The hills are alive: making music on the porch and, right, the view from Rockfish Valley Overlook in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Virginia

On top of old Smoky

There's no better way to appreciate the Appalachians than to travel with a banjo – but be sure to watch out for hungry bears and bugling elk

WORDS **ROSE SKELTON**

The hills around us shimmer in the late-afternoon sun and the meadow grasses bristle in the breeze as the notes to "Jubilee", a classic Kentucky tune, float from the log-cabin porch on which we sit. My banjo lies expectantly in my lap; I try to copy the notes that George, a local in his 60s who's happy to show a music-curious tourist a tune or two, plucks, but after a while I give up and just listen to this beautiful, lilting music, so evocative of the Appalachian Mountains. It is the music of pioneers, of rugged adventure, of rural American life.

I've long wanted to learn the banjo and, never having stuck at lessons, have decided that total cultural immersion is my only chance of success. I am to wind my way down the spine of the Blue Ridge Mountains, part of the larger chain of Appalachians that the banjo calls home, with one objective: to learn as many banjo tunes as I can. Anticipating bears and large portions of fried chicken, I've brought with me a loud whistle and baggy trousers.

The Appalachians are the oldest mountains in the world, stretching from Canada to the southern United States. They were once higher than the Himalayas, but hundreds of millions of years of erosion have worn them down to a few thousand feet of rugged peaks covered in tufted forest, populated by white-tailed deer, elk and black bear.

The Blue Ridge Parkway, a 469-mile winding road which meanders the length of the Blue Ridge Mountains, is a tidy way of taking in the spectacular views they have to offer. It starts in the north at Shenandoah National Park, Virginia, and snakes through remote forest, opening up every few kilometres to a view of the blue-tinged peaks (a phenomenon caused by the trees releasing isoprene into the atmosphere), passing towns dotted with creaking, wood-framed houses with wide porches and swing chairs. I spend a few quiet days in the park hiking along well-marked trails and practising my "claw hammer" – the technique used to pick banjo tunes in these parts, in which you hit the string with the back of your fingernail.

The banjo is the sound of these mountains, but its roots lie much further away. West African slaves brought skin and gourd musical instruments from Mali and Senegal on slave ships and Irish and Scottish settlers brought their folk tunes on the fiddle. These musical cultures collided in the remote communities of the Appalachians, melded together and developed into a new sound. The banjo we know today has become the iconic instrument of white-mountain America, but the tunes played on it still contain elements of the African, Irish and Scottish melodies of its origins.

Heading south through Virginia, the more populated northern part of the mountains gives way to deep dramatic gorges, high peaks and dense forests. It is home to the Crooked Road, a music heritage trail that leads to some interesting live music spots, such as Floyd, an artsy mountain town where the village store has a legendary Friday-night jamboree. This is a great place to pick up music lessons, hear a live shindig and watch flat-footing >

ESSENTIALS

Delta (delta.com) flies to Washington DC from London Heathrow, Bristol and Manchester. Prices start from £350. For information on campsites in the Blue Ridge Parkway see blueridgeparkway.org and for a directory of live music go to blueridgemusic.org. Old Time workshops, masterclasses and concerts can be booked at appalshop.org and floydcountrystore.com

PHOTOGRAPH **ROSE SKELTON**

– a form of Appalachian dance a bit like clog dancing – in action. The further south you head into the banjo heartland, the more people seem interested in the "old-time" music, as it's known, and there are plenty of locals who will generously teach a beginner a tune or two.

After a raucous night of live music at the Sun Music Hall in Floyd, I am directed by friendly locals to an arts centre in Kentucky which promotes Appalachian music and culture. The Appalshop arts centre in Whitesburg is one of the reasons mountain music has been able to flourish in this largely neglected state, supporting the music and exploring the social and economic issues – such as aggressive coal mining – which the songs are so often about.

My Whitesburg guide is a radio host called Brett Ratliff, and it's he who introduces me to George, the white-bearded Kentuckian who teaches me to play "Jubilee". Once I have the tune buzzing in my head, if not under my fingers, we head to Joe's Chicken Shack, a trailer sandwiched in a valley of lime-green and gold hills, for some fabulous dark crispy-fried chicken.


A lonesome log cabin in Kentucky

"Kentucky is so diverse," says Brett, himself a banjo teacher. "Even from one side of the county to the other people play music in different ways. And this music is still evolving," he says, licking the chicken off his fingers. "That's how the tradition is passed on; that's how it lives and stays vibrant." Teaching the songs to the younger generation – who repeatedly listen and copy, as I had done with George – is how this music stays alive.

WITH FOUR SONGS to my banjo repertoire, I decide to make one more stop on my Appalachian quest. I have been invited to something called the Rut by a musician friend, and I am assured great music, beautiful mountain camping, and elk rutting.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park sits at the end of the Blue Ridge Parkway and straddles the border between North Carolina >

ROSE SKELTON, PREVIOUS PAGE: ALAMY

Listen up: Brett Ratliff teaching the banjo in Whitesburg, Kentucky

ROSE SKELTON

and Tennessee. Every year a group of old-time banjo players, violinists, guitarists, dancers and double bassists meets in the park. They erect awnings, build fires, pitch tents, crack open jam jars of moonshine (illicit booze) and spend all night playing songs in little huddles around the camp.

"It's like music camp for adults," says one merry drinker around the fire, the pitter-patter of a flat-footer coming from behind us as she dances on a wooden board to tunes such as "Pretty Polly" and "Shady Grove".

The following day we all head to the meadows to witness the curious mating rituals of the elk, one of the largest species of deer in the world. They were re-introduced to the Appalachians after they disappeared through disease and hunting, and the Smokies, as these mountains are fondly known, are one of the best places to come and see these magnificent animals. The elk move in herds, protected by one male bull which will fight viciously for control of his harem. The sound they make as the males fight and mate is known as "bugling". It's a blood-curdling cry, enough to terrify even the hardiest camper, and one that echoes for miles through the wooded valleys.

That night around the fire, one of the musicians ducks out of the communal jam to teach me my fifth tune.

I go to sleep to the sound of elk bugling high up in the mountains and as I instinctively grope for the whistle around my neck – there's been no use for it yet, thankfully – I check the banjo calluses on my fingers. They're coming along nicely. ■

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