

Take the Long Way

BY NAN BAUROTH

Come spring, Mother Nature unveils one spectacular bloom after another, painting the landscape with drifts of daffodils, brilliant lavender shoots on redbuds and the lacy foliage of dogwoods peeking through groves of still-barren hardwoods. The best way to experience this glorious rebirth of nature is on scenic drives through Virginia, Maryland and the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., where millions of delicate, pale pink cherry blossoms burst forth in an ethereal display unmatched anywhere in the country.

Virginia Beauty

One great route for catching this seasonal show of shows begins on the Blue Ridge Parkway in Galax, Virginia, just across the North Carolina line, where the first signs of spring dot the Appalachian Mountains. Keep an eye out for roadside wildflowers such as violets and buttercups beginning in March and in April, bloodroot and white apple blossoms breaking bud. Birdlife is also on the wing, including the Acadian flycatcher, scarlet tanager and cerulean warbler.

At Roanoke, stop for a catfish BLT at Blue 5 or smoked Gouda and pimento grilled cheese at 50's-style Pop's Ice Cream & Soda Bar, and then snap a selfie at the iconic Roanoke Star atop Mill Mountain. Back on the parkway, the road makes tracks for Peaks of Otter, a popular part of the route for its astounding views. Take the shuttle from Peaks of Otter Lodge to ascend Sharp Top Mountain or hike the moderately difficult 1.45-mile trail loop to Fallingwater Cascades.

The final must-see destination on the parkway is Lexington, 10 miles off the Buena Vista exit. The entire downtown district is on the National Register of Historic Places. While there, grab the state's best burger at Bistro on Main.

The most awesome leg of scenic byway in Virginia this time of year comes at the end of the Blue Ridge Parkway on Skyline Drive from Waynesboro to Front Royal. Apty named, this sojourn along the spine of Shenandoah National Park restricts speed to 35 so drivers can leisurely cruise along, gawking at the jaw-dropping panoramas around every bend, or pull in to 75 scenic overlooks offering a soaring glimpse of one of America's treasured natural sanctuaries in the first flush of spring. The 105-mile tour takes about four hours from end to end – or one hour between each exit, depending on the number of stops along this breathtaking birds-eye of a ride.

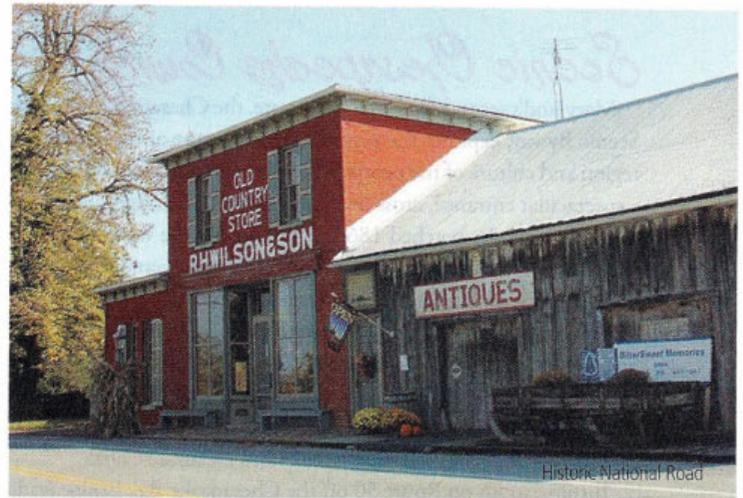
A detour well worth a weekend visit and east of the parkway is Norfolk, Va, a city with 144-miles of shoreline, culture and cuisine. Named "Venue that Rocks" the hardest by Rolling Stone, a vibrant music scene jams in this historic area and is quaintly surrounded by antique shops, coffee houses and a ton of breweries. The world-renowned Chrysler Museum glass studio is really a marvel and welcomes visitors to witness the amazing craft.

Norfolk is a modern port city nestled where the Chesapeake Bay meets the Atlantic and is swimming with rivers, beaches and creeks. One of the most iconic experiences is a paddlewheel ferry, joining downtown Norfolk and Olde Towne Portsmouth via the Elizabeth River. Most tours leave every half hour.

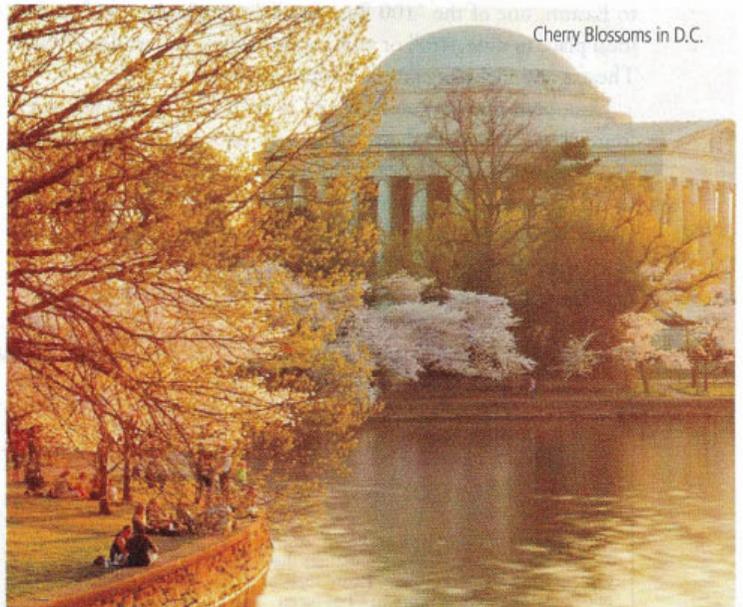
Peak Cherry Blossom Time

The high point of spring's scenic route is the National Cherry Blossom Festival in Washington, D.C., from March 20 to April 12, when 1,700 of these graceful trees surrounding the Tidal Basin and lining the shores of the Potomac River and Washington Channel create a dazzling pink froth of blossoms. Average peak bloom is April 4, but events go on the entire time, including a parade, bike tour, dog walk and evening lantern walk.

Driving the tree-lined route is not advisable due to street closures by the National Park Service. Festival organizers suggest either taking the water taxi from Georgetown, or if driving south on the scenic George Washington Memorial Parkway, turning on Route 50 to cross the Potomac. Handicapped parking is located along West Basin Drive at the FDR Memorial, as well as south-



Historic National Road



Cherry Blossoms in D.C.

bound Ohio Drive on the Washington Boundary Channel side of Hains Point, north of the intersection with Buckeye Drive.

The most convenient way to view the blossoms, though, is on the new National Mall Circulator buses that stop at highly visible points along a prominent route. Walking the two mile cherry blossom trail, which takes around an hour, is also the perfect way to get up close with the gossamer beauty of the blooms and capture memorable shots that make for an unforgettable trip.

Star Spangled Maryland

Maryland boasts two topnotch scenic routes. Pick up the Historic National Road, Route 144, at Fredericksburg, and take a walking tour of the historic district, Maryland's first designated "Great American Main Street." Continuing east on this colorful byway leads directly into the heart of the historic village of New Market, Maryland's Antique Capital, a must-shop for bargain hunters. As the Historic National Road approaches Baltimore, train buffs will want to climb aboard the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Museum, the oldest, most historic and most comprehensive American railroad collection in the world.

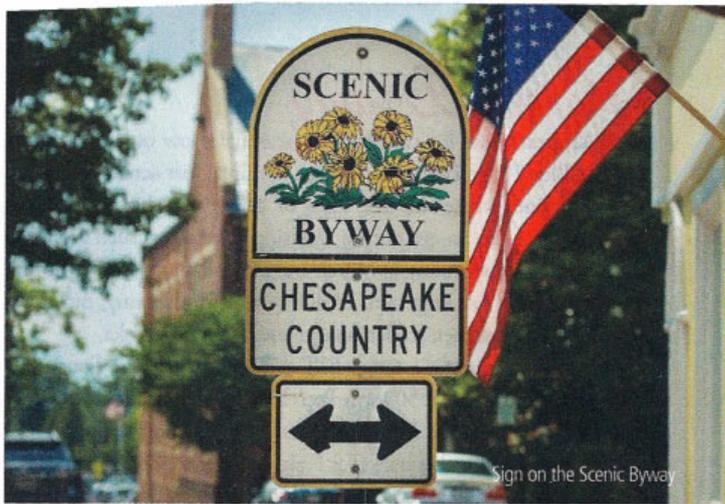
Scenic Chesapeake Country

Maryland's second famous scenic route, the Chesapeake Country Scenic Byway, explores the picturesque landscape of the Tidewater region and culture of the people who inhabit the Eastern Shore. For a spectacular entrance, cross the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, a 4.3 mile dual span wonder perched 186 feet high above the water that on a clear day offers dramatic vistas and at dusk, unforgettable sunsets.

Once back on land, the route meanders north to Chestertown in Kent County, a historic town with restored colonial homes, churches and seafood restaurants like the Fish Whistle, known for luscious crab cakes. Then it's on to Chesapeake City, a charming village with wide-open views of oceangoing vessels, as well as art galleries and a museum commemorating the 1829 Chesapeake and Delaware Canal.

Turning south on Route 50 off the Chesapeake Bay Bridge leads to Easton, one of the "100 Best Small Towns in America" and an ideal place to dine, stroll or visit antique shops, the art deco Avalon Theatre and Pickering Creek Audubon Center.

Next, head due west on Route 33 to St. Michaels, a quaint waterfront village with gift shops, restaurants and B&Bs. The primary tourist draw is the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, and a chance to sail on an authentic working skipjack for oyster dredging. Back on Route 50, it's on to Cambridge, another historic town that is home to Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, a 27,000-acre preserve for nesting and feeding waterfowl, and known spot for sighting bald eagles. ♥



Sign on the Scenic Byway

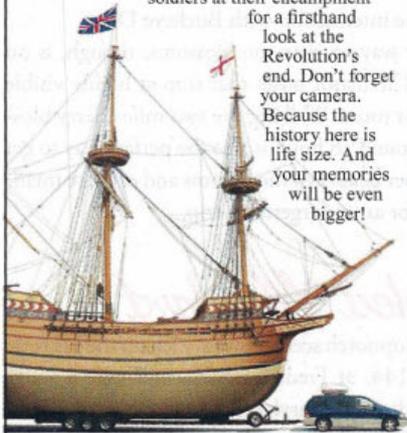


Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge

SAVINGS The next time you ask for a AAA TripTik, ask for a scenic route or go online to AAAMaps.com. Visit AAA.com/Go to see the Cherry Blossoms in full bloom.

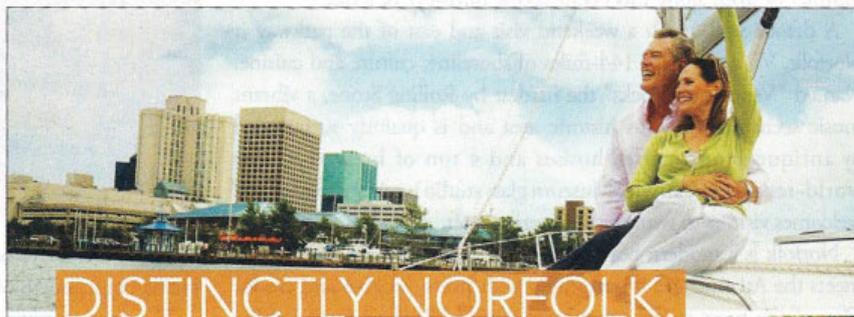
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