

When the weather warms in the Southern Appalachians, fiddles and bows emerge with the wildflowers. Rousing festivals celebrate mountain music, local foods, crafts, and the beauty of the bloom. Rustic may be the rule, but top-tier lodging and luxe fare complement one of the U.S.' best-kept-secret natural spectacles.

appalala Spring

By Randy Johnson

Photography by Hugh Morton



Appalachian

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT FROM MY FIRST APPALACHIAN MUSIC FESTIVAL. I IMAGINED SOME big beer-swilling crowd hooting in a muddy field to the electrified twang of bluegrass or country. But that image faded fast in the darkened auditorium of Glenville State College in West Virginia, where I first heard Southern highlanders sing sorrowful tales, their richly accented voices underscored by dulcimers and fiddles.

The craggy faces betrayed the bone structure of the region's early Scotch-Irish settlers. Poignant, discordant harmonies gave me goose bumps. The music at the West Virginia State Folk Festival wasn't exactly Aaron Copland's classic *Appalachian Spring*, but events like these, at this time of year, are the perfect way to celebrate nature's reawakening in one of the most scenic, culturally distinctive parts of the U.S. Mountain culture emerges ►►►

starkly in the spring, when residents gather to celebrate the season, traditional music, and food. Some gatherings are popular with travelers, others are more like family reunions. All welcome the beauty and bounty of spring.

The Appalachians arc from Canada's Gaspé Peninsula to Alabama, but nowhere is spring as showy as in the verdant Southern Appalachians, from Virginia and West Virginia to North Carolina and Tennessee.

Rustic was the rule, but today, Appalachia's legendary hollows hide sophisticated lodging and a growing national renown for gourmet fare.

The greening summits and waving wildflowers are music to the eyes for visitors in this global capital of biodiversity. Bud-burnished trees tint mountainsides with hues reminiscent of fall as the bloom creeps higher up the slopes with each passing week. Whether or not you pause long enough to hear a mountain fiddler, the scenery alone is worth the trip.



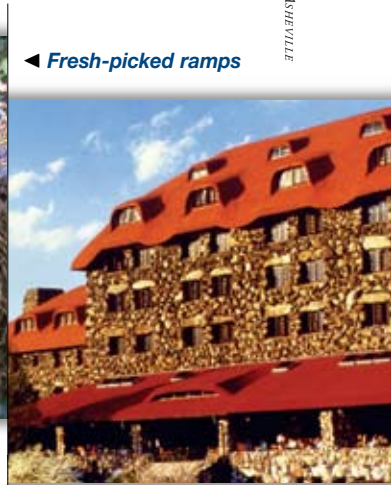
Roan Mountain rhododendron ▶



◀ The Swag's cool cabins



Asheville's Grove Park Inn ▶



◀ Fresh-picked ramps

The Great Smokies / By May, deep snowdrifts are gone and the nearly 7,000-foot summits of the Great Smoky Mountains crest like a lime-green wave on the border of North Carolina and Tennessee.

There's no better place than The Swag to savor the spectacle. Named for a swale between summits, the inn offers a magical collection of lodges and cabins built from massive logs felled long ago in Appalachian virgin forests. Arriving guests pull up to a dogtrot amidst a breeze-filled, mile-high forest. Gaze east off the porch into cloud-filled valleys far below. West, and 30 feet away, a rustic, flower-bordered fence marks the boundary of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Nearby, hiking staffs stand in a large, hollow section of tree trunk. A wooden name medallion for each guest invites you to grab yours and stride through the gate and into the green enclave.

The Swag is all about nature. This and many lofty Southern Appalachian resorts bask in crisp, high-elevation cool that sets them apart from—and above—the ordinary world of the sultry South. The earliest visitors entered the

region to escape the South's summer heat—and modern travelers still do.

Wildflower walks are everywhere on The Swag's 250-acre tract. Wonderfully private little nooks called "hideaways" beckon. Spring to fall, expert naturalists engage guests with interpretive programs and guided hikes.

The Swag is known for delectable post-hike fare and four-star amenities such as in-room XM satellite radio and an abbreviated morning version of *The New York Times* by fax. Owners Dan Matthews and wife Deener lived in New York City until recently. Dan, a native of nearby Waynesville, North Carolina, retired as the rector of Trinity Church, the historic Wall Street church so close to the events of 9/11. Perhaps not surprisingly, the couple came home to The Swag.

For a counterpoint to the fancy shallots of The Swag, drop in on the 75th annual Ramp Festival on Saturday, May 7, in Waynesville, a pristine, archetypal mountain

downtown. Isolated highland residents of the past were so tired of dried foods by spring that they'd eat anything that resembled fresh greens—including the local wild leeks called ramps. This notoriously strong onion is a traditional garnish that can get schoolchildren banished from class until the aroma subsides. Local volunteers prepare plentiful ramp-laced dishes at the American Legion hall. Options include country ham and ramps, ramps and scrambled eggs, and ramp meatloaf. Raw ramps are for sale, and there's a ramp-eating contest. Contestants get two minutes to eat the most bags, each containing about 18 ramps. Last year's winner downed three bagsful.

The festival kicks off the summer travel season. Saturday night after the ramp event, the first of the Waynesville Street Dances draws folks downtown for bluegrass and mountain music. The night before, the summer's first Art After Dark invites visitors to galleries and craft studios for demonstrations and hors d'oeuvres. Like events all over Appalachia, these types of fests often benefit local volunteer fire departments and rescue squads.

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Urban Appalachia / From the Smokies and Waynesville, follow the winding motor trail of the Blue Ridge Parkway north over the ridgetop jumble of the Nantahala and Pisgah national forests to trendy Asheville. Foremost among the city's wealth of festivals is the Biltmore Estate's Festival of Flowers, held April 1–30. The estate's formal gardens are an inspiring explosion of allergens. America's largest private home is the centerpiece, but the outdoor and conservatory gardens, and even the vineyards, add up to a stellar spring experience. Thousands of acres of grounds landscaped by Frederick Law Olmsted and rich surrounding forests abound with flowering shrubs and trees.

Stay on the grounds at the Inn on Biltmore Estate and it's easy to feel "to the manor born." Asheville may be the base for a memorable roam through the region, but the estate is difficult to leave. Trails lace the idyllic setting, with horseback riding, mountain biking, and hiking close at hand. The Biltmore's outdoor center rents all the equipment and

mountain culture. The art-festooned Urban Trail leads you through the city's architectural, literary, and musical history. Thomas Wolfe's home is on the tour, as is Asheville's classic Grove Arcade, a recently reclaimed urban market like Seattle's Pike Place or Reading Terminal in Philly. Asheville gave birth to the first traditional mountain-music festival in 1925, and the summertime Shindig on the Green is just one of many music and crafts fairs that carry on that tradition. Restaurants, nightlife, and regionally significant craft galleries make an Asheville visit worth even a long trip.

Higher Country / The Blue Ridge Parkway soars north out of Asheville and back even earlier into spring. On the way past Mount Mitchell, the highest mountain in the East (6,684 feet), the atmospheric can be awe-inspiring.

In northwestern North Carolina, near Boone, a college town named after pioneering explorer Daniel Boone, the Appalachian Trail leads through vast open vistas on the highlands of Roan Mountain. The mountain's meadows,



Spring at Biltmore Estate ▶



◀ Grandfather Mountain



Asheville's Shindig on the Green ▶



◀ Eseeola Lodge in Linville

guides many trips, including raft rides on the French Broad River. The Land Rover Driving School offers a thrilling introduction to off-roading over the estate's rolling hills and valleys. The inn's patios, pool, and restaurants overlook the entire list of options, including the winery. Biltmore's restaurants serve estate-raised meats and produce in traditional regional dishes—and settings as diverse as a winery bistro and reinvented stable.

For a truly springtime vista, overlook Asheville's lush setting from the Grove Park Inn, a massive, boulder-built lodge nearing its 100th birthday that's been updated to first-rate resort status. From the flower-potted patio steakhouse, just below historic rooms favored by F. Scott Fitzgerald, the view sweeps across the leafy city's art-deco landmarks to the surrounding Blue Ridge. Immediately below, the sounds of a cascade lead your gaze to the Grove Park Spa, an enticing subterranean retreat of New Age music and waterfall-filled grottoes that could induce you to hole up for your entire stay.

Don't. Downtown Asheville is a vibrant oasis of granola

covered with rare species of flowers and natural gardens of rhododendron, are a landmark spring destination.

At more than 6,000 feet, lethargic bumblebees careen through the chilly air, spurred into reluctant action by acres of blossoms. On June 17–18, the 60th Roan Mountain Rhododendron Festival will celebrate the bloom, proof that spring is just getting going on the high peaks, when summer is already broiling elsewhere in the South. Visitors circulate between the mountaintop gardens and Tennessee's nearby Roan Mountain State Park, the setting for mountain music, crafts, and natural-history programs.

At the base of nearby Grandfather Mountain in Linville, check in to Eseeola Lodge, a romantic, chestnut bark-shingled inn from the late 1800s. The lodge and a cluster of structures from Linville's early days form the heart of a national historic district that preserves one of the first planned resort communities in the U.S. This quaint, rhododendron-dappled summer colony is still sheltered by towering forests of hemlock and white pine. Today's inn has 24 rooms flanking a beautiful chestnut-paneled hallway. ▶

For further information on these inns and events, a Southern Appalachian calendar of spring festivals, and additional Appalachian travel articles, go to **hemispheresmagazine.com** and click on Cyber Sidebar.



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The once ubiquitous trees succumbed to a chestnut blight not long after the lodge was built with the golden wood.

A stay at Eseeola invites you to take a book (perhaps Horace Kephart's classic *Our Southern Highlanders*), wander to where the trout stream courses beneath the inn's dining room, and pick a chair on the flower-covered grounds. The lawns are worthy of a putting green. Eseeola's golf course, designed by Donald Ross, is still a classic—and being a lodge guest is the only way the public can play.

Bring a jacket for the four-star dining (in a nod to informality, ties are no longer required). Breakfast and dinner are included in the room rate, and an indulgent Thursday night seafood buffet is considered the best in the High Country (nonguests *can* dine at Eseeola).

Bark-sided style continues at the Ragged Garden Inn in nearby Blowing Rock, a town fictionalized in the Mitford series by author and onetime resident Jan Karon. To really step back in time, the rambling, white-clapboard Green Park Inn perches on the Continental Divide. This 120-plus-year-old monument to the appeal of the town's cool summer climate was among the first tourism traditions in these mountains.

A Musical Finale / Follow spring north, to southwestern Virginia, and the Blue Ridge Parkway leads through a hotbed of traditional music. The Parkway's Blue Ridge Music Center, near Galax, just opened last summer. The new museum's exhibits trace the region's pivotal and continuing role in music uniquely identified with the U.S.—country, bluegrass, gospel. The center refers visitors to many local musical venues, and its stage hosts continuing warm-weather concerts.

Not far west, Virginia's highest summit thrusts rocky peaks at racing clouds. Wild ponies roam Mount Rogers' crag-capped, mile-high meadows. Nordic skiers striding into spring see the ponies huddled together, their manes matted with hoar frost. One of the season's earliest festivals falls on the last full weekend of March on Whitetop, Mount Rogers' neighbor. The Whitetop Mountain Maple Festival pours golden gallons of tasty local syrup over hearty breakfast fare. Stretch your

legs with tours of the sugar house or the tubing system that taps the trees, or stay warm inside with storytelling and performances by local musicians. The only wildflowers you'll see are in the event's slide shows, but you can come back May 12 and 13 for the Mount Rogers Naturalists Rally and a ramp festival. Nearby Damascus, Virginia, is an Appalachian Trail town where you can rent bikes and take a shuttle to Whitetop's summit for a downhill ride back to town on the Virginia Creeper Trail.

On the way to the Parkway's northern terminus at Shenandoah National Park, the road passes Wintergreen Resort with its Spring Wildflower Symposium, May 19–21. One of the South's best ski areas and mountain resorts has preserved most of its acreage as wilderness that erupts in springtime bloom. Workshops and hikes on the resort's trails feature experts, authors, and diverse opportunities to learn about the outdoor Appalachians.

The Blue Ridge Parkway and its adjacent events, inns, and outings are just part of the story. Any Appalachian byway, including the enticing country roads that wander into West Virginia, can lead to inspiring spring scenery and contact with people glad to be alive in a beautiful and elemental part of the world. The sounds of fiddles and the footfalls of cloggers may not seem as sophisticated as Copland's well-known ode to Appalachian spring, but the season itself is sure to spark the artist in anyone. ▀

Randy Johnson, *the editor of HEMISPHERES*, is the author of *Hiking the Blue Ridge Parkway*, *Hiking North Carolina*, *Best Easy Day Hikes of the Blue Ridge Parkway*, and *Southern Snow: The Winter Guide to Dixie*. For more information, visit randyjohnsonbooks.com.