



Along the Skyline Drive

This 105-mile ribbon of highway offers some of the best fall color in the South.



PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK SANDLIN

left: The speed limit on the Skyline Drive is 35 mph, even for bikers. **above:** This celebrated road offers the best views of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley.

Somewhere in Japan, there's a snapshot that *Southern Living* photographer Mark Sandlin made one autumn afternoon on Virginia's Skyline Drive.

While working on a story for the magazine, we met a family frantically trying to make their camera work. Mark offered to help and diagnosed the problem as dead batteries. No problem—he had more in the car.

After repairing the camera, Mark offered to take the portrait. Noriko Sugai pulled her sister, Seiko, close with one arm and hugged husband Iwao with the other. I still hear from the Sugais occasionally.

"It was a memorable day," says Noriko, who works at The Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. "For my sister who lives in Osaka, Japan, it was her first visit to Skyline Drive. She said, 'It was so beautiful there, and the American people are so kind.' She really didn't expect that."

On Top of the Shenandoah

Skyline Drive just seems to inspire kinship in people. Maybe it's the fact that the speed limit is only 35 mph. The park rangers frown on speeding, and there's far too much to see anyway.

No, you mosey along this curly 105-mile stretch of highway that lies across the spine of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the Shenandoah National Park.

Or maybe it's the fine fall weather and colorful scenery that bring out the best in humankind. The color, often some of the best in the South, starts early on top of the mountain. Even when the leaves fade up here, overlooks are plentiful.

They offer spectacular views of the multicolored quilt of small towns, farmsteads, and cornfields spread across the valley floor.

Sightseeing Strategy

Whatever it is that makes this spot so special, one thing's for sure: You'll be sharing it with a cast of thousands in the fall.

One way to approach the drive, says ranger Karen Beck-Herzog, is to break it up into sections. Front Royal to Thornton Gap at Milepost 32 makes up the northern section, and Thornton Gap to Swift Run Gap at Milepost 65 marks the central section. The southern section runs from Swift Run Gap to Rockfish Gap, the end of the drive at Milepost 105.

"The central section is the most heavily visited," Karen says. "You'll encounter less traffic if you can come

down to the southern section, which is visited the least."

Better yet, Karen says, take a day off and visit during the week. "You'll enjoy yourself so much more if you come during the middle of the week," she reports cheerfully. "It's much quieter then."

Karen resists my plea to name the best views. "We have 75 overlooks," she notes. "You won't be disappointed." Still, she offers one last piece of advice: "Get out of your car," she suggests. "You wouldn't believe how many people come here and never get out."

CASSANDRA M. VANHOOSER



SKYLINE DRIVE

Shenandoah National Park: 3655 U.S. 211 East, Luray, VA 22835; (540) 999-3500 or www.nps.gov/shen. **Pass:** \$10 per car, good for seven days. ♦

THREE WATERFALL HIKES

- Dark Hollow Falls near Milepost 51. This 1.4-mile moderate hike takes you to 70-foot-tall falls.
- Lewis Falls. Trail leaves from Big Meadows amphitheater near Milepost 52. Falls here soar to 81 feet, and it's less crowded than Dark Hollow.
- Jones Run Falls at Milepost 84. Easy 3.4-mile hike leads to a 42-foot waterfall.