

National Park Profile: Shenandoah National Park

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Sited only 72 miles from Washington D.C., the Shenandoah National Park was opened in 1936 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Though visitors come year round, the most popular season may be autumn, when the trees change color usually about October 10 to 25. Once in the park, you'll use the famed Skyline Drive. Ranging 105 miles southward from Front Royal (at US 340) in Virginia to Rockfish Gap (at I-64) near Charlottesville, the park is almost synonymous with the drive, as that highway swings and dips its way right down the park, mostly along its spine. The Skyline (dating from 1939) connects directly at its southern point to yet another marvel, the 469-mile Blue Ridge Parkway.

Accommodations and other services are found at the four entrances to Skyline Drive. In addition to the north and south points already mentioned, they are Thornton Gap (at US 211) and Swift Run Gap (at US 33). There are numerous turnouts or overlooks so that you can do your sightseeing from these places instead of trying to do it while driving the narrow highway. (The speed limit is 35 mph).

There are three major information and visitor centers along the way from north to south. Dickey Ridge (4.6 miles from north entrance) is the first, usually closing in late autumn. The second is the Byrd Visitor Center (51 miles), with information on the park's history, film and ranger programs, maps and guides, coffee shop, camp store, gift shop, gas station and more. There's also the Big Meadows Lodge and a campground, both closed in winter. At Big Meadows, look for deer, black bear, bobcats, turkeys and some of the 200 species of birds here. Note also the wild flowers, strawberries and blueberries, if roving wildlife hasn't eaten the last two. Loft Mountain (79.5 miles) is the third major information center, with campground, gas station, store, gift shop, picnic area and more. Usually closes in late October.

Among the must stops along the Skyline Drive are the following (miles measured from north entrance): The Shenandoah Valley Overlook (2.8 miles), an impressive panorama in any kind of weather. At mile 41.7 is Skyland, the highest point on the drive (3680 feet), and a favorite tourist stop. The earliest structure dates back to the 1890s and the compound provides lodging, restaurant, gift shop, access to the Stony Man Trail and horse riding, as well as conducted hikes and evening programs.

Farther along (at 42.6 miles) are Whiteoak Canyon, with six waterfalls, a trail (4.6 miles round trip) and entry to the Limberlost Trail, a 1.3-mile loop that is accessible to the disabled, with assistance, however. This is especially beautiful when the mountain laurel

is in bloom. Dark Hollow Falls (50.7) cascades some 70 feet and is worth a trip. At 56.4 miles is Bearfence Mountain, which provides a 360-degree view after you climb about .8 mile (roundtrip) up from the parking lot over loose rocks. Not for the acrophobic, park rangers say.

Off the Road

The park is much more than the Skyline Drive, of course, with more than 500 miles of hiking trails, for instance. These include short loops, but also 101 miles of the Appalachian Trail itself, leading to marvelous views and peaceful glades. You can get detailed trail maps at the visitor centers. The Potomac Appalachian Trail Club operates six trail cabins and maintains huts for Appalachian Trail hikers.

You can fish for native brook trout, if you get a Virginia license. Hunting is prohibited. Park authorities say forests, with about 100 species of trees, cover 95% of the park. Every May there is a Wildflower Weekend, with featured programs on photography or field sessions, among other things to do.

Aramark is the concessionaire which operates the lodging here, ranging from the deluxe Skyland Resort to an historic Big Meadows Lodge and the Lewis Mountain Cabins. All three open in late March or early April and close on November 4 (lodge and cabins) or November 25 (the resort). Prices for a room range from \$73 to \$189.

2007 Changes

Brought back by popular demand is the Rapidan Camp tour, a three-hour program that is accessible to wheelchairs. This was the summer retreat of President Herbert Hoover and his First Lady, Lou Henry Hoover. (When they didn't want dinner guests to know what they were talking about, by the way, they conversed in Chinese, learned when they spent time in that country, where Herbert was a civil engineer.) You take a van up to the camp and walk around the grounds of the former summer White House. The program is offered daily except Tuesday and Wednesday through September 3rd. On Monday and Thursdays it's 9 AM, on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays it's 9am and 1:30pm.

Aramark has a long list of events in 2007, ranging from Shakespeare in the Park through wine tasting, a charity walk, and several kinds of musical presentations. If you want to celebrate Apple Butter or learn how to quilt, get their brochure. See Aramark contact information below.

A Ranger's Favorite Hike

An anonymous ranger said she likes to check out the remains of ruined houses and barns while hiking along, some just heaps of timber, and imagine what life must have been like a hundred years or so ago. There are said to be more than 500 such places in the park, as well as about 100 family cemeteries, according to the park's magazine.

Entrance Fees

It will cost you only \$10 per vehicle during the winter season (December to February), and \$15 the rest of the year. Per person entrance fee (pedestrian, bicyclist, motorcyclist) is \$5 in winter, \$8 rest of the time.

Number of visitors

The park's official publication says they welcome nearly 1,500,000 visitors a year.

Associated Links

The park's official contact information: tel. 540/999-3500; www.nps.gov/shen.

Aramark, the concessionaire for the park, can be reached at 800/999-4714 or 540/843-2100, website www.visitshenandoah.com.

.The Shenandoah National Park Association sells books and other items at its site, tel. 540/999-3582, website www.snpbooks.org.