
Stop 3. Blue Ridge Parkway

Arrival datetime: Wednesday April 3, 8:30PM
Sites visited: Blue Ridge Parkway, Table Rock State Park, SC
Accommodations: Table Rock Lodge
States traveled: Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina

Our planning included how long the drive would be at each stop, and where we would stay at each stop. It had not included what actually to do once we arrived at one of our stops. It had not included what would be interesting places to break up the drive along the way. So in order to plan a few rest stops on Blue Ridge Parkway, we headed for the Visitors Center. The outside door to the foyer was open, but the glass doors leading to the exhibits were locked. A sign in the foyer said it would open April 6. Jennifer went to the rest room and when she came out, Michael was talking to a Park Ranger. Apparently, they had been having a meeting in a back room and heard us come in. He gave us maps and advice, our own private early spring park service.

We used the maps to stop here and there at overlooks that rewarded us with more of the deep blue views we had seen on Skyline Drive. Our first stop was Groundhog Hill. It had an observation tower and a restaurant close by. The exit leading to the Observation Tower was closed. But we parked the car outside the gate and walked up the Tower. We dutifully examined the Civil War era fences and solemnly observed the small family graveyard, which was scattered with flowers. No longer to our surprise,

the restaurant was also closed for the season, that is, the previous season. The proprietor greeted us. He was happy to see tourists mulling about so early in April. But he was not yet ready to serve us lunch.

A few dozen heavy raindrops splashed our windshield once or twice. But it was sunny again when we arrived at Blowing Rock, where the wind had to have been 40-50 knots. It was advertised that objects thrown over the rock come blowing back to you. It took us a few tries to find the right location over the rock, but to our delight, and the delight of a little girl who followed us, small pebbles thrown over the rock really did come sailing back.

Our last Blue Ridge stop was a craft center that had very high quality carved wood spoons and jewelry and boxes. Knowing we would be gone for Mother's and Father's Day, we bought some gifts. The clouds were rolling over the mountains to the west. Just beneath them, a horizontal band of gold. To the east, the mountaintops were alternately dark brown and rust, reflecting the pattern of the clouds under the sun. The views were mostly to the east for a long while. Then the clouds caught up. Just as we reached the highest point in the eastern US, Mount



Jennifer in the wind at Blowing Rock.

Mitchell, the clouds started pouring over the mountains to our right. We saw the peak of Mount Mitchell disappear and reappear as the waves of cloud crashed over it. The next wave flooded the mountains to our right and poured white foam into the valleys on our left. Soon we were immersed in fog. Both Jennifer and Michael had to keep their faces 6 inches from the windshield in order to make out the next 3 or 4 feet of the faint yellow line. Every mile or so, the car moved into a small clearing. These clearings afforded a view of the valley that we had only before seen from an airplane. Clouds blanketed the horizon like snowdrifts blowing gently over a field.



A cloud wave over Mount Mitchell.

We had chosen Table Rock State Park because it was a green spot on the map not far from the Blue Ridge Parkway and the short side trip gave us a chance to visit the State of South Carolina. We arrived about 8:30PM, long after the Visitors Center closed. Luckily, we had stopped for dinner just off the parkway, for when we made the reservation, no one had mentioned that the restaurant at the lodge would not yet open for the season, and that there were no other restaurants for miles around. We had our Cabin number and followed signs to it. A Ranger was standing by a locked gate and let us in. The Cabin was also locked. We drove

back to the gate but the Ranger was gone we were locked in. We considered breaking into the cabin. Instead, Jennifer used our cell phone to call the main number for the Park. She got an answering machine. Thinking it futile, she nevertheless relayed our plight to the answering machine. The Ranger picked up. Our key was in an envelope attached to the door at the Visitors Center. He said he thought we had already picked it up. He met us with it at the gate.

The next day we hiked to the top of Table Rock. The beginning of the trail was laced with waterfalls. The middle sported



The falls at the base of Table Rock in Table Rock State Park.

huge rock formations. They were so big and diverse you could find pictures in them as children do with clouds. There was one that looked like a whale, and was the same size. Another looked like a giant camel. The hike was steadily uphill, but wide with lots of steps for easy footing. The vistas were well worth the climb. Two overlooks at approximately two-thirds and three-quarters of the way were both individually well worth the climb. Large lunch rocks comfortably seated a few dozen hikers, and less than ten dotted each. The view was spectacular. Almost 360° of meringue-like mountain peaks and lakes, stretching like the ocean to the end of the horizon. Hawks soared barely twenty feet away.

The Ranger had told us to try Aunt Sue's for dinner, "about the only place in

town." We drove there but it was not yet open for the season. A workman wandering Aunt Sue's on the porch sent us to a small grocery in the neighboring town of Pumpkintown, but they sold expired food. The local gas station turned out to have some unexpired groceries, so we stocked there. However, it was out of gas. The proprietress did not plan "to spend the \$12,000 to refill because the return on investment is too slow." However, she invited us to make the investment. We declined gracefully.

Back at our Cabin, we wandered around the lake and rocked on our porch. If we were going to stay more than one night, Jennifer would have taken spic-n-span to the kitchen, but as it was, we just made our macaroni and cheese very carefully. There was no phone or television. We were asleep by 8:30PM.

Miles traveled: 678
Departure datetime: Friday April 5, 8:20AM
Departure weather: Sunny 56°