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Chasing fall's colors in Virginia's picturesque Shenandoah Valley

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Fall in the Shenandoah Valley is full of colors.



By Gretchen McKay / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

LURAY, Va. — Some years ago, fresh out of college and poor as church mice, my husband and I set out on our great honeymoon adventure. Our three-day drive from Pittsburgh to jobs in Miami would take us through Virginia's picturesque Shenandoah Valley. To humor my father, we agreed to stop at Luray Caverns.

Good call, Dad!

Discovered in 1878 and named a National Natural Landmark in the early 1970s, the 64-acre series of subterranean rooms and passageways proved pretty amazing, despite a hokey tour that takes visitors more than a mile and 160 feet below the surface.

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“If you use your imagination,” our elderly guide kept parroting, we’d see the likes of fried eggs, ice cream cones, giant redwoods and a big shaggy dog on the fantastical, slow-growing calcite formations. (Created millions of years ago by mineral-rich water dripping upon limestone, the icicle-like stalactites and pillar-like stalagmites grow about an inch every 100 years.)

There’s something magical about being deep underground, where the temperature is always 54 degrees, and still feeling dwarfed by nature; some of the cavern’s dimly lit rooms soar 10 stories. And how cool is the cavern’s sparkling Dream Lake, which reflects myriad stalactites hanging above on the ceiling? We knew someday, we’d be back.

Our redux came earlier this month, after dropping our daughter off for her sophomore year at James Madison University. It proved just as fun as the first time.

Fall is the perfect time to visit Luray and Shenandoah National Park’s nearby Skyline Drive, which runs 105 miles along the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Come October, it’s a leaf-peepers paradise. The entire valley turns brilliant shades of crimson, yellow and orange, and local farms sell apples along with pumpkins and other fall foods from roadside stands. (For a weekly fall foliage report, visit dof.virginia.gov/fall.)

We started our trip in scenic Harrisonburg, home to the university. Known as part of the “Breadbasket of the Confederacy,” it’s a must-do for history buffs interested in Civil War battlefields and historic sites such as the Hardesty-Higgins House, used briefly as headquarters for Union Gen. Nathaniel Banks. It’s equally popular with bicyclists, thanks to multiple road and mountain-biking trails, and also a boon for foodies, who have dozens of restaurants to choose from in the state’s first designated culinary district. Add three craft breweries, a cider house and a pair of wineries to the virtual delights.

After moving Liv into her dorm, we saluted the fall semester with a terrific lunch of pulled pork and cheese grits at Clementine Cafe on South Main Street, also an art gallery and live music venue. Then it was on to Kline’s Dairy Bar — a local institution since 1943 — for orange creams. Bidding Olivia a teary goodbye, we drove a half-hour south to Staunton.

It’s tough to imagine a small town more charming than Staunton (don’t make the mistake we did — it’s pronounced “Stan-ton” y’all!), home to Mary Baldwin College and the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library and Museum. Extremely walkable, it’s postcard pretty. And talk about things to do: Its six-block main street bustles with antique shops, art galleries, restaurants, coffee shops and quaint boutiques ripe for the picking.

It’s also a boon for theater lovers: The American Shakespeare Center houses the world’s only re-creation of Shakespeare’s original indoor theater, the 300-seat Blackfriars Playhouse. It’s next door to the historic Stonewall Jackson Hotel where, after checking in, we made a beeline to Chef Ian Boden’s much-lauded 26-seat restaurant, The Shack. We didn’t have

If you go: Shenandoah Valley/Skyline Drive

• Getting there: Bordered by the Blue Ridge Mountains to the east and the Alleghenies to the west, Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley stretches some 200 miles from Harpers Ferry, W.Va., to Roanoke, Va. Skyline Drive is the only public road within Shenandoah National Park. The park is open year-round pending weather, although most visitor facilities and services close down completely from late November to March. To check status, call the park’s recorded information line at 1-540-999-3500 or visit nps.gov/shen.

The are four entrances to Skyline Drive: At Front Royal near Route 66 and 340; Thornton Gap at Route 211; Swift Run Gap at Route 33; and Rockfish Gap at Route 64 and Route 250 near Staunton (where we started). Cost is \$20 per vehicle for seven consecutive days; it takes about three hours to travel the drive’s 105 miles on a clear day (the speed limit is 35 mph). From Pittsburgh, the 300-mile drive takes about five hours via Harrisonburg and Staunton, Va.

• Lodging: Living large, or on a budget? The area features a variety of chain hotels/motels and small inns in all price ranges. For B&B types, the historic Joshua Wilton House Inn (\$145 and up) and Stonewall Jackson Inn (\$139 and up) in Harrisonburg are good bets; the Queen Anne-style Berkeley House Inn B&B in Staunton (\$149 and up) dates to 1893. We overnighted at the very lovely Stonewall Jackson Hotel in historic downtown Staunton. Built in 1924 and lovingly restored in 2005, it’s recognized by the National Trust Historic Hotels of America for its historic and architectural significance.

You’ll also find comfy rooms within the park at historic Big Meadows Lodge, Skyland Resort

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time (or reservations) for the \$45 prix fixe menu, but the pimento cheese and pork cracklins we noshed al fresco while watching a guy across the street cut grass were a memorable pre-theater treat. Nourished, we then clapped and hooted our way through a very lively production of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” And neither one of us thought we liked Shakespeare! (The cast is that good.)

While the playhouse is lively, the town after hours is anything but: Save for Zynodoa (serving upscale Southern food) and Byers Street Bistro, where we ate burgers at the bar and listened to a band from Richmond, Staunton pretty much rolls up the sidewalks after dark. Then again, you want to be up early Saturday morning for the farmers market at the corner of Byers and Johnson streets in the Wharf District, lush with locally grown produce, organic honey and baked goods.

We’d hoped to take a peek inside Trinity Episcopal Church, which contains 12 Tiffany windows spanning Louis Comfort Tiffany’s 40-year career, but the doors were locked. So instead, my husband talked me into visiting Bruce Elder’s antique/classic car museum, located in a 1911 Ford dealership building. For \$5, we got to see two floors of more than 50 cars, both for sale and display, including Richard Petty’s 1987 Pontiac Grand Prix Winston Cup Race car, a 1911 Chalmers Model 30 with wooden spoke wheels and the ’35 Packard convertible Arthur Miller drove Marilyn Monroe in.

As payback, I insisted we do a craft beer tasting (\$10 for four) at Redbeard Brewing, a small batch brewery on Lewis Street. I recommend the Black Rye IPA, along with the burgers, on your way out of town at the nondescript Marino’s Lunch on North Augusta Street. A fave with locals, it’s been a beer joint and legendary bluegrass hot spot for more than 100 years.

Staunton is just a few miles from the Rockfish

Gap entrance to Shenandoah National Park’s Skyline Drive, where the \$20 per car entry buys you seven days on the 105-mile drive. If you plan on hiking, ask the park ranger at the gate for trail maps; they’re marked with elevation, distance and effort (easy to challenging). We did two hikes during our stay: the 2.2-mile loop to the Turk Mountain Overlook (harder than it looked) and the 1.6-mile Stony Man Trail partway along the Appalachian Trail to Stony Man Summit, Shenandoah’s second highest peak at 4,010 feet (easier than we imagined).



Source: Ecol
PG graphic: Fall foliage sites in Virginia
(Click image for larger version)

(the highest point on the drive) or Lewis Mountain Cabins. \$109 and up; reserve at goshenandoah.com/lodging or 1-877-847-1919.

If you’d rather rough it and don’t fear wildlife (this is black bear country), the park is happy to oblige with four campsites along Skyline Drive. Prices start at \$15 for a tent site with common restrooms; reservations may be made up to six months in advance online at recreation.gov/shen, or by calling 1-877-444-6777.

• Eat, drink and be merry: You won’t want for a good meal, or beer, in the Shenandoah Valley. In 2014, Harrisonburg became the first city in Virginia to adopt the designation of “Downtown Culinary District.” Some of the best choices include Clementine Cafe (which doubles as an art gallery), Bella Luna Wood-fired Pizza, Jack Brown’s Beer & Burger Joint and A Bowl of Good Cafe (closed Sundays). For local craft beers, the tap room at Three Brothers Brewing features 10 rotating drafts (open Thursday-Monday). You’ll find equally good eats in Staunton, including the tiny 26-seat The Shack, voted one of Southern Living magazine’s Best New Restaurants in 2014. Chef Ian Boden serves a prix-fix menu on weekends and burgers made from local meat on weekdays. If they’re on the menu, the pork cracklins with sorghum hot sauce are nothing short of amazing. Zynodoa (Southern cuisine) and Mill Street Grill (ribs, seafood and pasta in a century-old flour mill) also are highly recommended, and we had a terrific breakfast at Cranberry’s Grocery & Eatery. And we loved the beer tasting at the funky, small-batch Redbeard Brewing (\$10 for 5 tastes; Thursday-Sunday).

If you just plan on going point to point by car, know that the 35 mph speed limit makes for slow driving. Sometimes infuriatingly so, as drivers pull on and off for the drive's 75(!) overlooks. We thought the views of the rolling piedmont to the east were more spectacular than those of the Luray Valley to the west, but they're all Instagram-worthy (even if you can't immediately post them due to poor cell service).

If you're overnighting on the drive, there's only three choices, and they're all pretty rustic, if also charming: Lewis Mountain Cabins, Big Meadow Lodge (where you'll find the Harry F. Byrd Visitor Center) and Skyland Lodge, where we enjoyed views from the highest point on Skyline Drive from the comfort of our room. A word of caution for you impatient types: while the resort regional fare was very good, the restaurant can be extremely crowded on weekend evenings. Expect a wait. (It took almost an hour just to get a beer in the taproom.)

Another long queue is in store if you don't get to Luray Caverns early; by 11 a.m., the line already was snaking out the door, even for those smart advance-ticket buyers. The **hourlong tour, though, is lots of fun if you don't mind the dawdlers at the rear or getting poked by picture takers on the narrow passageway.** Be sure to rub the "eggs" on the way out — the only parts of the cavern that you are allowed to touch — for good luck.

• **Activities:** Staunton is an antiques' paradise, and it also boasts art galleries, boutiques, an antique car museum and a lively farmers market on Saturday. If you like theater, Blackfriars Playhouse at The American Shakespeare Center hosts an internationally acclaimed theater company that performs Shakespeare's works under their original staging conditions.

The area also is renowned for its outdoor activities. Shenandoah National Park has more than 500 miles of trails, including 101 miles of the Appalachian Trail. There's also biking, fishing, horseback riding and 105-mile Skyline Drive.

• **More info:**
visitshenandoah.org or
visitskylinedrive.org.

Admission to the caverns includes The Car and Carriage Caravan Museum, but we opted instead for the adjoining Luray Valley Museum (also free) to learn about local history and see artifacts from the 1750s to the 1920s; the museum also includes a seven-acre re-creation of a small 19th-century farming community. Still got some energy? Kids will love the Garden Maze (\$9 adult, \$7 ages 6-12), and who can say no to a tasting of local wines in the 1860 Burner Barn (weekends only through fall)?

After a quick exploration of Luray's historic main street, we made one last stop before heading back north: the Virginia Farm Market in Winchester (look for the big red barn). In addition to jug-your-own cider and a dozen or more varieties of locally grown apples to choose from (Winchester is known as the Apple Capital of Virginia), its pumpkin patch during the season boasts 15,000 pumpkins. Splurge on the apple cider doughnuts. You'll eat at least two on your way to the parking lot.

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