

High Country Back Roads Southern Loop



1 - Your High Country Back Roads tour begins on King Street, in downtown Boone. The town was named for Daniel Boone who camped in this area during the 1700's, and is home to Appalachian State University. Mileage is measured from the Watauga County Courthouse and County Administrative Building at the intersection of King St. and Water St. King Street is also US-321, US-421 and NC-194. The real Back Roads tour begins almost five miles out when NC-194 breaks off and becomes a designated NC Scenic Byway. Begin by following US-421 North. Enjoy the trip.

2 - As you turn left off US-421 onto a designated Scenic Byway route NC-194, you enter one of the true High Country Back Roads. This road, nicknamed "Mission Crossing," winds through some of the oldest farm areas in the High Country. It is specifically not recommended for vehicles over 35 feet long.

After about two miles you will find the Watauga River on your right. This river flows west into the Tennessee River valley and ultimately to the Gulf of Mexico. You will pass a large barn with many windows which was a tobacco barn for curing the tobacco grown along the river's floodplain. However, in recent years this land has become the fertile ground for growing organic broccoli, through changes in the industry, the national tobacco settlement, and the resulting "Golden Leaf Foundation" which funds the farmers' new projects.

As the houses become more frequent along the way, you will be entering the community of Valle Crucis, settled in 1780 and named "Vale of the Cross" because of the way Crab Orchard Creek and Dutch Creek flow into the Watauga River and form a "cross." Some landmarks include the Baird House and Barn, and the Mast General Store, both on your left. The Baird House and Barn are now the home of Dutch Creek Trails, a horseback riding outfitter run by cowboy poet, Keith Ward. The Mast General Store was opened in 1883 carrying everything from "cradles to caskets." You might stop in and see this National Historical Landmark that is still an active store and houses the Valle Crucis Post Office.

3 - Just a bit farther down the road (a tenth of a mile or so) is the attractive, stone Valle Crucis Elementary School, which was built by the Works Project Administration (WPA) during the Roosevelt administration. It is still one of eight elementary schools serving Watauga County. Notably, all eight are deemed "Schools of Excellence" by the NC Public School System.

At this point, turn right on NC-194 that continues to Banner Elk. However, just before the turn you can see the Mast General Store Annex up ahead, built in 1909 as Farthing's Store and carrying additional apparel merchandise, as well as an ice cream kiosk. The adjacent Valle Crucis Park offers a children's playground, paved walking and biking loop, picnic shelters and scenic water features.

As you go up NC-194, you are following Dutch Creek (to your left) which sustained a great deal of flooding in the hurricanes of September 2004. You will pass Chadi Farms, a horse

farm where you can ride, The Inn at Taylor House, one of the many bed and breakfast inns in the area, and The Apple Barn, a popular contra-dancing venue. NC Historical Marker N-9 discusses the Episcopal Mission built here in 1842 as a monastic order, and reopened in 1895 as a mission school. It is now run as a camp and conference center.

The road gets curvy again and heads mostly uphill as you continue from Valle Crucis (at 2,900' elevation) to Banner Elk (at 3,700').

Two miles later, the road levels briefly and you pass the Matney community, with the facetiously labeled "Matney Mall" and the Carender Barn circa about 1879.

The Watauga/Avery County line marker is a good place to check your mileage. Soon you will enter the town of Banner Elk. This small community is home to Lees-McRae college and a number of specialty shops and very good restaurants. The town is named for the Banner family who settled on this location of the headwaters of Elk River. The river was so-named for the elk which used to roam this area many years ago.

4 - At the first stoplight, in the middle of this quaint college town, turn left onto NC route 184. On the outskirts of town, the large pond on your right is Mill Pond and usually hosts a few friendly ducks and geese. As you continue a few miles on NC-184 you may notice a very large, rectangular condominium building on top of Sugar Mountain, to your right. This is "Sugartop" built in 1981. The public reaction to this building resulted in the enactment of "ridge laws," restricting the size and location of buildings on mountain ridgelines and to prevent scarring the landscape.

The Great Train Robbery on the right is an emporium of over 100 booths with a vast array of merchandise if you are interested in a stop. A mile beyond, is the entrance to the Village of Sugar Mountain. Ski Sugar is one of the four modern ski resorts in the area. You can see the white snow of the ski slopes well into April. Even in the summer, the slopes stand out as wide trails of bright green grass, until snowmaking resumes in November.

5- When you reach the intersection of NC-105, you are in an area called Tynecastle, and that is Grandfather Mountain which you see straight ahead, and considerably above you. The elevation at Tynecastle is about 4,000' and the top of Grandfather Mountain is at nearly 6,000'. Turn right and head down NC-105 south, following the western foot of Grandfather Mountain. High and to the left, you might catch a glimpse of the Mile-High Swinging Bridge on the mountain's ridge top.

In about four miles you will reach the community of Linville and the stoplight at the intersection with US 221. Linville community and nearby Linville Falls in the Linville Gorge were named for William and John Linville, contemporaries of Daniel Boone who were killed by Indians at the site of the Falls in 1766. *Note: If you want a quick side-trip, you can turn right, then right again at the next street and visit the Hampton General Store, which is one more of the surviving, old, general stores in the High Country. They also have plenty of ice cream, soft drinks and BBQ if it is time for a break. Then back to the Linville stoplight!*

6 - From the original direction on NC-105, turn left – there is a huge “Grandfather Mountain” sign with an arrow; you can’t miss it! This section of US 221 will climb and pass around the ridge of Grandfather Mountain, also known as Tanawha to the Indians.

At 5,985’, the mountain’s peak is the highest point in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and provides a unique habitat for rare species of plants and insects.

MacRae Meadows on the left is the location of the Highland Games in July, one of America’s premier Highland Scottish celebration of Celtic culture and competition featuring the largest clan gathering in the world.

In July there is a foot-race up this road, from the light at Linville through the entrance to Grandfather Mountain, then all the way to the Mile-High Swinging Bridge. In five miles, you climb 1,568’ uphill. This race is called “The Bear” with very good reason!

7 – As you follow US-221, you will pass the entrance to Grandfather Mountain, the highest peak in the Blue Ridge mountain range and a globally recognized nature preserve. It is the only privately owned International Biosphere Reserve recognized by the United Nations.

There is an admission charge to maintain the facilities, including the Nature Museum, restaurant, souvenir shop, animal habitat (with deer, cougars, bears, otters and eagles, among others), and the Mile-High Swinging Bridge on the ridge top. On a clear day, long-range views just don’t get better than this!

8 – Back on US-221 North, you will continue, crossing under the Blue Ridge Parkway.

The Parkway was begun in September 1935 and the work was done in "sections." By World War II, about one-half of the road was completed and by the 1960s, all but one section was opened to the public. In 1987, the last section was completed around Grandfather Mountain, including the Linn Cove Viaduct at Milepost 304, an environmentally sensitive, award winning bridge. The whole Blue Ridge Parkway runs 469 miles from northern Virginia to southern North Carolina.

By the way, the mountain “next door” with the TV tower on top is Grandmother Mountain.

For many years, US-221 was the main highway linking Linville to Blowing Rock. It was originally built as a toll road, by Hugh MacRae, who provided a coach service to bring Blowing Rock summer residents to his resort in Linville. The toll was a dime for a man on horseback, and \$2 per coach. Today, it is a NC Scenic Byway nicknamed “Little Parkway” and parallels the Blue Ridge Parkway on the eastern side of the mountain. You can frequently see the Parkway on the slope above. For about the next 15 miles into Blowing Rock, you follow a beautiful High Country Back Road that is little used today. There are several waterfalls along the way and opportunities to pull off and enjoy the spectacular scenery.

9- So far, your trip has been on the western side of the Eastern Continental Divide. The continental divide is the line where rain falling on the eastern slope runs eventually into the

Atlantic Ocean and rain falling on the western slope joins streams emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. Just past the Watauga/Caldwell county line, you will cross the Divide at 3900 feet.

Elliott Daingerfield (1859-1932) was one of the best known and most respected artists a century ago and at the height of his career one of the most recognized Southern American painters. His work is exhibited in the National Gallery in Washington and the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

He built his mountain retreat here and named it "Westglow." It is now operated as Westglow Spa. (Historical Marker N-25) Look for one of his best paintings, "Madonna of the Hills," at St. Mary's of the Hills Episcopal Church on Main St. in Blowing Rock.

10 – At about mile 40, there is a rest area with toilet and picnic facilities operated by the NC Dept. of Transportation. This is closely followed by the Blowing Rock town limits and Bass Lake (entrance to your left), part of the Moses H. Cone estate.

Cone was a textile magnate who also built a retreat from the summer heat, which is now owned by the National Park Service. You are welcome to park and enjoy a nice walk on the path around the lake. You can visit the mansion by walking the long trails up to it, or by reaching it via the Blue Ridge Parkway, at milepost 294. It houses a museum and craft center of the Southern Highland Craft Guild.

11 – "Little Parkway" ends at Blowing Rock's Main Street, also known as 321 Business.

You can see the beautiful downtown with all its shops and restaurants, mostly in the two blocks to your right. If you have enjoyed Jan Karon's popular "Mitford" series of novels you can probably pick out many of the settings which were based on Blowing Rock. At the end of those two blocks, on the left, is St. Mary's.

To get back to US-321 Bypass and Boone, turn onto Sunset Drive (the stoplight at the center point of Main St.) and follow it to the stoplight at the highway. Turn left on US-321 Bypass north.

Before leaving the Blowing Rock community, you will pass the new Blowing Rock Performing Arts Center on the right, then Chetola Lake through the woods to the left and the Tanger Shoppes on the Parkway for outlet shopping on the left.

Covering the last 8 miles to Boone you will pass the entrance to Appalachian Ski Mountain (the first ski resort in the area), Mystery Hill with its Appalachian Heritage Museum, and Tweetsie Railroad. Tweetsie is North Carolina's first family theme park and uses the original steam engine of the "Tennessee and Western North Carolina Railroad" that ran through the area before 1940. The park is open every May through October.

12 - The entrance to the Boone Golf Club, a public course, is on your right at the Boone town limits sign. As you drive through Boone, you will pass hotels, restaurants and stores of every sort.

Before reaching the University, please note the brown directional sign on your right at Daniel Boone Dr., indicating the entrance to the Daniel Boone Native Gardens, Hickory Ridge Homestead and the *Horn in the West* amphitheater.

The *Horn in the West* plays nightly except Mondays, from mid-June through mid-August, and is the nation's oldest Revolutionary War outdoor drama. Adjacent to it is the Hickory Ridge Homestead, a setting of several original log cabins from around the area. The Daniel Boone Native Gardens feature a collection of North Carolina native plants in an informal landscape design.

Approaching Appalachian State University and the downtown area, you'll be able to see the university's large convocation center ahead. ASU was founded in Boone in 1899 and has grown to a major member of the University of North Carolina system with 14,000 students. This year the Mountaineers reign as the NCAA division I-AA national football champions.

13- All of the buildings to the left are part of ASU. The intersection that reconnects with NC-194 and US 421 has the Dan'l Boone Inn restaurant on the left, a very famous Southern-style eatery. Dan'l Boone Inn has been in the old Bingham house since 1959. Prior to that, the 1923 Bingham house had served as a doctor's office and hospital.

Turn left onto King Street, and you are headed uphill, toward downtown Boone. As the street starts downhill again, the large new building on the left is ASU's Turchin Center art gallery, which has changing art exhibits open to the public at no charge. This begins the main downtown district with its many restaurants and shops.

Also see historic buildings such as the Jones House, home of the county arts council, Mast General Store's Old Boone Mercantile and the WPA-built post office. Note the movie theater, built in 1938, and still operating today. Also, check out Boone Drug and Old Time Soda Fountain, opened in 1919. One block ahead is the county courthouse.

14 - This completes the southern loop of High Country Back Roads. Your odometer should read about 50-miles. We sincerely hope you enjoyed the scenery!