Ridgeline Sunrises, a Waterwheel Mill & a Gilded Mansion — A 4-Day Blue Ridge Parkway Road Trip

The Blue Ridge Parkway and its northern approach on Skyline Drive form one of the great American road trips — 265 miles of ridgeline driving from the northern gate of Shenandoah National Park to the outskirts of Asheville, with more overlooks than any one trip can stop at. This 4-day route hits the highlights without rushing: a full day on Skyline Drive, a pioneer homestead and a working 19th-century gristmill on the Parkway itself, the Mile-High Swinging Bridge at Grandfather Mountain, and a Gilded Age mansion tour to close it out — with real inns, restaurants, and 2026 prices for every stop.

DURATION	BEST TIME TO GO	FROM
4 Days	**Late Sept – Mid-Oct** high overlooks turn first; Asheville's lower elevation peaks by late October	**$650 USD / person** for 2 people

Day 1 Front Royal to Staunton: Skyline Drive's Ridgeline Overlooks

The route starts at Skyline Drive's northern gate in Front Royal and climbs the spine of Shenandoah National Park for 105 miles, with more than 75 overlooks over the Shenandoah Valley before the drive drops into Staunton for the night.

Self-Drive — Washington Dulles to Front Royal

~1 hour 15 minutes · rental car required for the full route

Washington Dulles International Airport (IAD) is the closest major airport to the start of Skyline Drive, about 65 miles north on Route 7 and US-340 — a rental car is essential for this trip, since the Parkway and its overlooks have no public transit.

Enterprise Rent-A-Car — Washington Dulles Airport · +18007368222 · www.enterprise.com

Skyline Drive Scenic Overlooks

~4–5 hours · $30 USD per vehicle, 7-day pass

Skyline Drive runs the crest of Shenandoah National Park with 75 overlooks in 105 miles — Hogback Overlook and Range View Overlook are two of the best early stops for a first look at the Shenandoah Valley's patchwork of farms, with black bear sightings common near dusk.

Shenandoah National Park · +15409993500 · www.nps.gov/shen

Hike — Stony Man Summit Trail

~1.5 hours · Free with park entrance

A 1.6-mile round-trip climb to the park's second-highest peak, with one of the easiest big payoffs on Skyline Drive — a rock outcrop view over the valley without the elevation gain of Old Rag or Hawksbill.

Shenandoah National Park · +15409993500 · www.nps.gov/shen

Overnight — Blackburn Inn & Conference Center, Staunton

From $180–230 USD / night, for 2 people

A restored 1825 asylum building turned boutique hotel in downtown Staunton, with soaring ceilings, a rooftop bar, and a short walk to the city's restaurant row — a comfortable landing spot after the drive down from Skyline Drive.

Blackburn Inn & Conference Center · +15407120601 · www.blackburn-inn.com

Day 2 — Waynesboro to Blowing Rock: Humpback Rocks, Peaks of Otter & Mabry Mill

The Blue Ridge Parkway begins at Rockfish Gap outside Waynesboro and runs south along the ridge into North Carolina — today covers about 210 miles at Parkway speed, with a pioneer homestead, a mountain lake, and a 19th-century gristmill along the way.

Humpback Rocks Mountain Farm Trail

~45 minutes · Free · Blue Ridge Parkway, Milepost 5.8

An open-air pioneer homestead — cabin, barn, and springhouse relocated from around the region — with an easy 0.25-mile loop trail right off the Parkway, the first classic stop heading south from Rockfish Gap.

Blue Ridge Parkway Visitor Information · +18283483400 · www.nps.gov/blri

Peaks of Otter — Abbott Lake Loop

~1 hour · Free · Blue Ridge Parkway, Milepost 85.6

A flat 1-mile loop around Abbott Lake with Sharp Top's distinctive peak reflected in the water — the classic midday leg-stretch on the Parkway, with a National Park Service visitor center on site.

Blue Ridge Parkway Visitor Information · +18283483400 · www.nps.gov/blri

Lunch — Mabry Mill

~1 hour · Blue Ridge Parkway, Milepost 176.1 · seasonal (spring–fall)

A working water-powered gristmill built in 1910, still turning on the millpond it sits beside — the single most-photographed spot on the entire Parkway, with a seasonal restaurant serving buckwheat pancakes next to the mill and a small gift shop.

Mabry Mill Restaurant & Gift Shop · mabrymillrestaurant.com

Overnight — Chetola Resort, Blowing Rock

From $259–349 USD / night, for 2 people

A lakeside resort at the edge of downtown Blowing Rock with a spa, an indoor pool, and its own trail around Chetola Lake — a relaxed base for a village that's easy to walk after a long day of driving.

Chetola Resort · +18282955500 · www.chetola.com

Day 3 Blowing Rock to Asheville: Grandfather Mountain, Linville Falls & Craggy Gardens

The Parkway's highest and wildest stretch — a swinging bridge at nearly a mile in elevation, a waterfall hike, and high-elevation balds that turn some of the earliest color on the whole route — before dropping into Asheville for the night.

Mile-High Swinging Bridge — Grandfather Mountain

~2–3 hours · $25–35 USD / adult, varies by date

A short detour off the Parkway to North Carolina's highest peak open to the public, where a 228-foot suspension bridge sways 80 feet above a boulder field — golden and red hardwoods fill the valley below through early-to-mid October.

Grandfather Mountain · +18287334337 · grandfather.com

Linville Falls & Craggy Gardens

~2.5 hours combined · Free · Blue Ridge Parkway, Mileposts 316.4 & 364

Two of the Parkway's best short hikes back to back — Erwin's View Trail's 1.6-mile round trip to three overlooks of Linville Falls' two-stage drop, then Craggy Gardens' wind-swept, treeless balds above 6,000 feet, among the first spots on the Parkway to turn color each fall.

Blue Ridge Parkway Visitor Information · +18283483400 · www.nps.gov/blri

Departure — Asheville Regional Airport

~20 minutes from downtown

Asheville Regional Airport (AVL) sits about 15 miles south of downtown on I-26, with direct flights to most East Coast hubs — or continue the drive home from here if this was a one-way loop back to a rental return.

Asheville Regional Airport · +18286842226 · flyavl.com