

Destination: Afton, Virginia

Virginia brims with choices for late summer fun. Head to the mountains to hike and camp. Hit the beach and work on that savage tan. Kayak the many lakes, rivers and inlets. Experience the diversity of flavors that await you when touring the many wineries, breweries, cideries and distilleries that dot the landscape.

Recently eight of us planned a weekend retreat to explore craft beverages made in the Blue Ridge Mountains. While this adult getaway definitely focused on mostly beers (and safety was always in mind with regard to drivers), pretty much every place is family friendly. We also can't resist vintage finds, so a few antique shops became part of the journey.

We started our adventure on a sunny Saturday morning, driving towards Charlottesville, with our first stop at Blue Mountain Brewery **[1]** on the way to our ultimate destination of Afton, VA (about 23 miles west of Charlottesville). Founded in 2007, Blue Mountain, central Virginia's first rural brewery, offers magnificent views and a venue with plenty of outdoor seating. We were also starving and looked forward to the full service restaurant (Blue Mountain Afton Brewpub) with an extensive menu and about 10 beers on tap. It did not disappoint. We also found local wines, ciders and seltzers available.

Blue Mountain is child-and-dog-friendly (as long as they are on a leash and outdoors—the dogs, not necessarily the children) with a full range of beers available year-round.

Once we finished our lunch and flights, we headed towards Greenwood Antiques and Uniques **[2]**. This was definitely a must-stop. Besides antique and vintage items, they offer handcrafted pieces, jewelry, home decor and accessories and furniture. They had lovely displays and it would be nice to return around the holidays to see what they have.

Next up: Brewing Tree Beer Company **[3]**. Owned and operated by Mark and

[by julie fanning
& greg taylor]

A beer-centric
excursion in the
central Blue Ridge
Mountains region

[PHOTOS by Greg Taylor
& Julie Fanning]





Gina Thompson, their incredible credentials made this another must-stop on our tour. Mark has an impressive background in brewing, launching many breweries out west before returning to Virginia. Gina has a culinary arts degree and sommelier certification. Together they have turned Brewing Tree into not only a top-notch brewery with an ever-changing menu of delicious food (Scratch Kitchen), but the property surrounding the building is stunning. A scenic meadow, picnic tables, Adirondack chairs and occasionally a riverside bar set-up are available (also child-and-dog-friendly).

On the way to our final destination for the day (our B&B), we happened upon the Rockfish Gap Country Store, so we decided to check it out. It's a charming place. Originally built in the 1930s as a shed for local farmers to store and sell their fruit, it became a full-fledged country store in 1965. For more than 55 years they have provided a wide variety of merchandise, from fine art to linens, antiques, Virginia wines and an assortment of cheeses, crackers, jellies and jams. If you're into Christmas, they have an entire room dedicated to decor and ornaments.

Then it was time to check in to our accommodations for the weekend: WildManDan "beer centric" B&B [4], located on the same grounds as the WildManDan Brewery.

The brewery was not hard to spot; the converted barn is boldly painted in the bright, Coca-Cola-red color scheme and logo. As we pulled into the driveway, a beautifully landscaped property with flowers in full bloom greeted us.

The 1870 farmhouse features a wraparound porch with ample seating, six spacious rooms, five baths, a full kitchen, living room and a bar. The grounds also have a gazebo and a firepit with a Solo Stove and a circle of comfy rope swings surrounding it. Guests staying at the inn receive welcome pints in the red brew barn and tasting room. The following morning we experienced a beer class from Dan, who provided beer tasting guidelines and evaluations with several examples. Dan is essentially a beer expert (formally certified as a beer judge) and WildManDan carries the distinction as the smallest production brewery in Virginia. His wife, Terri, has decades of experience in the hospitality industry, and she constantly evolves the catering menu.

They were wonderful people and such hospitable hosts.

After the beer class, our crew departed for our first destination of the day: Bold Rock Nellysford Cidery [5]. What a beautiful location. The deck has a treehouse-like feel, with views of a large field with plenty of seating, an outdoor stage and in the distance, access to the Rockfish River. We found multiple patios just off the main building as well. It was nice to watch children running around in the grass and families enjoying the sunny day with their lunches.

Speaking of lunch, Bold Rock not only has an incredible assortment of drinks, but the Nellysford location serves food. We enjoyed snacks and sampled some of the hard ciders made with apples and fruits from Virginia and North Carolina farms. They also offer hard seltzers with an apple alcohol base, hard tea, hard lemonade and ready-to-drink cocktails.

On the road again, we took another side step as we noticed Tuckahoe Antiques. Initially the building operated as an apple packing

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shed, built in 1939. About 28 years ago, it became an antique mall with dealers that offer a variety of antiques and collectibles on two levels.

One of the bigger-named destinations on our tour was next: Devil's Backbone Basecamp Brewpub [6]. While we knew a large beer conglomerate had acquired it, they still stand by their mantra of taking their time to make beer (mostly lagers), "away from the hustle and bustle of life." We heard of the exceptional quality, so we had to check it out for ourselves. It is a nice, outdoorsy venue not far from Wintergreen Resort. Worth noting: the Orange Smash is a distilled vodka drink (available in four-pack cans) made with fresh orange juice—their version of the crush that is oh-so-popular in Virginia Beach, and just as delicious.

We made our final beer stop of the day at Starr Hill Brewery [7]. Another large, familiar brand, they are recognized as the second-oldest brewery in Virginia with strong ties to live music. We visited one of their

smaller locations, in Crozet, and the variety and quality of the beer was excellent. Starr Hill Brewery, founded in 1999, has since won numerous awards. They also partner with local nonprofits every month, with each taproom donating to a local charity organization.

Before heading back to the B&B for some relaxation, a fire and some games (Cards Against Humanity, anyone?), we ordered takeout from Crozet Pizza—down the street from Starr Hill. WOW—their crust, their secret sauce. The pies were delicious. Launched in 1977, they begin making crust at 4 a.m. every day, and have perfected their recipes and processes. Recognized by National Geographic, USA TODAY and even Food Network Magazine as the best pizza in Virginia.

With bellies full, pint glasses empty and conversations about returning to the area to experience another season, we already have another visit in the works. We also want to confirm some of the strange noises coming from the attic of the WildManDan B&B (#haunted). [U]

Julie Fanning, Boulevard's chief creative director, has an extensive background in graphic design and marketing, and occasionally writes about things she enjoys—such as craft beverages, travel and music.

Greg Taylor is an IT software consultant specializing in implementation and project management. His passions are hockey, baseball, and views from his kayak, his Harley or a hiking trail.

Blue Mountain Brewery

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Greenwood Antiques

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Rockfish Gap Country Store

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WildManDan's Beer Centric

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