

With Planning, Winter Can Be a Fine Time to Travel the Parkway

Spring, summer and fall have always been the peak travel seasons on the Blue Ridge Parkway. That's not hard to figure. People come to enjoy the succession of wildflowers, cool mornings and pleasantly warm afternoons, lush green mountainsides and brilliant autumn colors.

Winter is another matter. Sections of the Parkway are often closed by snow and ice, campgrounds and most other visitor facilities are shut for the season, and days can be downright frigid. As uninviting as that may sound, don't rule out a winter visit.

For one, the views are better when strong cold fronts pass over the region. Distant peaks, obscured by summertime haze, stretch toward the horizon, giving a real appreciation for the impressive topography of the southern Appalachians. The crisp air seems cleaner because, well, it is cleaner, thanks to fewer manmade particulates, the pollution that contributes so much to warm weather haze. Barren trees also reveal the time-sculpted contours of

the mountain slopes, making winter the best time to appreciate "the bone structure of the landscape." Many species of birds and other animals common to the region also are more easily seen when the vegetation is off the trees.

Hiking can be especially rewarding. There are no annoying gnats, mosquitoes, or ticks, and there is little need to worry about poison ivy and other bothersome plants (although avoiding poison ivy vines is still recommended for those who are sensitive to this plant). The cold can be biting, so dress in layers. As you exercise, and as the day warms, simply remove gloves, hat, and heavier outer garments to maintain comfort. With forethought, there is no need to sweat or shiver. There are also fewer people, and it is possible to hike some trails without seeing anyone else. Fewer people also increase chances that you will enjoy an overlook in solitude and will be able to drive without contending with congestion.

With a little cooperation from the

weather, explore trails and closed sections of the motor road on cross-country skies—or put on good boots and enjoy the snowy scenery afoot. We don't use salt or other chemicals to treat the motor road, and the higher—and snowier—elevations are often closed. Ice from runoff accumulates thickly around tunnels, which means those areas may be closed even when the temperatures moderate briefly and the road itself is snow and ice-free. In that case, break out the bicycle and enjoy a traffic-free Parkway.

Beware, few facilities are open. Exceptions are the restaurant and lodge at the Peaks of Otter near Bedford, Va., the Folk Art Center at Asheville, N.C. and the Museum of North Carolina Minerals at Spruce Pine, N.C. Of course, accommodations and travel services are easily accessible in the many towns and communities that adjoin the Parkway.

Also keep in mind that besides closings from snow and ice, we repair tunnels, rock retaining walls and other structures along



the motor road in winter. Call ahead to see if the section you wish to travel is open. Daily updates on road closures and travel conditions are available at (828) 298-0398.

To be sure, traveling and enjoying the Parkway in winter requires planning, but with that investment, the "rude breath" of winter can be surprisingly enjoyable.

-Daniel W. Brown