

turn the air blue

Outdoor adventures, wine tasting, history, music and much more, Virginia is a state that offers a wealth of Southern experiences, says **Steve Hartridge**



The Blue Ridge Mountains and foothills in Virginia offer some of the finest mountain biking in the U.S. Opposite: Stop for a breather in Carvins Cove, near Roanoke

Do you want to take the easy, intermediate or difficult route?" politely asks Kristine, my guide for a morning of mountain biking.

Still feeling a bit jet-lagged after my transatlantic flight the day before and noting that Kristine is clearly something of an expert – I can tell that just from the colourful lycra kit she is wearing and her bum-bag that is stuffed with energy bars and salt-replacement sachets – I suggest we start on one of the easy trails.

It is the right call: I spend the next 25 minutes pedalling along a trail barely wide enough to take a bike tyre, tackling some short but lung-busting climbs, ducking under overhanging branches, negotiating tree roots and accelerating through small pools of water. With my wheels spinning in loose sand, I struggle to keep up.

But, with a few tips from Kristine – "When the ground is bumpy, keep your pedals parallel" and "If you're too far forward over the handlebars when heading downhill you will go!" – I quickly improve and by the time we tackle an intermediate trail called 'Little Belle' I am feeling confident.

I am in Carvins Cove Natural Reserve in Virginia, the second largest municipal park in the U.S., with 60 miles of trails.

We stop by a cobalt-blue lake and Kristine tells me all about the many thrills and spills she has had cycling in Virginia including a few close-enough encounters with some black bears on the very trail we are on.

"Didn't you see the upturned bin and rubbish strewn over the road on the way into the reserve...that was a bear," she said.

All too soon, the bikes have been loaded back into the 4x4, and we are heading back into Roanoke, where I am to spend the next two days visiting the city's attractions.

Follow the trail

Mountain biking is one of the emerging popular activities in Virginia's Blue Ridge region, which offers over 300 miles of specialist trails. The area, which takes in Roanoke and Salem and several counties close to the scenic Blue Ridge Parkway, is being promoted by the newly-named Virginia's Blue Ridge (visitvbr.com) marketing association, which is aiming for more international visitors by pushing the 'metro-mountain' mix of urban fun and outdoor adventures on offer.

Roanoke, the region's largest town and a

starting point for many driving the Blue Ridge Parkway, is attracting those with a love of the great outdoors, and there are outfitters like Roanoke Mountain Adventures (roanokemountainadventures.com) which will kit out riders and novices alike with mountain bikes, canoes, kayaks, paddle-boards and more.

Looking down on Roanoke is Mill Mountain, with its 13 miles of single-track mountain bike trails. Then there's the Roanoke Valley Greenway, 30 miles of mixed-use paved pathways, which runs close to downtown.

Other bike routes are springing up throughout Virginia, including a trail that runs 32 miles from Richmond to Jamestown – linking the state's present day capital to its old capital.

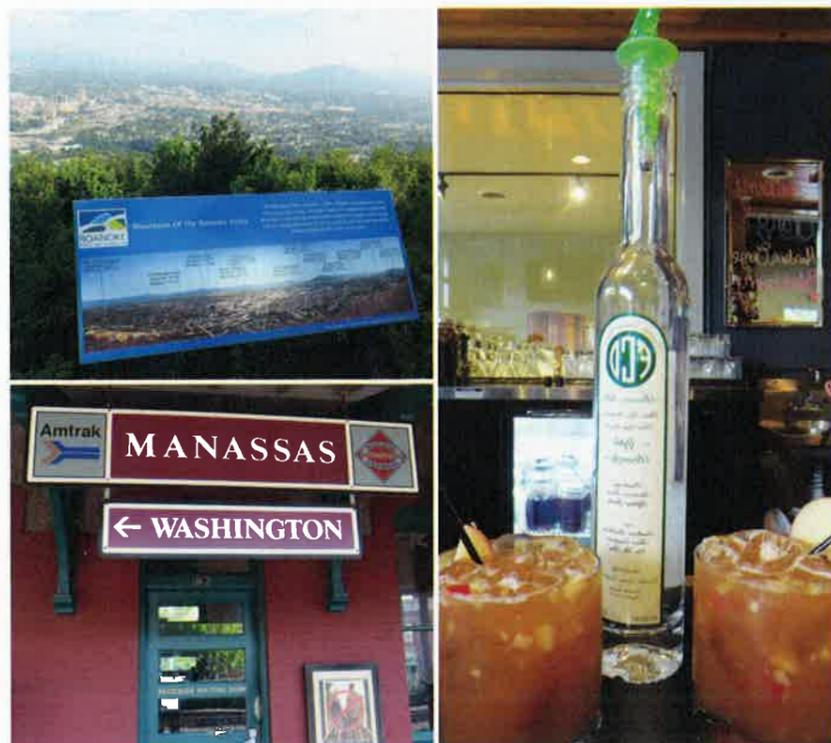
The age of the train

Roanoke developed on the back of the railways and a glimpse back at those days is on offer at the fabulous O. Winston Link Museum, dedicated to the photography of a railroad photographer, whose work, mostly in black and white, captured the dying days of steam locomotives.

Across town, locomotives, planes, and classic cars are on display at the Virginia Museum of Transportation, housed in a former freight depot.

Still on trains, Amtrak put Roanoke back on its route network late last year. The service, which starts out in Boston, stops in New York and Washington DC, before calling in at the Virginia towns of Lynchburg, Charlottesville, Culpepper and Manassas. The state's next goal is to see the service extend further southwest to Bristol, on the Virginia-Tennessee state line. ▶





“Suggest to clients heading to Washington DC that they stay in Arlington, Virginia. A short hop away, it has 40 or so hotels offering rates up to 20% less than those in downtown DC”

Top square: View of the Roanoke Valley from Mill Mountain Park; Manassas train station; cocktails at Franklin County Distilleries; Right: the Roanoke Star, the ‘Hollywood Sign of the East Coast’. Opposite page: McAfee Knob, one of the most photographed spots on the Appalachian Trail, in Virginia’s Blue Ridge; iconic locomotive at the Virginia Museum of Transportation, Roanoke

► I boarded in Manassas, the sleek blue-and-grey train appearing just before its 18.00 timetable departure. With its wide seats, high soft-leather backs, big drop-down tray and a power outlet by the side, it shared few similarities to my usual daily 07.07 from Brighton to East Croydon. There was also a buffet car serving a selection of sandwiches, hot snacks and bottles of Virginia-brewed beer. I spent the four-hour journey in total comfort, and near silence – and all for \$49.

Wine and history

That same afternoon I had enjoyed tasting some excellent wines at the Winery at Bull Run. About 25 miles southwest of Washington, D.C. the winery is one of 300 in Virginia but the only one on the grounds of a battlefield: Bull Run was the site in July 1861 of the first major engagement of the American Civil War.

The war was so much of a ‘novelty’ at that time that, as Union and Confederate troops began gathering for the fight ahead, locals, dressed in their Sunday finery, jumped on their horse and carts and rode out to watch the action unfold. It didn’t take more than a few rounds of musket fire for them to realising that this was perhaps not the ideal family afternoon out.

Today’s visitors can combine a history tour with sampling the wines. In the summer months, on a terrace overlooking the rows of vines, the winery offers picnic tables and live music, while visitors wanting to learn about the battle can visit the nearby Manassas National Battlefield Park.

Music and beer

Roanoke is also a jumping off point for The Crooked Road, a self-drive music-themed tour that travels 300 miles through southwest Virginia, highlighting the tradition of bluegrass, gospel and blues music in the mountains of Appalachia and the Blue Ridge. Towns like Floyd, Galax and the Meadows of Dan all host their own country and bluegrass events and festivals. The trail also exposes visitors to the crafts, heritage and history of the region.

Across Virginia is an emerging network of ‘beer trails’. Join the Ale Trail in Virginia’s Blue Ridge, which takes in 15 craft breweries, 14 wineries and to distilleries.

The Star Hill Brewery in Roanoke is one of the oldest in the state while just out of town the Franklin County Distilleries, which dubs itself as the ‘Moonshine Capital of the World,’ serves up cocktails like ‘Dilly-Peno’, with jalapeños, sage and corn whisky.

Other real ale routes include the Richmond Beer Trail, with more than 25 craft breweries and more on the way, and the Shenandoah Valley Beerwerks Trail features 13 craft breweries.

History makers

Richmond made *Lonely Planet’s* ‘must visit in 2018’ list, partly due to a burgeoning foodies scene in part fuelled by chefs from DC moving there to offer a contemporary



twist on traditional Southern fayre. Next year marks the 400th anniversary of the birth of the U.S. in Jamestown. Visitors can explore Virginia’s Historic Triangle and soak in the history of the birthplace of America in Colonial Williamsburg, Jamestown’s historic fort and Yorktown. Also in recognition of the 400th anniversary, a new exhibit, American Adventure, will open at the Virginia Living Museum in Newport News at the southeastern end of the Virginia Peninsula, in January 19, 2019, and continue until April 21. The immersive, educational role-play adventure will ask visitors to conquer one great challenge: survive the year as one of the original Jamestown colonists.

Top experiences

★ Star City: Roanoke is so named because of the giant neon-lit star that looks down on the Roanoke Valley from atop Mill Mountain. It was built in 1949 as a spectacular Christmas decoration but was so popular the city kept it up. Travel up there for great views of the city and surrounding Appalachian Mountains.

🔧 Pinball wizard: Also in Roanoke, drop by the Pinball Museum in the town’s Centre in the Square. It is a labour of love run by an owner who travels the country picking up machines and restoring them.

🏛️ Fine art: The Virginia Museum of Fine arts in Richmond is one of the best in the east. It was the first museum in the U.S. to host an exhibit from the Forbidden City in Beijing and is known for its large exhibition of Faberge eggs.

🏠 Mount Vernon: Visit the restored home of the country’s first president, George Washington. The Mount



Vernon Inn is famous for its peanut soup while other attractions on the estate include a working blacksmith and a newly re-opened whisky distillery. Apparently GW made plenty of money of his own selling his own corn and rye-based whiskeys.

🏠 Alexandria: Stroll down historic King Street in the town George Washington called home. Just over the Potomac from the capital, it was there long before there was a Washington D.C.

🛍️ Shopping: Tyson’s Corner, in McLean, Virginia, just outside of Washington D.C., is known as the ‘Rodeo Drive of the East Coast’. Tyson’s Corner Center is one of the largest malls in the country, with 300 department and specialty stores that include Nordstrom, Bloomingdale’s, Macy’s, Lord & Taylor and Old Navy.

Where to book it

🏠 FIRST CLASS HOLIDAYS - 0161 888 5606

The operator has a seven-night tour that visits Jamestown, Williamsburg and Charlottesville in Virginia, along with DC, Philadelphia and Gettysburg. Prices from £1,995. It can tailor-make add-ons in the Blue Ride region. fcholidays.com

“Take the Amtrak train from Washington D.C. to the heart of Virginia’s Blue Ridge”

Steve Hartridge, Selling Travel

