BREAKING OUT

Tracking bursts of fall colors

Parkway ideal for taking in the views

By Josh Noel
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

CHEROKEE, N.C. — My plan to drive all 250 miles of North Carolina's portion of the Blue Ridge Parkway was derailed after 2.1 miles.

That's how far south of the Virginia border I was when I came across Gully Creek Trail, a semi-rigorous 2-mile hiking loop down into — and then back up out of — the fall color. Dusk wasn't far off, and my hotel reservation was 70 miles on, but I couldn't resist.

Down I went into the rich reds, oranges and yellows. The air was slippery and moist, which made the trail about the same. Amid the sweet smell of earthy autumn decay, I passed several people heading up, including a forlorn, red-faced woman with her forlorn, red-faced 4-year-old daughter.

"How much farther to the top?" she asked.

"Not far."

"Good."

"Long walk?"

She nodded, panting.

"But pretty, right?"

She nodded, panting, again, but this time, smiled.

Back on the highway, I resumed the scenic journey to my hotel but realized this would not be a road trip about getting from start to finish. It would be a road trip about the road: the hikes, the piney mountains, well-marked overlooks that make for easy vista viewing, towering magnolias, dogwood and birch.



Contributed

The view from Mount Mitchell in North Carolina is among the spectacular vistas along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

IF YOU GO

- Fall colors typically peak on the Blue Ridge Parkway in mid-October but may vary.
- Accommodations and food — blueridgeresort.com
- Accommodations near Mount Pisgah — 828-235-8228, pisgahinn.com
- General information — blueridgeparkway.org
- National Park Service — nps.gov/blri

The Blue Ridge Parkway, which turns 75 next year, is almost 470 miles long. It begins southwest of Charlottesville, Va., and ends in North Carolina's southwest corner, near the Tennessee border and Great Smoky Mountains National Park. About 250 of those miles are in North Carolina, much in national forest. That's the part I spent three days driving. The speed limit is 45, but I never wanted to go faster than 30.

I passed campers, a church tucked along the side of the road and a sign pointing me off the parkway to North Carolina Highway 21, toward towns called Sparta and Roaring Gap. But who needs Sparta and Roaring Gap when you're on the Blue Ridge Parkway? And on I went.

Fifty miles from my hotel, dusk descended. I considered pushing through. But in the peak of fall color, missing so many trees in the dark seemed a waste. Back to Sparta it was, because 20 miles back the way I had come seemed a better option than losing 50. In that way the parkway in fall is like camping: When the sun goes down, there's not much left to do. When the sun comes up, it's time to start again.

Morning dawned cool and gray as I drove out of relatively nondescript Sparta and stopped for the second time in two days at Bullhead Mountain Overlook. The reds in particular seemed to be coming in so many shades: fiery, burnt, muddy, electric.

A bit farther I stopped for breakfast at one of the few places to eat on the parkway, Bluffs Lodge & Restaurant. Bluffs put the greasy in greasy spoon, so naturally I took a spot at the counter beside a red-bearded guy with a motorcycle helmet. I ordered a stack of sweet-potato pancakes (a local favorite) with a side of country ham (another local favorite), which is cured in sugar and salt. Lots of salt.

"You'll be drinking water all day," my waitress said, refilling my coffee cup.

The guy beside me was 31-year-old Steve Kirtley, from Bowling Green, Ky., who made a last-moment decision to be here. When leaving home for a short vacation, he intended to bike to Washington, D.C., and New York City. Something about the parkway lured him in, and it wasn't exactly the colors. He's colorblind.

"I just love the scenery," Kirtley said, warming his hands on a cup of tea. "It's been views I couldn't have expected. You're on this bluff, and there's this canopy of golden leaves above you. Now imagine that for 470 miles."

Funny thing was that the canopy was many more colors than golden. He didn't care.

"I definitely want to do this again and take my time," Kirtley said.

Taking time is the point, which is why I took a lazy four hours to go the next 100 miles, stopping for any photo or sweeping overlook that possessed me.