

Trails offer unique chance to enjoy the mountains

Our region offers many walking and hiking opportunities, most of which offer views and vistas that showcase the splendor of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

In Alleghany County, several walking trails are easily accessible from the county seat in Sparta, N.C. Nearby, The Blue Ridge Parkway's Doughton Park, Stone Mountain State Park and the New River State Park offer up numerous additional hiking opportunities.

Ashe County and Grayson County, Va., also give enthusiasts even more options.

As of press time for this guide, the local volunteer group Alleghany-Sparta Trail Association (ASTA) was in the process of getting Sparta designated an official North Carolina Trail Town, part of a program recognizing communities that support outdoor recreation and sustainable tourism.

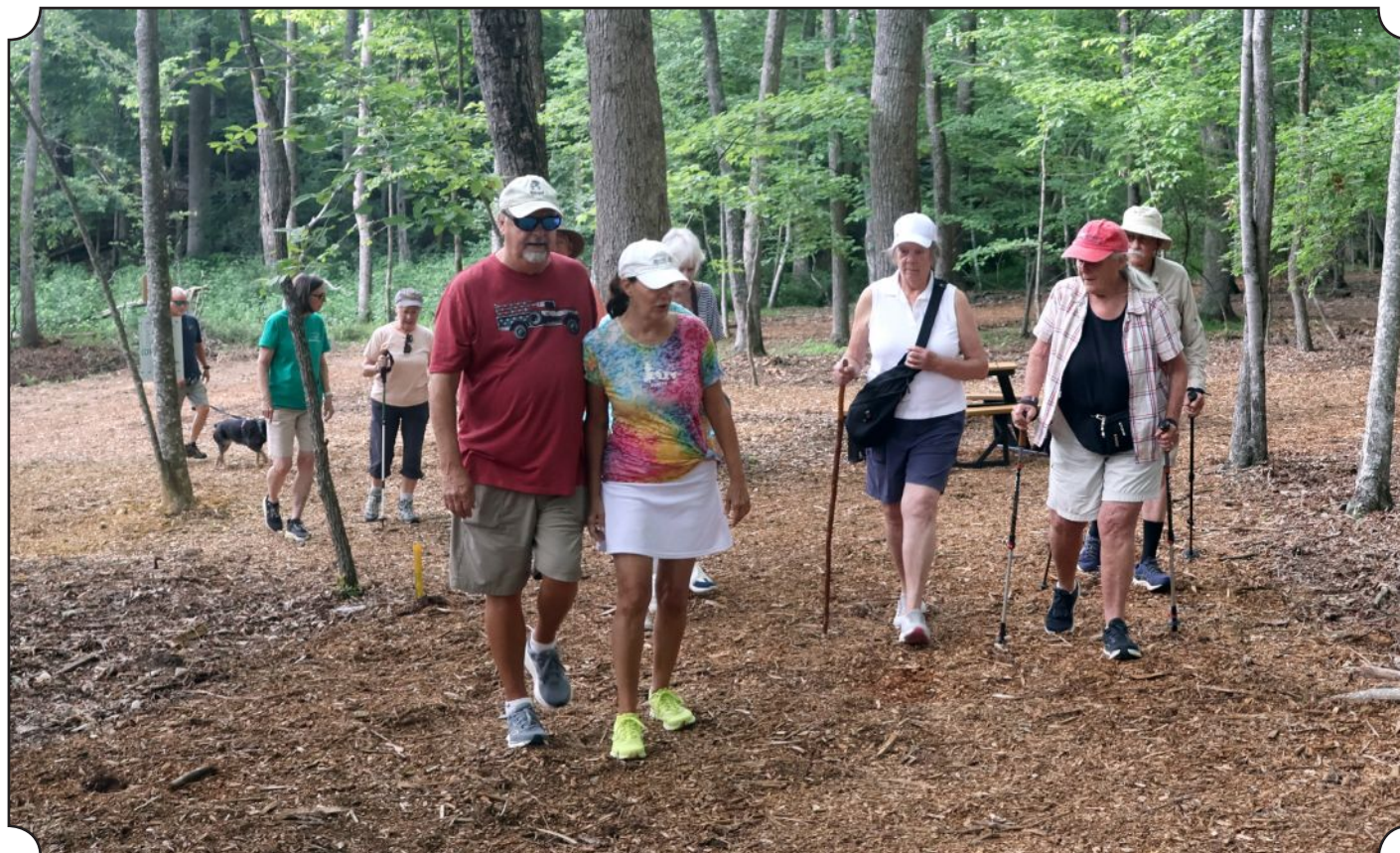
ASTA is also working to establish Alleghany County's first greenway to expand local trails, hosts 4-H hiking adventures, leads "Pathways to Wellness" hikes in partnership with Wilkes Community College and is joining Alleghany Memorial Hospital to sponsor an upcoming 5K through Sam Brown Park.

Through Sept. 30, ASTA is holding a hiking challenge with prizes for three categories: most attended hikes, longest distance hiked and most trail maintenance hours. Prizes include local business gift cards, a backpack, hiking items and ASTA items. For more information and to sign up, email spartatrails@gmail.com using "Attn:Challenge" in the subject line.

Sparta Trails

CROUSE PARK. The town park at 60 Cherry Street in Sparta has a paved 1/3-mile loop walking trail. It circles around and among the park's picnic, playground, recreation areas and splash pad. The trail offers a relatively low impact walk over the gently rolling terrain. It circles alongside the Crouse Park Stage and loops beside the Crouse House, where bluegrass and old-time jam sessions are held every Monday evening at 6 p.m. The small creek at the rear of the park is also an attraction for children; the Farmer's Market that divides the park from N.C. 18 North (East Whitehead Street) is open every Saturday morning.

VETERANS MEMORIAL PARK. The park features a level, 1/3-mile loop walking trail with a crushed stone surface, which the county is hoping to pave in the near future. Veterans Memorial Park is accessible at 254 Duncan Street in Sparta, where a large paved parking area is located. The



park spans the area between Duncan Street and the U.S. 21 bypass (Sparta Parkway). The trail circles grassy fields where soccer games are held, and the park area is bordered and somewhat divided by Bledsoe Creek. The creek is a stocked trout stream and features public fishing opportunities beginning in April each year and continuing through the early summer months.

SAM BROWN PARK. Home of the Sparta Lions Club, Sam Brown Park at 598 Trojan Avenue in Sparta has a small playground and pavilion area, as well as a connection to a number of trails. From the park, one can connect directly to trails running around Alleghany High School toward the Alleghany Public Library and Wilkes Community College, as well as other spurs reaching farther up the wooded mountain-side. Walking the trail around the park, one follows a rise in elevation of around 400 feet. A sign near the trailhead says the hike is a mile, and there are dual inner and outer loops that can be enjoyed. Nearer to the community college and public library lots on Atwood Street is another access point that meanders between the college and Alleghany High School. The walk is mostly shaded, which makes for a pleasantly cool afternoon walk on a hot day.

Outlying Hiking Trails

If it's a walk in the woods or a longer backpacking and camping trip you prefer, you are in hiking heaven.

THE ASTA TRAIL'S first section is officially marked at Milepost 234 on the Blue Ridge Parkway southeast of Sparta. Constructed by ASTA, it is hoped that this footpath will eventually connect Sparta to the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (MST). Park at Milepost 234 and walk around the gate. Signs point to the area where the trail leaves an abandoned paved road and heads downhill toward a small stream, where a camp site has been constructed. The MST path intersects the ASTA trail in about a mile. ASTA also has group hikes on different area trails on the third Sunday of each month. For information, visit spartatrails.org or email spartatrails@gmail.com. You can also see this guide's events calendar for ASTA's 10th Anniversary Trail Days hikes and events on June 18-21.

OLDE BEAU RESORT AND GOLF CLUB has hiking trails that are open to the public. Six trails of varying difficulty combine for a total of five miles. They traverse through woods, fields and along peaceful lakes. Trails are marked with white blazes. For information, visit oldebeauresort.com/hiking-trails or call 336-363-3333.

THE MOUNTAINS-TO-SEA TRAIL

(MST) runs 1,175 miles from North Carolina's mountains to the Atlantic Ocean, and 13 miles of that run through Alleghany County on footpaths alongside the Blue Ridge Parkway. It traces the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains overlooking the foothills and valleys below. The scenery can't be beat, and the trails through woods and open fields are easy or moderate.

Unique to this section are the frequent access points along the scenic highway. Hikers can go any number of miles, getting on and off at various overlooks, road crossings and grassy pull-offs. These access points are numerous between N.C. Hwy. 18 in Laurel Springs and Devil's Garden Overlook at Milepost 235.7 on the Parkway. Learn more at mountaintoseatrail.org.

DOUGHTON PARK on the Blue Ridge Parkway is a crown jewel of the scenic highway. It has 30 miles of trails that vary from easy strolls to strenuous hikes that descend and ascend the escarpment of the Blue Ridge.

The 7.5-mile Bluff Mountain Trail (also designated as MST) traces the higher elevations along the mountain peaks. It traverses the Doughton Park Picnic Area and the Doughton Park Campground. Fodderstack

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