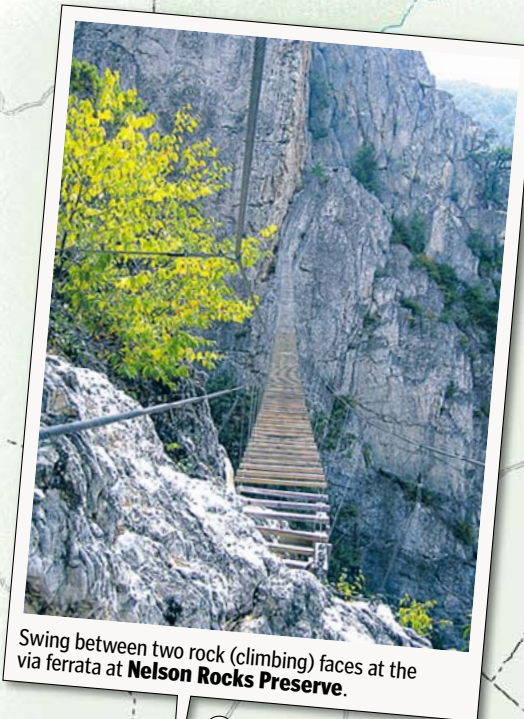
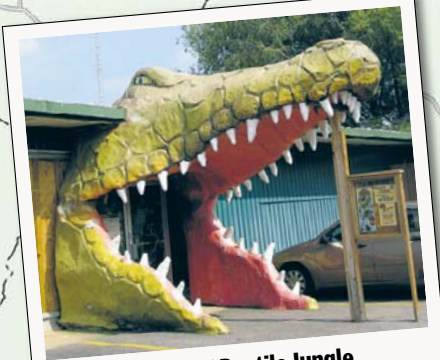


ROADTRIP | Going Vertical in West Virginia



Swing between two rock (climbing) faces at the via ferrata at **Nelson Rocks Preserve**.



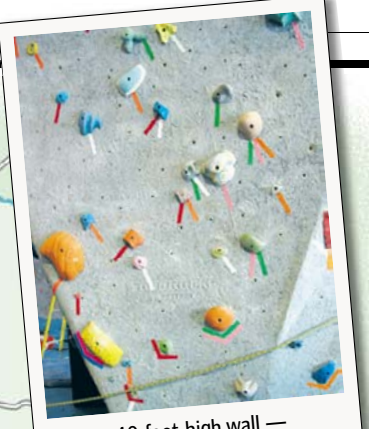
The **Luray Zoo and Reptile Jungle**, which rehabilitates many rescued animals, is like a spa for critters.

Drive at granny-speed along **Skyline Drive**, the 105-mile mountainous road in Shenandoah National Park that has 75 scenic overlooks.

For a river splash, pick up paddling or fishing supplies at the **Front Royal Canoe Co.**



Drop a line in the fishing pond at **Sky Meadows State Park** and hook catfish, largemouth bass and bluegill.



Climb a 40-foot-high wall — indoors! — at the **Sportrock** climbing gym.

The **Massanutten Visitor Center** supplies maps and field guides to help plan a hiking trip in the Lee Ranger District, the closest national forest to Washington.

Lost in the **Garden Maze**? Climb the elevated platform for clues on how to escape.

Forage for tools, furniture, clocks and other vintage items inside the 8,000-square-foot **Schaefer Antiques'** steel hangar and barn.

For a mountain high, pull into the unmarked overlook in the parking lot at the **West Virginia border**.

Horse around at the **National Sporting Library**, which houses more than 16,000 books, periodicals, photos, films and manuscripts on horseback riding and field sports.

Driver's route

0 20 MILES



Get a java and art buzz at the beatnik-style **Artful Dodger** coffeehouse and lounge.

WHERE: Judy Gap, W.Va.

WHY: Ride those rapids, crack the maze and climb to the top.

HOW FAR: About 160 miles from Washington.

West Virginia is a rock climber's paradise. Climbers can enjoy the 300-foot-high cliffs of Seneca Rocks, the dizzying vertical faces at Franklin Rocks or more than 2,000 climbing routes on the rocky walls of the New River Gorge. However, you don't need to be a climber — or even to have had rock climbing instruction — to experience the thrill of dangling off the side of a cliff in the Mountain State. Indeed, at Nelson Rocks Preserve, all you need to scale the via ferrata is Spider-Man's will.

Via ferrata is Italian for "iron way." In Europe, more than 300 via ferratas are open to the public. The climbing areas were designed to help troops move easily through the mountains during World War II. With stainless steel rungs mounted in

the rock face, scaling a vertical monster became as easy as climbing a ladder — albeit a very tall ladder. The via at Nelson Rocks is one of only six in North America.

If you need a little prep before attempting the via ferrata, stop by Sportrock's indoor climbing gym in Sterling for an introductory class. Overcome your fear of heights — or harnesses — by hanging from the ceiling of an artificial cave or lunging from hold to hold atop a 40-foot wall.

Maintain your adrenaline level by exploring an array of outdoor adventures dotting the Virginia countryside. At the Front Royal Canoe Co., you can shoot down the Shenandoah River by raft, kayak or canoe, or enjoy a lazy float in a cushy tube (your cooler gets its own ride). In Luray, get lost in the Garden Maze: Densely packed, eight-foot-tall trees create a puzzling half-mile pathway with 40 turn points. And at the Massanutten Visitor Center, follow the Wildflower Trail that echoes the footsteps of Confederate Gen. Stonewall Jackson.

But don't get tuckered out too soon: The via awaits. To scale the via ferrata (which gains 1,000 feet in altitude), climbers ascend the first hundred feet of one of two parallel vertical blades of rock that erupt from the side of the mountain. The route then travels across an Indiana Jones-style rope bridge (200 feet long, 150 feet high) to the other rock face. Using a series of rungs, climbers then bolt up the headwall to the top of a narrow precipice only a few feet wide, where the rock drops off 300

feet on each side. The descent starts on separate rungs and finishes with a diagonal traverse to a footpath, a few switchbacks to a pair of overlooks, and back on solid ground.

To protect themselves from falling, adventurers use a Y-shaped lanyard, a harness and carabiners that are connected to a steel cable that runs along the route. About every six to eight feet, the cable is bolted to the rock face; the climber unclips and re-clips each carabiner to move past a bolt. For timid climbers, there are two escape routes: at the top of the first section and at the entrance to the bridge. The climb, without bailing, should take about three hours. But before you even step into your harness, keep this lesson in mind: Don't fixate on the rungs and rock. Enjoy the breathtaking scenery from on high, because soon enough, you'll have to return to earth.

— **Matthew Graham**

Nelson Rocks Preserve, Route 28, Judy Gap, W.Va., 304-567-3169, www.nelsonrocks.org. Open daily by appointment; open for walk-ins Thursday-Friday, 9 a.m.-2 p.m.; Saturday-Sunday, noon-3 p.m. Weekends \$40, weekdays \$35 (includes helmet, harness and lanyard); weekends \$35, weekdays \$30 (lanyard only).

Road Trip maps are available online at www.washingtonpost.com/roadtrip, as are addresses and hours of operation (be sure to check before you go). Have an idea for a trip? E-mail roadtrip@washpost.com.