



The Boone Fork Trail has it all—rhodo forest, waterfalls, and open meadows, and the Flat Top Trail reaches pretty meadows not far from Cone Manor House. Photos by R Johnson



The Grandfather Trail takes a turn for the sky with the aid of cables and ladders. (RJ at last spring's Naturalist Weekend). Photo by TK



Part of the hike at Price Lake is seeing boaters afloat beneath distant Grandfather Mountain. Photo by Randy Johnson

Meet the Mountains . . . by Randy Johnson

No matter where you reside, ask ten other locals if they visit the places people come from miles away to see—and 8 out of 10 say, “Never been there.”

For me, the really mystifying admission is all those local folks who never hike in the area, and particularly on Grandfather Mountain. How many times do you have to look up at that rocky ridge on the skyline on the drive from Banner Elk to NC 105 before you wonder—“What’s it like to walk across that ridge?”

Tourists are in the same boat. It’s understandable that they look up at the peaks from the road and think, “We experienced the mountains!”

Locals and visitors alike can be that way. But you’re missing out if you just know the mountains from your car.

These mountains have been waiting millions of years, so it’s easy to change that. They’ll be here for visitors when the urge strikes to walk away from your car on the Blue Ridge Parkway, as they will for locals when you decide to swing by the hardware store on the way to a job site Monday and spend Saturday in the woods.

Here are some prime places to go—from easy to adventurous—if you really want to really meet the mountains.

STRETCH YOUR LEGS

The Parkway calls most of its trails “leg-stretchers” for a reason—they’re short, easy paths intended to limber up a motorist who’s been “motoring.” It’s easy to save some gas and deepen your experience by taking in a few trails. And that goes for families with toddlers, the elderly, or people in wheelchairs or even on crutches.

Figure that: After exploring the craft shop and maybe taking the upstairs tour in the Moses Cone Manor House in Blowing Rock, try the paved Figure Eight Trail just outside. It was the Cone’s favorite hike, a perfect half-mile stroll to show guests what the inside of a rhododendron forest looks like. And it loops back on itself in such a fun, confusing way, it’s like a mini-“Maze,” that other trail in Cone Park known for its corkscrew configuration. Great signs tell you how mountaineers used the trees.

Lake of the woods: Pull into Price Lake at Boone Fork Overlook (Milepost 297.2) and start the lake loop by the boat launch. The total circuit around this jewel of a lake is 2.3 miles and perfectly flat—but people in wheelchairs, toddlers, and older hikers will love the first half-mile. It’s been turned into the easiest path imaginable with trailside benches, streamside sitting spots, wetland boardwalks and a lakeshore observation deck. Out and back is an easy mile. And the rest of the trail is so well marked and easy—it begs to be a picnic hike.

Blowing Rock’s bottom: If you’re too fond of Blowing Rock to leave, head to the Glen Burney Trail. Turn down Laurel Lane from Main Street and just through the next stop sign (at Wallingford Lane), go left into the parking lot. This is moderate to strenuous hike is a little rocky in spots, and it does dip down 800 feet, which means you have to climb back up. But it’s perfect for fit folks who want to see how the edge of a quaint town turns into a waterfall-filled gorge. There’s an observation deck atop the falls (stay behind the rail!)—a perfect place to have lunch. There and back is a 3-mile roundtrip. Or turn around anywhere you want. There are streamside views almost all the way.

Speaking of towns: If you’re chilling this summer on Beech Mountain, you really don’t need to head down the hill to take some great hikes. Stop into Fred’s General Mercantile or elsewhere, grab a copy of this trail town’s hiking map and take your pick. Boone, too, has a premier path in its Lee and Vivian Reynolds Greenway that starts near the Watauga Humane Society. Borrow a homeless dog and take an easy walk to a nice little picnic spot in the curve of the South Fork of the New River.

Flat out Flatrock: After a visit to Grandfather Mountain, head to the Flatrock Trail and see the mountain from one of the High Country’s best viewpoints. From US 221, one mile from the Grandfather entrance, hop on the Parkway at Milepost 305.1 near Linville and turn right to go south. At Milepost 308.3, pull into the Flatrock Trail. This easy little 0.7-mile loop rises through cool woods to cross a long ledge above Linville. The western skyline ridge includes Hump Mountain where the Appalachian Trail crosses grassy meadows. Grab the Grandfather view before ducking back into the woods and back to your car.

MORE RUGGED REWARDS

It’s not always easy to moderate hiking in the High Country. If you’re up for it, head home with an adventure under your belt.

Waterfall Wander: Start at the Parkway’s Boone Fork Picnic Area at Milepost 296.5 for a 5-mile loop that has it all—rhodo forest, waterfalls, and even meadows. There’s plentiful evidence of beavers at the start of this trail, then a really nice waterfall at about 1.8 miles (lunch!). You’ll curve back up away from the Boone Fork to open meadows—

take a right off the trail to picnic atop the grassy bulge. After meeting, then deleting, the Tanawha Trail through Price Lake Campground, you’re back the car.

Granddad of ‘em all: If you do visit Grandfather Mountain, and it’s pretty much mandatory to achieve a serious sampling of the High Country (especially if you live here), the South’s premier adventure hike starts where the road to the top ends. If you’re up for a craggy climb where cables and ladders help you up cliffs to high adventure—take the Grandfather Trail Extension from the Black Rock Trail Parking Area just below the Swinging Bridge. No flip-flops allowed. Be sure to have good footwear, a pack, raingear, food and water, and return before the park closes—this is a serious high mountain hike. Climb up and across MacRae Peak. Then, from the gap beyond, return on the Underwood Trail for a 2-plus mile hike. Be prepared—it can take 3 hours if you keep stopping to gape at the magnificent views.

Randy Johnson launched Grandfather Mountain’s wilderness trail management program 30 years ago this summer. For these and other hikes check out his books at local stores, including “Hiking the Blue Ridge Parkway” and “Hiking North Carolina,” or visit www.randyjohnsonbooks.com for more info on local trails.

