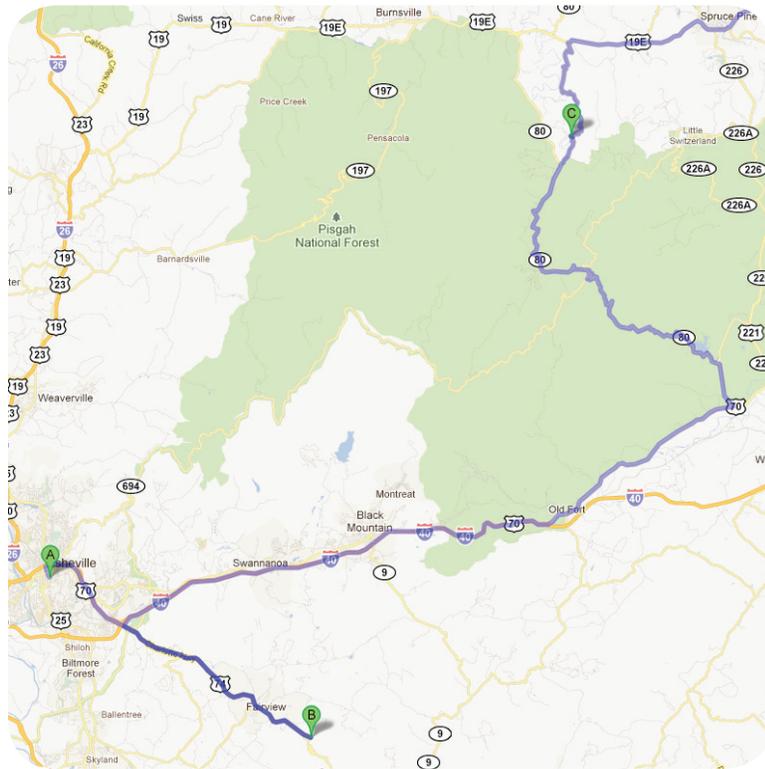


Farm Fresh NC Back Roads Tour

Want to pick a bunch of lavender, pet an alpaca, or enjoy a farm-fresh meal? You can do this and more at the scores of farms across the state that welcome visitors. Design your own trip or follow this two-day farm-fresh tour in the mountains, beginning in Asheville and ending near Boone.

Be sure to check the websites or call ahead for visitor information and hours of operation.



Day One

Start casual at Laurey's Café in downtown Asheville. Owner Laurey Masterton works with a long list of area farmers to incorporate local ingredients and products at every turn, an admirable feat for this high-volume business. Eggs with sausage from Hickory Nut Gap Farm will fuel you for the 30-minute drive – right to the source.

Hickory Nut Gap is a 600-acre fifth-generation farm nestled in a scenic valley southeast of Asheville in Fairview. At the farm store, you can buy grass-fed beef, pork, poultry, and eggs, as well as food products

from other farms in the region. Hickory Nut gussies up in the fall, with longer hours and special children's activities.

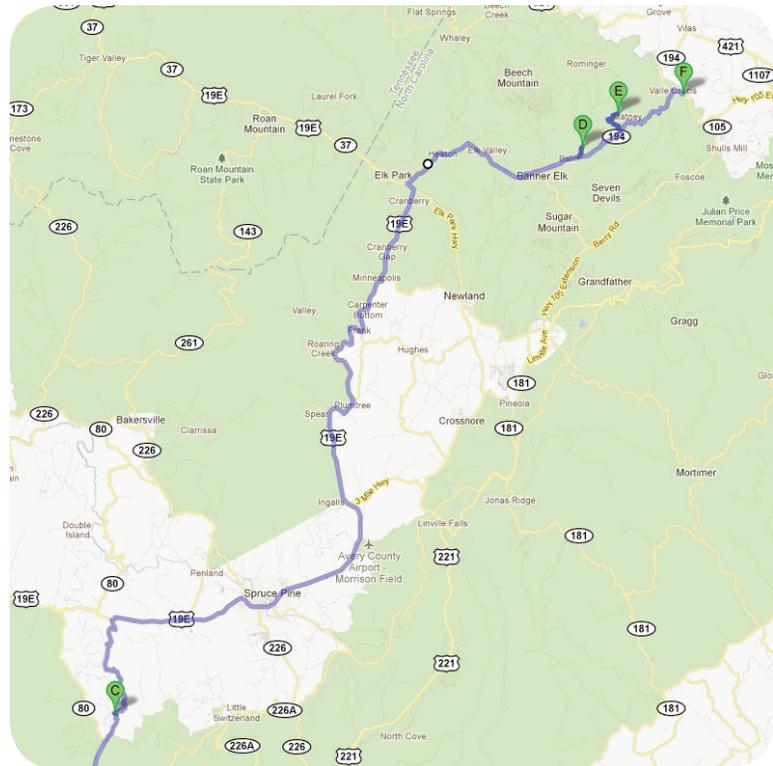
From there, you'll go east on twisting Highway 9, which is merely a primer for the next leg of your drive, north on hairpin-happy Highway 80 to Celso, 75 minutes from Fairview. Here you'll find Mountain Farm, where owner Marilyn Cade grows lavender and U-pick blueberries and raises dairy goats under the shadow of the Black Mountain Range. Visitors can walk a lavender labyrinth, commune with the goats, and shop at the store brimming with lavender and goat-milk body care and culinary products, all made on site.

From Mountain Farm, you're off on another twisting, turning and wildly scenic drive north to Banner Elk, about an hour away. Tonight you won't have to worry about drinking and driving if you stay at the Blueberry Villa at the Banner Elk Winery. Suites at the luxury bed and breakfast overlook vineyards and blueberry bushes and have mountain views. And of course guests are treated to wine tastings.

Day Two

Even with a gourmet breakfast at Blueberry Villa, you still need your fiber – alpaca, that is. If you've never encountered alpacas up close and personal, you're in for a thrill when you take a tour (by appointment) at Apple Hill Farm in nearby Valle Crucis. Farmer Lee Rankin also raises llamas and donkeys on her 43-acre hilltop farm. The tour includes a look at her lovely produce garden, berries, apple orchard and plenty of alpaca face time. A shop in Rankin's stylish barn contains goods made from alpaca fleece, goat milk soap and other hand-made products.

Heading toward Boone, you'll soon reach Valle Crucis, where you'll stay for the night. For more than a century, visitors to the mountains have stayed at the historic Mast Farm Inn. Seven guest rooms are available in the original 1880s farmhouse along with eight cabins and cottages on the grounds, including the Loom House, the iconic two-room log cabin that started the farm in the early 1800s. Guests are invited to stroll through the inn's garden, which supplies its outstanding farm-to-table restaurant, Simplicity. And make sure you drop by Simplicity's Pantry, a small shop in the main lodge filled to the brim with products made in North Carolina, yet one more way to enjoy the state's agricultural bounty.



For more on North Carolina agritourism, visit www.visitncfarms.com.

Diane Daniel is the author of Farm Fresh North Carolina, a statewide agritourism guidebook. (www.farmfreshnc.com)

Google Driving Map:

<http://bit.ly/qJzwHh>

Links:

Laurey's Café:

<http://www.laureysyum.com/cafe>

Hickory Nut Gap Farm:

<http://www.hickorynutgapfarm.com/visit-farm-asheville.php>

Mountain Farm:

<http://www.mountainfarm.net/>

Blueberry Villa:

<http://www.blueberryvillainn.com/>

Banner Elk Winery:

<http://www.bannerelkwinery.com/>

Mast Farm Inn:

<http://www.mastfarminn.com/>

Simplicity (at the Mast Farm Inn):

<http://www.mastfarm.net/mfi-simplicity/>