

COLORIFFIC



The Blue Ridge Scenic Railway is an idyllic method for scoping out breathtaking vistas.

This fall, take in the foliage in North Georgia



Blue Ridge in autumn

PHOTOS/COURTESY OF THE FANNIN COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Rumor has it that the energy force felt when crossing the equator shakes airplanes and boats. Thus I wasn't sure what to expect while placing one foot on each side of the state line that passes through the conjoined twin border towns of McCaysville, Ga., and Copperhill, Tenn., painted on the pavement as a blue dashed stripe. It's a photo op to be sure, but thankfully doing so won't rip you in half. I didn't even feel a twinge.

The towns are the lunch stop after a leisurely one-hour ride aboard the Blue Ridge Scenic Railway on a route that starts in Blue Ridge, Ga. The train ride is great fun. It's hard not to smile when the red locomotive pulls out of the 100-year-old depot in quaint downtown Blue Ridge pulling 10 vintage railcars (some climate-controlled, some open-air). The 26-mile round trip winds through some of North Georgia's most scenic areas and offers photogenic peeks at the Toccoa River through dense foliage. Gorgeous in any season, it's an especially popular autumn trip. (Also popular are special December dates offering rides with Santa.)

Friendly car hosts share interesting facts about sites passed en route and even suggest

where to point your camera to capture the best vistas. The trip follows the old Marietta and North Georgia Railroad line circa 1877. Abandoned in 1949, it was restored and re-launched as the Blue Ridge Scenic Railway in 1998.

During the 1.5-hour layover, there's time to crisscross the state line, shop for crafts and antiques, grab a bakery or ice cream snack, explore or eat lunch. My car host said that he'd eaten at several of the McCaysville/Copperhill restaurants and hadn't gotten sick. I took it as a joke, but after testing multiple dining options, I realized that it was the kindest thing he could think to say. I recommend packing a picnic lunch, and then dining in Blue Ridge after the train journey. Because Blue Ridge is a more than just where to board and disembark the train: It's a worthy destination in its own right.

Even those of us spoiled by Atlanta's extensive shopping scene will find unique treasures in Blue Ridge's interesting assortment of art and craft galleries, antique shops and specialty boutique shops. Prefer to spend time with nature? Hiking, biking, tubing, rafting, fishing, hunting, boating, swimming and horseback riding opportunities abound in the region that's 40 percent National Forest.

For lunch, small bites or dinner, head to Harvest on Main. Chef/Owner Danny Mell-

man showcases local ingredients in creative dishes that he describes as "a fresh approach to food, influenced from travels." The menu changes seasonally, with the goal to feature as many sustainable products as possible. Recent offerings like cummin-roasted local trout, Vidalia onion stuffed with sun-dried tomato couscous and sweet potato ravioli with house-pulled brisket impressed with approachable yet sophisticated flavors.

IF YOU GO

BLUE RIDGE SCENIC RAILWAY

706-632-8724
www.brscenic.com

HARVEST ON MAIN

706-946-6164
www.harvestonmain.com

HIGHER GROUND MASSAGE & BODYWORK STUDIO

706-455-9760
www.highergroundmassage.com

SERENITY GARDENS

706-258-4949

SOUTHERN COMFORT CABIN RENTALS

706-258-3737
www.southerncomfortcabinrentals.com

After such an enjoyable day, why rush home? Spend the night at a local cabin or in downtown Blue Ridge at the upscale Blue Ridge Suite, available through Southern Comfort Cabin Rentals. It's a little-known treasure tucked right into the heart of downtown—expect envious looks from folks who see you slip the key into the door and head inside. Up an elevator is the private entrance to a fully furnished condominium with full kitchen and laundry facilities, cushy bed, plush chairs and luxurious bathroom with double-head shower (no tub). There's also a large deck to enjoy fresh air in private comfort.

A luxurious full-body massage from Ann Kennedy Studley at Higher Ground Massage & Bodywork Studio is sure to melt any lingering tension. Located just a short stroll down Main Street, the studio is a private oasis. Sessions are available in cozy rooms or in the outdoor garden. Pressure is adjusted to suit your preferences, and each massage is customized to address individual needs.

After a satisfying breakfast at Serenity Gardens linger in Blue Ridge before a leisurely hour-long drive back to Atlanta on I-575, one of Georgia's most scenic routes with spectacular mountain views.

There is one side-effect to a Blue Ridge getaway: You'll feel a pull to return. **SP**