgmm.org)

**The Grove Arcade Public Market**, 1 Page Ave., Suite 225, Asheville, NC 28801, (828) 252-7799, [www.grovearcade.com](http://www.grovearcade.com)

**Ijams Nature Center**, 2915 Island Home Ave., Knoxville, TN 37920, (865) 577-4717, [www.ijams.org](http://www.ijams.org)

**The Lost Sea**, 140 Lost Sea Rd., Sweetwater, TN 37874, (423) 337-6616, [www.thelostsea.com](http://www.thelostsea.com)

**Lulu's Café**, 612 W. Main St., Sylva, NC 28779, (828) 586-8989, [www.lulusonmain.com](http://www.lulusonmain.com)

**Mud Dabbers' Pottery & Crafts**, 20767 Great Smoky Mountain Expressway, Balsam, NC 28707, (828) 456-1916, [www.muddabbers.com](http://www.muddabbers.com)

**Whitman's Bakery & Sandwich Shop**, 18 N. Main St., Waynesville, NC 28786, (828) 456-8271

**Riverwood Shops at Craft Circle**, c/o Oaks Gallery, 29 Craft Circle, Dillsboro, NC 28725, (828) 586-6542

**Yellow Branch Farm & Pottery**, 136 Yellow Branch Circle, Robbinsville, NC 28771, (828) 479-6710, [www.yellowbranch.com](http://www.yellowbranch.com)

