Scenic highway winds through South Carolina's history

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BY PAMELA SELBERT • Special to the Post-Dispatch | Posted: Sunday, August 29, 2010 12:00 am | No Comments Posted

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The previous day's late-afternoon squall had cooled the air, and though the intense heat would return — this was the Deep South in July — early morning along the Cherokee Foothills National Scenic Highway in South Carolina's "Upcountry" was mild and pleasant under a robin's egg sky.

The drive runs along the 110 miles of State Highway 11, through the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, following a cobble of paths, trails and roads carved centuries ago. The route begins at Lake Hartwell near Interstate 85 at the state's western edge and arcs northeast, ending near Chesnee at Cowpens National Battlefield, scene of one of the most decisive battles in American history.

The two-lane highway wanders over high hills and through deep valleys, providing frequent dramatic vistas. Along the way are a host of attractions: historic sites, state parks, natural areas and recreation areas (with campgrounds and camper cabins, some quite fine); lakes, streams and waterfalls; and farms and orchards, many with stands selling the most local produce possible.

Lake Hartwell State Recreation Area attracts more than 14 million visitors a year. They come for swimming, boating and camping (120 RV sites and nine cabins are available year-round). The 56,000-acre lake has nearly 1,000 miles of shoreline lined with dozens of deep coves, and rare is the cove without swimmers or small boats bristling with fishing poles.

Continue to Walhalla, largest town along the route, then drive north about six miles on State Highway 28 to historic Stumphouse Tunnel. The tunnel, designed to provide a direct route from South Carolina to the Midwest, was begun in the 1850s. Had it been completed, it would have stretched for 5,863 feet — more than a mile. But work stopped at 1,600 feet when the Civil War began. Visitors can walk most of the way into the tunnel.

Return to Highway 11, then drive about two miles west on Oconee Station Road to reach Oconee Station State Historic Site, a frontier outpost and meeting place for European-Americans and Cherokees in the late 1700s, said park ranger Scott Alexander. Two buildings remain, both on the National Register of Historic Places.

The stone blockhouse was built in 1792 and garrisoned by about 30 militiamen to protect white settlers, though it soon became a trading post. Irish immigrant William Richards established another trading post nearby in 1795, and a decade later built the two-story brick home that stands there today. From here it's an easy half-hour walk along a packed-earth trail to 70-foot high Station Cove Falls.

Return to Highway 11, passing 18,500-acre Lake Keowee, and turn left at Boone Creek Road to Devil's Fork Park. Magnificent Lake Jocassee is here. Trees are thick to the water along most of the 75 miles of shoreline.

You can get on the water with rented pontoons (with or without a guide), canoes and kayaks. We cruised the sapphire-hued lake for four sublime hours, nosing into coves, sprinting (at a mighty 18 mph) across the water,

visiting waterfalls. Reservations for pontoon excursions are necessary; call Jocassee/Keowee Rentals at 1-864-704-0004 or go to lakejocassee.com. Prices range from $175 to $275.

Return to Highway 11 and continue east to the 1,000-acre Keowee-Toxaway State Natural Area, where a museum tells the history of the Upper Cherokee Indians, and views of the mountains are spectacular.

Ahead, where a kiosk sells quart-size Styrofoam cups of hot boiled peanuts for $3 (soggy, mushy, messy-to-eat and delicious), turn right on U.S. Highway 178 for the six-mile drive to Hagood Mill Historic Site and Folklife Center outside Pickens. Seven historic buildings are here, including two rustic yet elegant early 19th-century log cabins.

The mill was built in 1845 and used into the 1960s to grind corn and wheat. It now operates on the third Saturday of every month, drawing 1,000 or more visitors, who also can watch cotton gin, blacksmith and moonshine-still demonstrations, plus the work of several dozen crafters working in the style of the 19th century.

Return to Highway 11 and continue to 3,083-acre Table Rock State Park, which lies at the foot of the Blue Ridge Escarpment. The bald granite face of 3,124-foot-high Table Rock Mountain is a dramatic backdrop. Hiking, boating and swimming are popular here. The campground was home base for our five-day visit.

A couple of miles east of the park on Highway 11 is Aunt Sue's Country Corner, an array of rustic buildings that appear to be ancient but in fact date from the 1980s. Our first stop was at the Rock House, a rockhound's dream come true. Aunt Sue's also includes The Nature House, with displays of indigenous snakes and turtles; Outfitter House; Glass House, where Tiffany-like lamps, jewelry and window hangings are available; Wood House, with acacia-wood bowls and carved animals; and a restaurant open Tuesday-Sunday for lunch and dinner.

At Caesars Head State Park, nature has sculpted the emperor's face in profile, his head garlanded with laurels (though the profile actually looks more like Walter Matthau). A fine visitors center is located seven miles up a corkscrew road. En route, stop at Bald Rock Heritage Preserve, an elephantine-smooth expanse of rock spanning more than six acres and providing spectacular views of distant mountains. The rock has been covered with graffiti, but that doesn't diminish the view.

From the visitors center, a path leads to an overlook 3,200 feet up. You can look across the deep valley where the Blue Ridge Escarpment ends with a 2000-foot drop to the foothills, and the Piedmont — French for "foot of the mountains" — begins. Half a dozen stately peaks are on view; far below, the slopes and valley are broccoli green, with dark splotches where the clouds are casting shadows.

Proceeding east on Highway 11, a row of chainsaw-sculpture bears outside a shop near Marietta caught our attention. Frank Nicolette owns the Big Bear Trading Post and carves the bears and other works in a studio out back. Some of his efforts are inspired, but most intriguing about the place is Nicolette's dog, a 14-year old black and tan/spitz mix named Sparky. An excerpt from their fast-paced routine goes like this:

"Bring me the screwdriver, Sparky," Nicolette says. The dog disappears behind the counter, roots in a tool box and returns with a screwdriver in her mouth.

"Now go get the big pliers." She comes back with the wrong set.

"You know these aren't the big pliers," he chides. She disappears and returns with the right ones.

Poinsett Bridge, the oldest bridge in the state, is next. The imposing stone gothic arch over Little Gap Creek was built in 1820. To reach it, turn left on Old State Highway 11, then left on Callahan Mountain Road.

Another historic bridge — Campbell's Covered Bridge, built in 1909 and the only remaining covered bridge in South Carolina — is ahead. To get there, turn right on State Highway 101, left on State Highway 414, then right on Pleasant Hill Road. The way is not well marked but the historic site is grand, with stone viewing terraces, a picnic table and a dozen benches.

Hollywild, a 117-acre animal park with more than 500 rare and exotic critters, is about 10 miles south of Highway 11 near Inman. It's worth the drive. Safaris on converted school buses take visitors among herds of fallow deer, llamas, exotic cattle, goats and many other animals, all of which come right to the buses to dine. Visitors offer them bread and crackers that can be purchased.

Elsewhere at the park, dozens of animals are in natural enclosures, such as giant tortoises, lions, tigers, camels, zebras and Tank, a 6,500-pound white rhino. To get to Hollywild, turn right just east of Gowensville on New Cut Road, left on Holly Springs Road, then right on Hampton Road to the park.

Last town on the drive is quaint Chesnee, where you might want to stop for dinner at the Bantam Chef, a 1950s-style diner. Inside and out the place is a veritable 1950s theme park, with antique service station signs and gas pumps, and a display room with more vintage memorabilia.

Continue east of town three miles to Cowpens National Battlefield, where, on Jan. 17, 1781, the British sustained one of the worst disasters of their Southern Campaign.

The previous summer, "back-country patriots" had been warned to swear allegiance to Britain or be destroyed. Instead, patriot militia from South Carolina, North Carolina and Georgia joined militia from "Over the Mountains" (eastern Tennessee and southwestern Virginia). They waged a two-week campaign that ended with a British defeat at King's Mountain, and another loss three months later at Cowpens. This ultimately led to their ultimate surrender in October 1781 at Yorktown.

A visitors center displays Revolutionary War weapons and shows the film "Cowpens: A Battle Remembered," which tells the story also portrayed in the movie "The Patriot". There's also an auto tour and walking trail on the battlefield.

The scenic drive ends at Cowpens — and a few miles ahead, so does Highway 11. There travelers return to modern times and the faster pace of the interstate.

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Buy this photo Swimmers in Lake Jocassee play below Mill Creek Falls, one of several that fall into the lake. Photo by Guy Selbert

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