

North Carolina Mountain Getaways - Family Trip

Altitude Adjustment

Article written by: Christine Van Dyk



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A Family Getaway to the North Carolina Mountains

As the sun crept across the mountaintop, the morning light shone through the low-hanging fog that blanketed the pine trees. The Cherokee call it “shaconage,” the land of the blue smoke. I stood there with my two boys who were quickly becoming young men and watched as the “smoke” slowly settled into the crevices between the peaks. No one said a word. We waited in the eerie quiet, afraid to speak, until the trill of birdsong shattered the silence and the Earth began to wake.

In our world of smart phones and insta-everything, our North Carolina Mountain getaway surprised me. I never expected my pre-teens to be so in love with the Appalachian countryside or the simple outdoor activities that I treasured as a kid. But as it turns out, this was the great adventure my boys had longed for without even knowing. A place where ruffians dueled with sticks and chased each other up mountain paths, dove off cliffs into hidden swimming holes and caught fireflies in mason jars every night before bed. It is a moment that is forever trapped in my memory — when their boyhood was frozen, and I could watch

them grow up slowly. Here are some of our favorite experiences from that summer — an easy-to-follow agenda and a few things to do when your own family visits the smoky-blue mountains of North Carolina.

DAY ONE

Riding the Rails in Boone

After flying into Charlotte, we packed up our Toyota Highlander and drove up to Boone, where I introduced the boys to a favorite from my own childhood: the Tweetsie Railroad. Named for the shrill sound of its whistle, this authentic steam engine is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a classic throw-back to an era when vacations took place in wooden-paneled station wagons with bologna sandwiches packed in Styrofoam coolers. The three-mile, western-themed ride features



© Photo by Tweetsie Rail Road

an old-fashioned conductor who guides good ole' number 12 over trestles, around the mountain and past a comical band of robbers and American Indians. After disembarking, the boys raced off to explore the Wild West theme park, which featured a carousel, a Tilt-A-Whirl, a free-fall ride and a scenic chairlift up Miner's Mountain. Sick from too much cotton candy and that last whirl on the Tornado ride, we headed for the hotel where we all collapsed into bed.

DAY TWO

Panning For Fun

Scattered around the Boone area and in the small towns throughout this corner of Appalachia are gem mines where your kids can search for hidden treasure. Start by buying a bucket for your little rock hounds and setting them loose in the water flumes to look for precious and semi-precious stones. While we never found more than mica and quartz, watching the boys splash each other and learn about the area's mining history was well worth the cost of admission.

Trinkets from the General Store

Established in 1883, the Mast General Store of Boone is the perfect excuse for your kids to stock up on sugar and unnecessary plastic doodads. With toys, candy, outdoor gear and an apothecary, this shop of yesteryear is chock full of the kinds of treasures their grandparents may have coveted at their age like Little Golden Books, coonskin caps, bone-handled pocket knives and model cars.

Before heading out of Boone, make sure to grab some local-made souvenirs to take home with you like a jar of blackstrap molasses, stoneground southern grits, bottles of Cheerwine soda or a box of paper-thin Moravian spice cookies. Our favorite treats were the Insomnia Cookies we bought downtown. The s'mores and triple chocolate chunks were so delicious they were gone before we hit the onramp to the interstate.



© Photo by Mast General Store

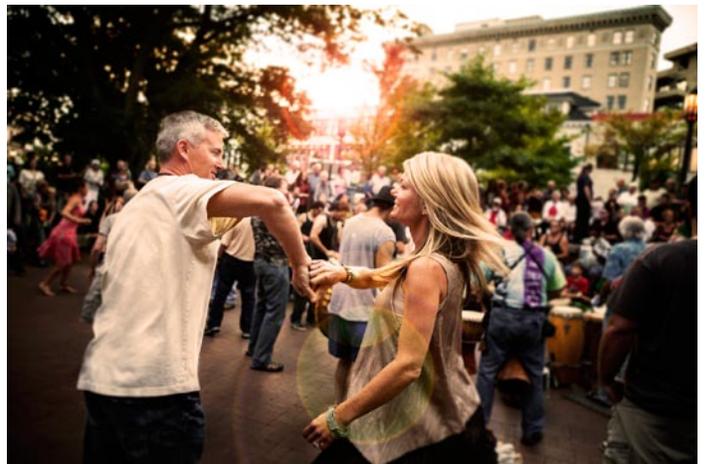
Where the Snow Falls Up

Less than a half hour from Boone, Blowing Rock is a quaint town with art galleries, boutiques and funky restaurants. However, with two squirmy boys, my chances of a girl's day were just about non-existent. Instead, we headed up to North Carolina's oldest attraction and the namesake for the town. Blowing Rock is a precipice that juts out some 4,000 feet above the valley. A Native American legend explains the unique updrafts of the crag that caused Ripley's Believe It Or Not to label it "the only place in the world where snow falls upside down." In truth, it is the shape of the overhang that directs the strong updrafts from the valley so that if you drop a piece of paper it will be blown right back up to you. Besides the fearful walk to the edge, the park features incredible panoramic views and an extensive network of trails for a great day of hiking.

DAY THREE

Day Trekking Along the Appalachian Trail

The Appalachian National Scenic Trail is a 2,174-mile footpath along ridges and across valleys in the mountains from Maine to Georgia. If you're not quite up to a thru-hike on the A.T., why not enjoy a short walk in the woods around Asheville just an hour and 45 minutes from Blowing Rock? Our boys loved chasing each other through the forest and up the rocky cliffs to the summit. Check online or with your hotel for day hikes that fit the abilities of your group. You'll also want to make sure the trek is a round-trip hike unless you have multiple cars that you can park at both ends of the route



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Appalachian Sounds in Downtown Asheville

Every Friday evening in the summer people of all ages beat a path to downtown Asheville for the city's Drum Circle. In the shade of Pritchard Park an eclectic mix of senior citizens, restless children, hipsters and businesspeople are invited to play along. You can imagine how fun it was to watch the boys pound the primal beats while my husband and I sat back, relaxed and enjoyed a bottle of wine beneath the stars.

Nearby at Pack Square Park another group of locals gathered at sunset to share the musical heritage of the Appalachian

Mountains. Asheville's Shindig on the Green is an impromptu jam session featuring bluegrass music and square dancing. Bring a lawn chair and find a spot on the grass where you can enjoy the music and savor some smoky North Carolina barbecue

DAY FOUR

Whitewater Thrills

Asheville has been called one of "America's Top 10 Best River Towns" by Fodor's Travel. With four rivers for rafting, there are plenty of paddling venues with levels that range from easy to extreme. After agreeing on a moderate class-three ride, we headed out with the boys. However, because we were traveling with kids, there are a few things we needed to keep in mind. Here are some of the tips I gathered for North Carolina rafting with children:



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Remember a change of clothes and dry shoes to wear afterward.

Bring water sandals or tennis shoes to wear during the float. Slather yourself in sunscreen and wear a hat since the sun reflects off the water.

When rafting with kids, ask for a guide in your boat since some companies only staff every second or third boat.

Reservations are necessary, especially on weekends. If you're looking for something a bit calmer, tubing excursions can be just as fun.

Ask if your rafting company offers other activities and pursuits like zip lining, fishing or swimming. That way you can enjoy twice the fun in a single outing.

DAY FIVE

"Fall" in Love With North Carolina

Our final day in the high country was spent searching for hidden waterfalls and old-fashioned swimming holes in and around the Pisgah National Forest. We slid on the natural slide at Bust Your Butt Falls and waded into the frigid waters below Looking Glass Falls before we capped off the adventure with a family toboggan run down the 60-foot slip into Sliding Rock. While it was most certainly the highlight of our trip, there are a few things to keep in mind:

Map your route beforehand since most falls and swimming pools are not marked.

Be especially careful climbing on the rocks to avoid being swept into the falls and keep small children away from rushing water. Never dive headfirst. It's hard to see the rocks and limbs that lie beneath the surface.

Most falls and pools require a short hike to reach them so wear proper shoes.

Bring along drinking water and snacks.

A getaway to the North Carolina Mountains is easy to do with just a rental car, a map program and some old-school car games to occupy the kids. After our five-day vacation, we headed to drop off the car at the Charlotte Airport Advantage Rent A Car just a couple of hours away from Asheville.

During our time in the high country, we skipped rocks across streams, sailed through the air on a rope swing, licked mint chocolate chip ice cream cones that melted down our hands and walked across a gorge on a bridge that swayed with the wind. Then, just as quickly as the fog had lifted from the mountains, our vacation was over. With our bags packed and the boys all tuckered out, we headed for home — grateful for the experience and our time in the "land of blue smoke."

Drive Times:

Charlotte to Boone: 2 hours, 5 minutes

Boone to Blowing Rock: 20 minutes

Blowing Rock to Asheville: 1 hour, 45 minutes

Asheville to Charlotte: 2 hours