

An aerial photograph of a town nestled in a valley. A river flows through the foreground, crossed by a bridge. The town is surrounded by lush greenery and trees with vibrant autumn foliage in shades of orange, yellow, and red. The sky is a soft, hazy blue with wispy clouds. The title 'DOWN IN THE VALLEY' is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters.

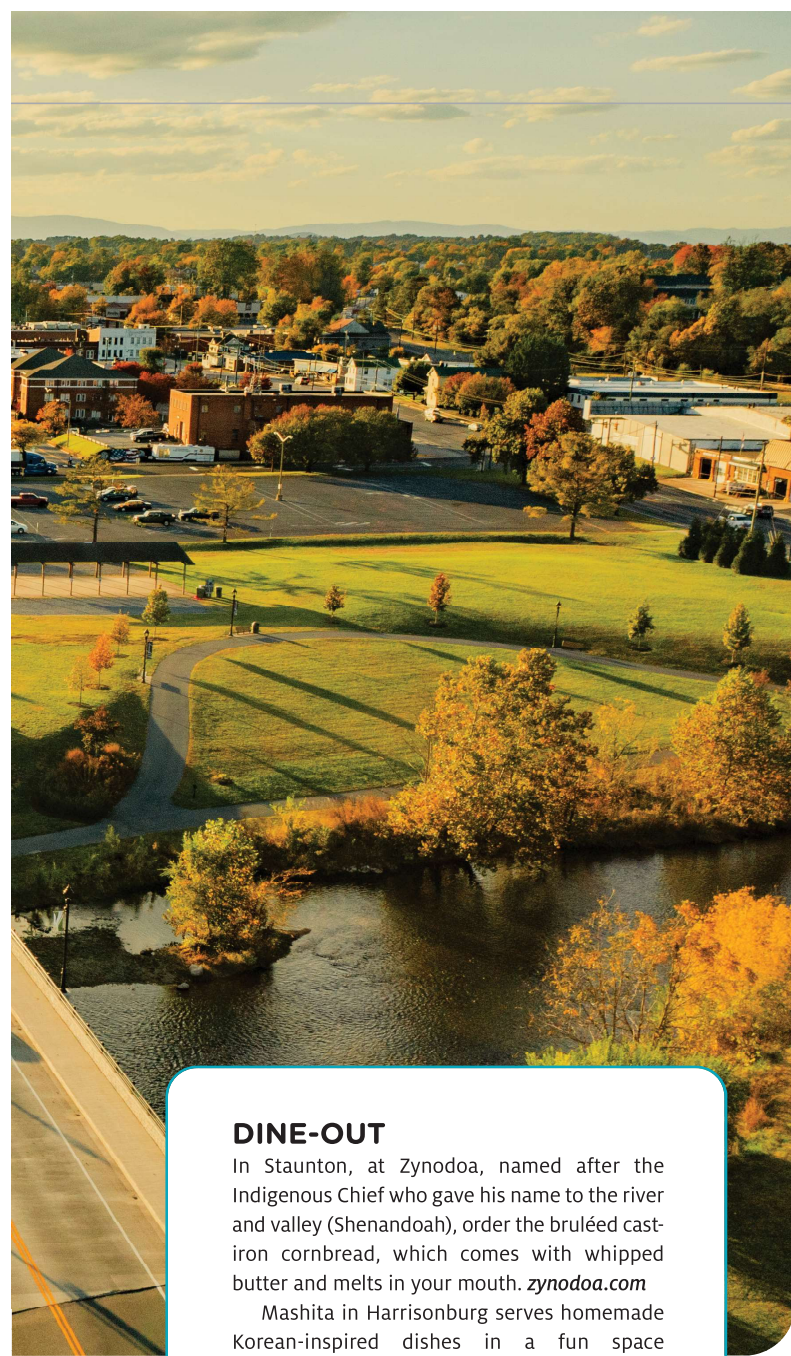
DOWN IN THE VALLEY

How a Virginia road trip sparked writer **Fiona Tapp** to discover there's more to see past the popular Interstate 81 when she veered off the main drag.

At Rockytop Overlook along the Skyline Drive of Virginia's Shenandoah National Park, the distant haze scatters light creating a blue paint stroke outline of Lewis Mountain on the horizon. The living canvas before me with deep shades of green running along Loft Mountain is larger than any gallery exhibition. This masterpiece moves in the breeze, the shadows deepen along valleys, the light catches on a new angle and the grasses sway by my feet.

When I started planning my trip to the Shenandoah Valley, I was expecting these landscapes, and to feel awed by nature's spectacle. What I wasn't expecting were the spaces I found in between these views that offered so much more than just a scenic drive.

The Shenandoah Valley stretches 225 kilometres from the charming small city of Winchester in the north to Rockbridge County, home of Natural Bridge State Park, in the south. Considered the original American Frontier and the site of many historic Civil War battles, the valley is framed by the



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DINE-OUT

In Staunton, at Zynodoa, named after the Indigenous Chief who gave his name to the river and valley (Shenandoah), order the bruléed cast-iron cornbread, which comes with whipped butter and melts in your mouth. zynodoa.com

Mashita in Harrisonburg serves homemade Korean-inspired dishes in a fun space showcasing local art. The fried mandu dumplings are delicious! eatmashita.com

Southern Kitchen in New Market is the quintessential American roadside diner. Try the homemade peanut soup and Lloyd's famous fried chicken for an authentic taste of the South. southernkitchenva.com

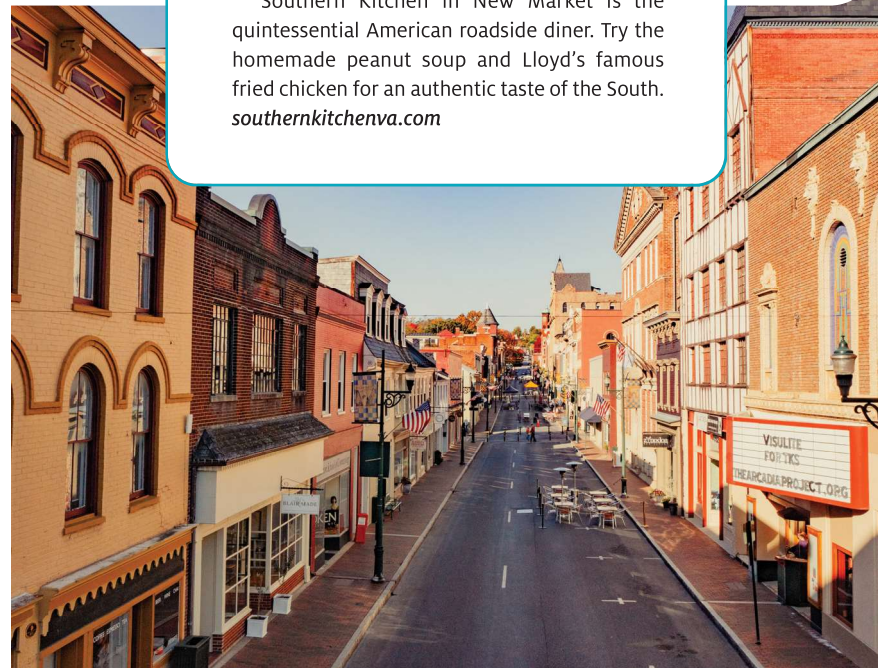
glorious Blue Ridge Mountains and is where I spent a road trip last spring, zigzagging through the hollows to Winchester, Luray, Harrisonburg, Waynesboro and Staunton. You can drive the entire length of the Shenandoah Valley in only two hours, but with so many fascinating small towns and cities along the way you could spend days exploring. I did.

GARDENS AND COUNTRY MUSIC IN WINCHESTER

Begin at ground zero in the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley. Housed inside a prominent stately Old Virginia heritage home known as the Glen Burnie House (portions are pre-Civil War), you'll hear stories of Winchester's founder James Wood and his descendant Julian Wood Glass Jr. who with partner R. Lee Taylor in the '50s not only restored the house but created garden art best enjoyed as a series of rooms.

I wandered the 2.8-hectare gardens, taking in the ornate statues, fountains and the pretty Pink Pavilion, which was used for entertaining. My favourite spot was the Asian Garden, which featured a towering bamboo grove, a moon gate and guardian lion dogs.

I left behind this museum of local antiquities to drive only 10 minutes to visit the home of a local country singer who achieved national stardom. Country music legend Patsy Cline, who paved the way for future icons, lived in an unassuming small white home on South Kent Street in her teen years until the age of 21. The Patsy Cline Historic House is furnished in '50s decor and features memorabilia from handwritten letters she penned to her mother to a replica of her blue cowgirl dress worn in Winchester for the 1956 Shenandoah Apple Blossom Festival Parade.



LURAY CAVERNS

Drive south on the I-81 and veer off toward the town of Luray. In the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Massanutten Mountains, there's an old-timey outpost that's home to seven-million-year-old wonders. The Luray Caverns, discovered in 1878, features a collection of limestone formations considered some of the most perfect in the world. As I stood by Dream Lake and inside Giant's Hall, gazing at these stalactites and stalagmites, a guide explained how these living rocks grow just one cubic inch in over a century.

SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK

My road trip took a scenic upgrade at Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park. This 168-kilometre road, which runs the entire park length, offers extraordinary valley views. See dramatic slopes and peaks, waterfalls and a kaleidoscope of rich foliage. While taking a photograph, I noticed growing traffic. Ahead a family of deer was slowly crossing the road as motorists looked on in delight.

The drive here is meant to be savoured and in fact, there's a 35-mph (56-km/h) speed limit so take your time, stop and enjoy as many of the 75 overlooks as you can.

UNUSUAL MUSEUMS AND CIDER IN HARRISONBURG

Heading back toward the I-81, I took another detour to wander the streets of Harrisonburg, known for its charming downtown and vibrant arts scene. I especially enjoyed visiting the Virginia Quilt Museum. Once regarded as "humble household" crafts, these intricate designs on display are true American craftsmanship that are showcased as the verified art forms they are. This tri-level museum celebrates Virginia's quilting cultural heritage.

INSIDER TIP

Get a closer look at the magnificent Shenandoah River navigating it by kayak, canoe, raft or floating lazily in a tube on a summer's day. Shenandoah River Outfitters will make sure you have everything you need. shenandoah-river.com



I then refuelled at Harrisonburg's first handcrafted cidery, Sage Bird Ciderworks, located in the north end Renaissance area. Here, husband and wife team Zach and Amberlee Carlson have been making small-batch, national award-winning hard cider ever since they launched in the summer of 2020.

FROM WAYNESBORO TO SHAKESPEARE IN STAUNTON

Farther south, I drove to Waynesboro to explore the Crozet Tunnel Greenway, a three-kilometre trail inside an abandoned historic train tunnel below the Blue Ridge Mountains. Take a flashlight to safeguard from sloshing into puddles that accumulate inside.

After another 20-minute drive I heard the sounds of The Bard at the American Shakespeare Center Blackfriar's Playhouse in Staunton. This recreated Shakespeare theatre has ongoing productions of the renowned English playwright.

NATURAL BRIDGE STATE PARK

My last stop on my road trip in the Shenandoah Valley was a 65-metre limestone arch that stood majestically in a lush natural setting. As I walked along Cedar Creek Trail my eyes kept arching upwards to see this geological wonder from every possible angle.

It's hard to believe that this rocky bridge has been on Earth for an estimated 500-million years. "It's older than the dinosaurs!" Chief Ranger Kenneth Horowitz announced on my tour and further divulged how amazing things occur "when small forces are at work over a couple of hundred thousand years."

Indeed.

Your road trip through the Shenandoah Valley will undoubtedly feature colours and landscapes more poignant and striking than those reflected in any painting but veer off Highway I-81, to explore the culture of historic and charming towns full of vim and vigour, and you'll experience the heart and soul of Virginia. **DS**



TRAVEL PLANNER

To help plan your summer trip to Virginia, see Virginia.org