



Year of the Trail
Jennifer Pharr Davis

Our favorite family spot to head to over the weekend is Burnsville, a small town 45 minutes north of Asheville and nestled in the shadows of the East Coast’s highest peaks. There are buckets of great hikes suitable for kids that can get you into an old growth forest, beside a clear mountain river, or at the base of a waterfall. And all without too much effort. It’s a great way to spend the day before heading into town for an ice cream or to window shop on Main Street. From there you can grab a pint (the grown-up version of ice cream) at Homeplace Beer Co. and follow it up with dinner at the Snapdragon.

This culturally rich area deserves more than a day, so I recommend spending a night or two in town, or in one of the many Airbnbs Yancey County has to offer before “running it back” the next day. I also recommend getting your energy up in the a.m. by grabbing a muffin and coffee at App Java on your way to the trail!

Here’s our list of favorite short hikes and outdoor activities in and around Burnsville:

1. Black Mountain Campground:

Black Mountain Campground has loads of options where kids and families can immerse themselves in nature – and you don’t need a campground reservation to enjoy the trails and waterfalls. If you’re family likes a challenge, consider hiking the 3.7 mile Upper Loop. If you want a more leisurely hike with stops to play along the river, opt for the 2.5 mile Lower Loop Trail. Or, if you’re a waterfall hunter, hike through the campground to Setrock Creek Falls and journey to nearby Roaring Fork Falls. It’s easy to spend an entire day around the Black Mountain campground, playing in the South Toe and hiking as much- or as little- as you like.

2. Balsam Nature Trail at Mount Mitchell:

When the Blue Ridge Parkway is open, we often opt to take the scenic route, driving this road to Burnsville with a stop at Mount Mitchell State Park along the way. There are plenty of longer and more challenging hikes within the State Park and

surrounding National Forest, but if you are on a time budget, visiting with little hikers or have limited mobility, I recommend heading straight for the .2 mile wheelchair (and stroller) accessible Summit Trail. Within a few minutes you will be standing on the highest peak in the Appalachians and on the entire East Coast! Enjoy the view – or mysterious “non-view” if it’s cloudy- from the top then explore the nearby Balsam Nature Trail. At just under a mile, this friendly little path leads through dense fir forest and beside fascinating rock formations. When you finish your loop, head back to the summit one more time. The view can change in minutes and sometimes if it was “socked in” the first go round, your second look might well be clear and beautiful.

3. Lost Cove

Definitely a pick for the more adventurous family, this 6.5-mile out and back (10.5 if the forest road gate is closed) leads to an abandoned mountain settlement. It’s creepy yet cool to see the crumbling foundations of houses and barns, or to turn a corner and spy an abandoned car being swallowed up by the forest. When your kids ask why or how an old car made it to the middle of the woods, you can tell them there was a small road system within the Lost Cove development and a few cars were delivered here on the nearby railroad. However, Lost Cove’s met its demise because there were no connecting roads leading into or out of the settlement. There’s not really a marked trail once you reach the abandoned town, but by wandering faint trails and old roadbeds you can stumble upon overgrown orchards, family cemeteries, and relics of a bygone era.

4. Ray Mica Mine

This is one of my favorite places to visit anywhere in the world! Probably because my great-great uncle once ran a Mica mine in Yancey County and Ray Mica Mine connects me to that heritage and legacy. But this is a spot that any family, rock hound, or history buff will enjoy. There is no marked trail at the National Forest trailhead, but you can follow the old road bed and “social trails” to several abandoned mining locations that were dug into the mountain. Most of the old mine shafts are surrounded by fencing, but you’ll still want to be cautious and keep little adventurers close. The best place for families to play is in the creek that can be accessed within 200 yards of the parking area. You can walk up and down the stream bed looking for shiny flakes of mica and the abundant white quartz. It’s also a great place to hunt for salamanders and native orchids near the stream. Sometimes we even discover an old can of beans or provisions left by one of the miners.

5. Bolen’s Creek

The most strenuous trail in Yancey County is the Black Mountain Crest Trail. I’m a fan of doing that one solo – without the kiddos. That said the northernmost mile of the Crest Trail is an awesome place to hike as a family and we have spent many afternoons wandering up the Bolen’s Creek watershed looking for river critters, wildflowers, old growth trees, and kyanite rocks. As an “out-and-back” hike, this adventure can be as long or short as you like. Our family usually goes roughly a mile

to the point where the trail turns away from the river, then a tad farther to where there is a huge old growth tree about twenty yards downhill from the trail. It takes all four of us holding hands and stretching out to surround the tree! And it provides a great destination and turn around point for our little ones.

Burnsville has no shortage of public lands and trails, places to stay and places to eat. But sometimes parking at trailheads on popular weekends can be tough. A general rule of thumb to avoid crowds and find parking is to go early or late in the day, or if possible, to go midweek. This was easier for us when we had babies and toddlers, but with school age kids we are more limited to weekends and holidays. A great resource we like to use on high traffic times/days is the Yancey County Public Transportation. You need to call and schedule the ride ahead of time, but they will meet you in Burnsville then shuttle and pick you up from the nearby trailheads. It's an easy, cost-effective way to avoid the worry of parking. And the drivers always have a good "yarn" to tell (for you city folks, that's a story). :)

Jennifer Pharr Davis is a long-distance hiker, author, speaker, National Geographic Adventurer of the Year, and Ambassador for the American Hiking Society. She has hiked over 14,000 miles on six different continents. Pharr Davis lives in Asheville, NC with her husband Brew, their daughter Charley, and son Gus.