



35TH ANNIVERSARY READER POLL RESULTS

BEST OF THE MOUNTAINS

Ready to discover a great new town? Experience an easy bicycle trail? Maybe add to your state parks checklist? We've got a reliable source for great recommendations: the readers of this magazine!

The New River through Virginia and West Virginia was voted best paddling river in the region.
Photo courtesy Virginia Tourism Corp. | Sam Dean

SUPPLEMENT TO:

Blue Ridge Country

EXPERIENCE THE MOUNTAINS OF THE SOUTH

JULY/AUGUST 2023



BEST OF THE MOUNTAINS

Compiled by **SARAH RIDDELL AND JEFFREY K. WOOD**

One of the most wonderful parts of having covered the Southern Appalachians for 35 years is that we have come to learn a great deal about the breadth, bounty and beauty of the towns, scenery, culture, recreation and more of the seven-state mountain region.

But once every five years we call on the real experts for their views. In polling conducted this spring, the readers of Blue Ridge Country have shared their judgments and recommendations. We're pleased to present them here.

Blowing Rock, North Carolina, took honors for best shopping town.

BEST MAIN-STREET LOCAL SHOPPING TOWN

- 1 Blowing Rock, NC
- 2 Waynesville, NC
- 2 Blue Ridge, GA

BEST ARTS TOWN

- 1 Asheville, NC
- 2 Blowing Rock, NC
- 3 Floyd, VA

BEST RETIREMENT TOWN

- 1 Hendersonville, NC
- 2 Brevard, NC
- 3 Roanoke, VA
- 3 Boone, NC



TODD BUSH

NEW ATTRACTIONS & DESTINATIONS



VIRGINIA SCENIC RAILWAY

Virginia Scenic Railway began service in the summer of 2022.

With so many new things to see and do in the Blue Ridge Mountains, there was no way we could list them all. Here are a handful that impressed our readers.

Virginia Scenic Railway (Staunton, Virginia). Sit back and soak in the beauty of the Virginia countryside from a renovated 1940s passenger car. The Alleghany Special heads west from Staunton and ventures through the Shenandoah Valley. The Blue Ridge Flyer route departs the Queen City and passes through

the Blue Ridge Tunnel. Both Trains run Thursday through Sunday. All tickets include a meal, dessert and beverage selection. 434-391-9772; virginiascenicrailway.com

Learn more from our May/June 2023 article: BlueRidgeCountry.com/TrainRides

Virginia Maple Syrup Trail (Highland County, Virginia). Highland County is known for its maple syrup, and in 2020, developed a seven-stop tour. Participants collect stamps along the way. Camps stamp passports year-round with the exception of select dates in March. 540-468-2550; virginiamaplesyrup.com

Soaky Mountain Waterpark (Sevierville, Tennessee). This 50-acre aquatic amusement park opened in '21 and features 20 attractions for all ages. Highlights include an inflatable obstacle course, a wave pool, water slides and water coasters. 833-687-6259; soakymountainwaterpark.com

New River Gorge National Park (West Virginia). While not a new attraction, the New River

Gorge was designated a national park by Congress in 2021, and this year, 963 acres of public hunting and outdoor recreation land was added. There are eight primitive campsites—those that have limited restroom facilities and no drinking water or power hookups—and visitors don't have to pay a fee to stay overnight. Also consider whitewater rafting or hiking on one of the park's many trails. 304-465-0508; nps.gov/neri/index.htm

Blue Ridge Tunnel Trail (Nelson County, Virginia). The 1858 Blue Ridge Tunnel was built to allow trains to travel under Rockfish Gap, and reopened as a public trail in 2020. Visitors are welcome to venture through this nearly mile-long historical landmark, but be sure to bring a headlamp or flashlight. 434-263-7130; blueridgetunnel.org

For more, see our March/April 2022 feature: blueridgecountry.com/Crozet

—SARAH RIDDELL

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VISITNC | SAM DEAN



VA CREEPER TRAIL | SAMDEAN

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Asheville, North Carolina, took several top honors, including bucket-list town and river town.

The Virginia Creeper Trail was chosen as best biking trail.

Boone, North Carolina, was readers' choice as top college town.

BEST REVITALIZED DOWNTOWN

- 1 Hendersonville, NC
- 2 Staunton, VA
- 3 Blue Ridge, GA

TOWN ON MY BUCKET LIST

- 1 Asheville, NC
- 2 Helen, GA
- 2 Boone, NC

BEST COLLEGE TOWN

- 1 Boone, NC
- 2 Blacksburg, VA
- 3 Charlottesville, VA

BEST WALKABLE TOWN

- 1 Blowing Rock, NC
- 2 Staunton, VA
- 3 Blue Ridge, GA

FRIENDLIEST TOWN

- 1 West Jefferson, NC
- 2 Hendersonville, NC
- 2 Floyd, VA

BEST FOODIE TOWN

- 1 Asheville, NC
- 2 Abingdon, VA
- 3 Boone, NC

BEST RIVER TOWN

- 1 Asheville, NC
- 2 Bryson City, NC
- 3 Helen, GA

BEST BIKING TRAIL

- 1 VA Creeper Trail, Damascus, VA
- 2 New River Trail State Park, Max Meadows, VA
- 3 Swamp Rabbit Trail, Greenville, SC
- 3 Roanoke River Greenway, Roanoke, VA

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74TH ANNUAL

VIRGINIA HIGHLANDS FESTIVAL

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VaHighlandsFestival.com



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10 DINERS WORTH THE DRIVE

Across the mountain region, there are hundreds. Here are a few our readers say are sure to please.

High's Restaurant (Monterey, Virginia). High's has been a staple since 1901 for its classic American comfort foods and specialty entrees. Try the signature dessert, Fire and Ice Cream—a big ice cream bowl set on fire without melting the deliciousness inside. Pre-dessert fare includes half-pound burgers, fried fish and barbeque. highrestaurant.com

Hob-Nob Drive-In (Gate City, Virginia). This family-owned establishment has been drawing crowds for 60 years. The short order menu offers cheeseburgers, sandwiches, salads and fries. Grilled cheese sandwiches and hot dogs are also served just as when Hob-Nob first opened—with a scoop of chili on them. Don't miss the thick and creamy milkshake, classic banana split, loaded sundae or a Monster Cone. facebook.com/hobnobdrive

Kathy's Restaurant (Staunton, Virginia). Memories from Kathy's childhood inspire many selections, especially the all-day breakfast menu, including homemade biscuits and gravy, corned beef hash and a vast assortment of omelets. Southern-inspired fried chicken and hamburger steaks are also a hit. But it's the gourmet pancakes that top everything: Flavors include blueberry, lemon, apple and strawberry. The pancake mix is available at the restaurant and on the website. kathys-restaurant.com

Mel's Diner (Pigeon Forge, Tennessee). This classic 1950s diner welcomes with a jukebox, checkered floors and all the American classics, including breakfast platters, sandwiches, hot dogs, burgers, ice cream floats and much more. Everything is served all day long, so

The Pink Cadillac Diner, near Natural Bridge, Virginia, offers all-day breakfast items plus ice cream and pervasively pink decor.

order a Mel's Famous Ultimate Banana Split any time!
melsdinerpf.com

Pink Cadillac Diner (Natural Bridge, Virginia). "The King of Rock and Roll" is honored in every way at this iconic diner with the pink Caddy out front. While their famous 12-ounce, double-decker Elvis burger is a fan favorite, customers also enjoy Pink Cadillac's all-day breakfast selections and the 12 different ice cream flavors. facebook.com/ThePinkCadillacDiner

Pop's Diner (Hendersonville, North Carolina). The old-school feel of checkerboard floors and a pink and blue color scheme belies that Pop's opened its doors only 11 years ago. Best known for its all-day breakfast, Pop's also offers burgers that ring a bell—the Jailhouse Rock, Buddy Holly and Frankie Vallie. The side dishes are unique—fried squash, and corn nuggets among others. popsdinernc.com

Sunrise Grill (Boone, North Carolina). For over 20 years, Sunrise has been serving up jalapeno popper grilled cheese, soysage patties, Belgian waffle sandwiches and goat cheese grits among other classic favorites. A Yelp poll voted their eggs benedict best in North Carolina. sunrisegrillboone.com

The Beacon Drive-In (Spartanburg, South Carolina). The Beacon is the second largest drive-in restaurant in the U.S.,



PINK CADILLAC | FACEBOOK

keeping the old-school curb service alive since 1946. They're known for their Chili Cheese A-Plenty, a chili cheeseburger hidden underneath heaping piles of fries and onion rings. The Southern-style sweet tea is served in a cup of shaved ice and finished with a spritz of lemon. beacondrivein.com

The Hole in the Wall (Blairsville, Georgia). Union County's oldest diner opened in 1931 and is known for the excellent service and food that's "so good you'll swear your grandma made it." Owner and chef Mark Cox has curated an extensive menu of internationally inspired signature dishes and Southern-style diner eats. holeinthewallga.com

Wright's Dairy-Rite (Staunton, Virginia). Wright's takes customers back in time as they place orders via speakers or phone from their cars or table. The drive-in specializes in hand-pattied burgers, homemade onion rings, footlong hot dogs and more. Wright's dessert offerings are the main attraction—funnel cake fries, hot fudge cake, malted milkshakes or a warm donut topped with ice cream. dairy-rite.com

—SARAH RIDDELL

BEST MOTORCYCLE ROUTE

- 1 Tail of the Dragon, Route 16, NC
- 2 Blue Ridge Parkway, NC-VA
- 3 Back of the Dragon, Route 16, VA

BEST FISHING LAKE

- 1 Smith Mountain Lake, VA
- 2 Watauga Lake, TN
- 3 Lake Lure, NC

BEST FISHING RIVER

- 1 New River, VA
- 2 James River, VA
- 3 Davidson River, Pisgah National Forest, NC

BEST PADDLING LAKE

- 1 Claytor Lake State Park, VA
- 2 Hungry Mother State Park, VA
- 3 Price Lake, Blowing Rock, NC

BEST PADDLING RIVER

- 1 New River, VA-WV
- 2 James River, VA
- 3 French Broad River, NC

BELOW: *Smith Mountain Lake, Virginia, was voted best fishing lake in the region.*

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BEST RAIL-TO-TRAIL SYSTEM

- 1 Virginia Creeper Trail, VA
- 2 New River Trail State Park, VA
- 3 Greenbrier River Trail, WV

BEST SWIMMING HOLE

- 1 Blue Hole Falls, Carter County, TN
- 2 Sliding Rock, Transylvania County, NC

FAVORITE WATERFALL

- 1 Cascade Falls, Giles County, VA
- 1 Crabtree Falls, Nelson County, VA
- 3 Linville Falls, McDowell County, NC

BEST ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATION

- 1 The Nature Conservancy



PAUL CIMINO | FLICKR

ABOVE: Tennessee's Blue Hole Falls took top honors for best swimming hole.

RIGHT: Virginia's Cascade Falls and Crabtree Falls (not pictured) tied for readers' favorite waterfall.



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Alpine Helen-White County Regional Visitor Center
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AlpineHelenGa



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ADOBESTOCK

BEST CAVERNS

- 1 Luray Caverns, Luray, VA
- 2 Linville Cavern, Marion, NC
- 3 Bristol Caverns, Bristol, TN
- 3 Dixie Caverns, Salem, VA

BEST GEM MINING

- 1 Franklin, NC
- 2 Emerald Village, Little Switzerland, NC
- 3 Dahlenega, GA

BEST HISTORIC ATTRACTION

- 1 Biltmore Estate, Asheville, VA
- 2 Monticello, Charlottesville, VA
- 3 Oconaluftee Village, Museum of the Cherokee, Cherokee, NC



Virginia's Luray Caverns took top honors for such underground wonders.

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BEST OF THE MOUNTAINS

BEST LOOP DRIVE ON A TANK OF GAS

- 1 Blue Ridge Parkway, NC-VA
- 2 Cades Cove, TN

BEST SCENIC TRAIN RIDE

- 1 Great Smoky Mountains Railroad, Bryson City, NC
- 2 Blue Ridge Scenic Railway, Blue Ridge, GA
- 3 Cass Scenic Railroad, Cass, WV

BEST MUSEUM

- 1 Museum of the Cherokee Indian, Cherokee, NC
- 1 Frontier Culture Museum, Staunton, VA
- 3 Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, VA



LEFT TO RIGHT: *Tops in their categories: Tennessee's Dollywood; North Carolina's Great Smoky Mountains Railroad; Virginia's Barter Theatre.*

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35TH ANNIVERSARY READER POLL RESULTS



JOSHUA MOORE

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS RAILROAD-FACEBOOK



BARBERTHEATER.COM



BEST THEME PARK

- 1 Dollywood, Pigeon Forge, TN
- 2 Tweetsie Railroad, Blowing Rock, NC

BEST PLACE TO HEAR MOUNTAIN MUSIC

- 1 Floyd Country Store, Floyd, VA
- 2 Galax, VA
- 3 Carter Family Fold, Hiltons, VA

BEST HISTORIC THEATER

- 1 Barter Theatre, Abingdon, VA
- 2 American Shakespeare Center's Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton, VA
- 3 Lincoln Theatre, Marion, VA
- 3 Grandin Theatre, Roanoke, VA



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BEST OF THE MOUNTAINS



DAN'L BOONE INN | FACEBOOK



SOUTHERN HIGHLAND CRAFT GUILD | FACEBOOK

BEST SPA

- 1 The Spa at Omni Grove Park Inn, Asheville, NC
- 2 The Omni Homestead Resort, Hot Springs, VA
- 2 The Greenbrier, White Sulphur Springs, WV

BEST PLACE FOR THE HOLIDAYS

- 1 Biltmore Estate, Asheville, NC
- 2 Pigeon Forge/Gatlinburg, TN
- 3 Asheville, NC

BEST ANTIQUING

- 1 Antique Tobacco Barn, Asheville, NC

BEST CRAFTS VENUE

- 1 Southern Highland Craft Guild, Asheville, NC

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BEST OUTLET SHOPPING

- 1 Tanger Outlets, Pigeon Forge, TN
- 2 Tanger Outlets, Blowing Rock, NC
- 3 Asheville Outlets, Asheville, NC

BEST COUNTRY STORE

- 1 Mast General Store, original in Valle Crucis, NC (others in various locations)
- 2 Floyd Country Store, Floyd, VA

BEST FARMERS MARKET

- 1 WNC Farmers Market, Asheville, NC
- 2 Historic Roanoke City Market, Roanoke, VA
- 3 Staunton Farmers' Market, Staunton, VA



OMNI GROVE PARK INN

LEFT TO RIGHT: Breakfast fare at the Dan'l Boone Inn, winner for Southern Cooking.

Asheville's Southern Highland Craft Guild was tops for crafts venue.

The Spa at the Omni Grove Park Inn in Asheville was voted tops for such attentive pampering.



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THE BLUE RIDGE FOOTHILLS



NELSON 151 | SKIP ROWLAND PHOTOGRAPHY

BEST SOUTHERN COOKING

- 1 Dan'l Boone Inn, Boone, NC
- 2 The Dillard House, Dillard, GA
- 3 Southern Charm Restaurant, Blue Ridge, GA
- 3 Moose Café, Asheville, NC

BEST MOUNTAIN SPIRITS TRAIL

- 1 Route 151 Nelson County VA

BEST MOUNTAIN WINE TRAIL

- 1 Nelson 151 Craft Beverage Trail, Nelson County, VA
- 2 Monticello Wine Trail, Charlottesville, VA
- 3 Blue Ridge Parkway - Chateau Morrisette and Villa Appalaccia, VA

BEST MOUNTAIN BEER TRAIL

- 1 Nelson 151, Craft Beverage Trail, Nelson County, VA

BEST FAMILY DESTINATION

- 1 Pigeon Forge/Gatlinburg area/ Dollywood, TN
- 2 Great Smoky Mountains National Park, NC/TN
- 3 Tweetsie Railroad, Blowing Rock, NC

BEST LUXURY RESORT

- 1 The Omni Grove Park Inn, Asheville, NC
- 2 The Omni Homestead Resort, Hot Springs, VA
- 3 The Greenbrier Hotel, White Sulphur Springs, WV



PRIMLAND RESORT

TOP: Valley Roads Vineyards, along the Route 151 Nelson County, Virginia, was top spirits trail.
ABOVE: Top golf resort: Virginia's Primland.

BEST GOLF RESORT

- 1 Primland Resort, Meadows of Dan, VA
- 2 The Omni Homestead Resort, Hot Springs, VA
- 3 Wintergreen Resort, Nellysford, VA
- 3 The Greenbrier, White Sulphur Springs, WV

BEST ARTS & CRAFTS SHOW

- 1 Virginia Highlands Festival, Abingdon, VA
- 2 Crozet Arts and Crafts Festival, Crozet, VA
- 2 Arts in the Park, Blue Ridge, GA

BEST MUSIC FESTIVAL

- 1 FloydFest, Floyd, VA
- 2 Old Fiddlers' Convention, Galax, VA
- 3 MerleFest, Wilkesboro, NC

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BEST PLACES FOR AN AGRI-VISIT

Our readers love taking trips to their favorite farms and orchards. Here are just a handful of their top agricultural adventure picks.

Winchester Creek Farm (Waynesville, North Carolina). Established in 2020, Winchester Creek Farm offers 20 acres framed by

the Smoky Mountains. Their 45-minute interactive tours give visitors the opportunity to learn more about the farm and meet their alpacas as well as some of their miniature farm animals. Winchester's alpaca yoga classes are designed to accommodate a variety of skill levels.

Vacation rentals overlook the property. winchestercreek-farm.com

Jeter Mountain Farm (Hendersonville, North Carolina).

The 400-acre Jeter Mountain Farm opens each July and gives visitors the complete u-pick experience. Orchards are filled with over 20 different apple tree varieties as well as blueberries, peaches, flowers and more. When your basket is full, head over to Jeter's taproom and enjoy a hard cider made from the orchard's own apples. jetermountain-farm.com

Sweetwater Valley Farm (Philadelphia, Tennessee).

This family-owned dairy farm is known for its farmstead cheeses. In 2018, Sweetwater became Tennessee's first Lely XL dairy farm, using robotic

technology to milk 500 of their Holstein cows. The farm offers tours of the state-of-the-art milking facility. Stop by the shop afterward and enjoy a complimentary cheese tasting. sweetwater-valley.com

Sky Top Orchard (Flat Rock, North Carolina).

This family-oriented orchard offers pick-your-own Asian pears, apples, peaches, cherries and grapes, plus numerous attractions children will love, including a playground, tractor rides through the orchard and the opportunity to pan for gems at the new Gold Rush Gem Mine. Finish the day with one (or a dozen!) of Sky Top's fresh, "made-while-you-watch" apple cider donuts. skytoporchard.com

—SARAH RIDDELL



Winchester Creek Farm in Waynesville, North Carolina, offers interactive tours and alpaca yoga classes.

WINCHESTER CREEK FARM FACEBOOK

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VA HIGHLAND FESTIVAL | BILLIE WHEELER

BEST FALL FESTIVAL (NON-MUSIC FOCUS)

- 1 Woolly Worm Festival, Banner Elk, NC
- 2 NC Apple Festival, Hendersonville, NC
- 3 Blue Ridge Folklife Festival, Ferrum, VA

BEST QUIRKY FESTIVAL

- 1 Woolly Worm Festival, Banner Elk, NC
- 2 Queen City Mischief & Magic, Staunton, VA
- 3 Appalachian Trail Days Festival, Damascus, VA

BEST HOLIDAY FESTIVAL

- 1 Dollywood's Smoky Mountain Christmas, Pigeon Forge, TN
- 2 Dickens of a Christmas, Roanoke, VA
- 3 Wintertide, Highland County, VA
- 3 Bristol Light Festival, Bristol, TN/VA
- 3 Blowing Rock WinterFest, Blowing Rock, NC
- 3 Biltmore Estate, Asheville, NC ▲▲



WOOLLY WORM FESTIVAL | TODD BUSH

LEFT TO RIGHT: Virginia Highlands Festival was tops for arts & crafts show.

Banner Elk, North Carolina's Woolly Worm Festival got the nod for quirky festival.

GET OUTTA TOWN!

Find yourself here

The mountains and valleys are yours to explore here in Patrick County. Stroll through the vineyards or sunflower fields. Cruise the Blue Ridge Parkway or hike Rock Castle Gorge. From the rugged outdoors to 5-Star luxury, there is so much to discover here. visitpatrickcounty.org



Visit the Patrick County Visitors Center at 126 N. Main St, Stuart, VA

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