

and roamed the mountains surviving on berries, until she collapsed. The child continued on and followed a stream out to civilization. The only words the child could say were "Hungry" and "Mother." Rescuers followed the stream up to find the mother's dead body. Now that's one tough woman; tough kid too.

Hungry Mother's campground is a little disappointing, a bit cramped, but they don't have

much level ground around here to spare. Our neighbors, whom we have dubbed Mr. and Mrs. Poopy Pants don't make it any easier. All is forgiven the next morning when Cody leads us on a walk of indescribable beauty. Molly, the hungry mother would be proud. This is one of the original six Civilian Conservation Corps state parks, opened in 1936. Those CCC folks were tough as well, living in tough times, tougher than now.

On the drive to Marion, we stopped at the Virginia Natural History Museum in NASCAR-crazy Martinsville. And there, on the floor is an innocuous looking round boulder six feet across and weighing two tons. It is a Stromatolite. It was found in a rock quarry in Roanoke. It's a piece of Virginia history that goes back a tad further than Jamestown because this is a fossil of the oldest form of life ever known. According to the museum's web site, Stromatolites "are a mound produced in shallow water by mats of algae that trap mud and sand particles. Another mat grows on the trapped sediment layer and this traps another layer of sediment, growing gradually over time." The oldest ones date back 3.46 billion years. At 500 million years old, our Virginia born and bred Stromatolite is a relative young-

Greetings from...



Hungry Mother State Park

with, this time, nice neighbors from Richmond. This place is huge, the lake bustling with July 4th weekend boaters. Over and over on this trip we have marveled at the recreational opportunities. Pressed to name a favorite, we would point to Staunton River State Park which is about 15 miles away from the Battlefield of the same name. For

bouncing over the campground and the Park Ranger's house!

The last day is our longest and hardest. We give Roanoke a huge berth, drive past the various Waddles and Whackers, cross the Eastern Continental Divide and the Appalachian Trail, descend into New Castle and wind up for lunch at Maw and Paw's in Eagle Rock on the James River. And there's a sign by the entrance that says "the biggest and best hamburger east of the Mississippi." Oookay, I'll bite.

Shhhh! They do not know that I am traveling incognito as the Simon Cowell of bacon cheeseburgers (see *Insider* July 10, 2008). What arrives from the kitchen is truly amazing. The hand-made patty is the size of a dessert plate. It sticks out an inch on all sides of the jumbo bun. Well, they

certainly have the "biggest" part down pat. I take a bite. Yeah, they got the "best" part too.

Fat and happy, we roll north, much better fed than Stonewall Jackson's men who trod this same trail during his infamous Valley Campaign. That was another bunch of tough guys. We spend two nights at Shenandoah State Park, just south of Front Royal because we want to float a

switchback or two of this wide crystal clear river before heading for home.

The next morning, we head east and south, down the Blue Ridge Turnpike from Sperryville to Madison over the Rapidan River and back into Orange County and home sweet home. We've been on a lot of scenic byways over the past eight days, but none is more beautiful than this one right in our own back yard.

ster.

But it was already a rock when the continents first collided 350 million years ago and Virginia was where the equator is now. That collision pushed up the Appalachians to heights in excess of 20,000 feet. Then 280 million years ago, Africa pulled away from our Piedmont and we all settled pretty much where we are today. Giant sharks with mouths the size of doorways roamed Caroline County's waters a mere 14 million years ago. In Saltville, just 14,000 years ago, giant sloths shared the ice age tundra with mastodons. When they stood on their hind legs, they could peer into your second-story bedroom window. They may have been hunted to extinction by...man.

We leave Hungry Mother, drive up the scenic and aptly named Rich Valley, spend the night at Claytor Lake

Twistin' tornadoes!



Staunton River State Park

around \$30 a night, this has all the amenities of a high-end resort: an Olympic size swimming pool and water slide, tennis courts, volleyball, a huge boat launch into Buggs Island Lake; the list goes on.

So what are all these loggers doing here in a state park? They're cleaning up after the April 16th tornado which mowed down a 100-yard wide swath through Halifax County, miraculously

POSTCARDS FROM CODY

A TOUR OF VIRGINIA'S STATE PARKS

What is the most beautiful state in the country?

Hawaii? Too darn far.

Alaska? Likewise, and those winters, yikes.

Colorado? The eastern two thirds of the state is flat as a pancake. Boring.

California? Gimme a break. Besides, which collapse will happen first: the financial or geologic one?

Maine? Nice lilacs in the summah, but those wintahs...

Florida? Too hot. Too crowded.

New York? Hmmm. That's a possibility except for this huge obnoxious smoke-belching city that thinks it's the center of the universe.

We could go on, but the long and the short of it is Virginia is the most beautiful state in the nation. It's got beaches; it's got wetlands; it's got rolling hills; and it's got mountains. It's got magnificent rivers and charming back lanes. It also has four distinct seasons, some pretty nice laid back people, and some fair-sized but not overwhelming cities. And most importantly, it's brimming with history.

Several weeks ago, we decided to go on a tour of Virginia's State Parks, staying in a different one every night, for a week. But, because there are 35 such parks in the state, we couldn't visit all of them in a week's time. So we sampled several in each of the system's regions: Chesapeake, Piedmont and Mountain. For a third opinion and comic relief, we brought our doofy Golden Retriever, Cody, who was happy to pose for pictures at all the parks we visited.

We all agree that Virginia is the best. No need to fly to Europe or the West Coast or Cancun or the Bahamas. No need to burn gallons and gallons of \$3.50+ gasoline to see Branson or Boulder or Burbank. You've got it all right here in your back yard. Besides, Virginia state parks are celebrating



SHENANDOAH RIVER SOUTH FORK

their 75th anniversary right now.

We set two rules during this tour of the Old Dominion: no Interstates and no driving faster than 60 miles per hour. Of the former, we can only ask, are we becoming fuddy-duddies or are people driving faster and worse than ever before? It doesn't really matter because either way, Interstate driving, especially in urban areas, is terrifying.

Which brings us to the 60-miles-per-hour rule. We like to quote the AAA spokesperson who said on TV the other night that for every five miles per hour you drive over 60, you burn up an extra 25 cents per gallon of gasoline. So, on a 20-gallon tank that's five bucks. I'd rather spend that on a bacon cheese burger at Maw and Paw's in Eagle Rock. More on that later. The real reason for the 60 miles-per-hour rule is that we're driving back country roads in a small RV and we're chicken. Not only do we want to enjoy the trip; we want to survive it.

It starts late on a Sunday morning in Orange County by taking the Monrovia Road as far as you can. And way down there in what they call 'the lower end of the county,' we miss a turn and pull into the driveway of an architectural gem of a country church. We later learn from its last surviving member it is called Ellisville Methodist Church. Gazing at its well proportioned lines, we realize we're on the right track, and we haven't even left our home county yet.

The road gets narrower; no center line. We slow down, wave to everyone we meet because, well, they waved first. We pick our way east through little places with names like Snell, Sparta, Alps and Chenault. Where do these names come from? Later in the trip when we're in the middle of the state we slide through Skinquarter. On a back country road in Craig County, just beyond Looney, we see signs for Whackertown and Waddletown. How about those Waddles; not Waddells, but Waddles. It's a big name 'round these parts, and believe me, some of them do.

Celebrating 75 years of Virginia State Parks



Our first night is spent at Belle Isle State Park, way down in the Northern Neck, in Lancaster County. Here, on a lazy tributary to the Rappahannock River, we practically have the place to ourselves. The camp host is disappointed we're only spending one night. We are "camping," but, it's not really camping is it, because we're not swatting insects, sleeping on sticks and stones, broiling hot, sopping wet, smelly, sleepless, and shower-less, answering the call of nature in the bush, which you must share with the snakes, chiggers and poison ivy.

No sir, what we're doing is not camping, but it sure borrows a lot of the good stuff from camping like seeing the stars at night, cooking and eating out doors, and kicking back to the sights and sounds and smells of mother nature. It's just that this kind of camping has hot and cold running water, a soft, dry bed and enough AC to run the AC.

Camping for most people whether they're in a tent or an RV is a way to get away from it all. But we're funny. When we go to a campground, we consider it an urban experience, what with all the new neighbors and kids running around that we don't get at our remote rural home.

We've done a fair bit of this kind of camping, and we're here to tell you that state parks are where it's at. For one thing they don't cram you all side by side like commercial campgrounds do. State park campgrounds are usually level, shady, spacious, with plenty of room between sites. And they are spotless. In fact, all of the

state parks we visited were immaculately clean: camp-sites, restrooms, showers, visitor's centers.

Okay, so they don't have putt putt golf. Horrors. We're devastated. Here's something else none of them have: Wi Fi and cable TV. In fact one state park we stayed at didn't even have cell phone coverage...just like home! But we were never bored. At Belle Isle we went on a 7 a.m. bird watching walk. The camp host, Mike Williams, could identify dozens and dozens of birds just by their songs. Out in the marsh, topping a tall pine tree, he pointed out a bald eagle's nest.

We found that just about all of the state parks we visited offered activities and programs for all ages most days of the week. So, get your nose out of that cell phone; shut down that computer screen and live a little bit in the real world!

The next day, we pack up and head down the Northern Neck, past Queenstown, established in 1669, and cross the Rappahannock at White Stone. Throughout this trip we pass dozens of "meeting" houses, churches with two front entrances, which identifies them as dating back at least to the Civil War when the sexes had to enter a house of worship through separate portals.

We reflect on the fact that back in 1669, going to church on Sunday was more than a religious exercise; it was the social event of the week, a vital soul-nurturing human connection with each other. That's why they called them "meeting" houses; people could meet. Regrettably, putt putt golf, Wi-Fi, cell phones and cable TV have now gotten in the way. We don't "meet" anymore.

We come to Jamestown, where it all started in May of 1607. Why did Captain Newport, for which Newport News is undoubtedly named, decide to settle right here? Because, the water was so deep he could tether his ships to the trees, we're told. Thinking about making a quick getaway, Captain Newport? Perhaps. But it would have been wiser to settle on higher

ground, not this mosquito-infested swampy island 60 miles up the James from Chesapeake Bay.

Since 1994, archaeologists have found a million artifacts here. A different story emerges from the driveway we were taught in grade school that both natives and visitors were all happy campers. If anything, it was an again off again love-hate relationship between these English "gentlemen," and the Algonquin Indians.

There are some strong characters here, namely the local chief or 'Powhatan,' his brother, and John Smith, whose life story of derring-do reads like a dime store novel. The Powhatan and John Smith managed to get things worked out, but just barely. It didn't last long.

Anyway, it just so happens that at this stage in the trip, I have started reading Laura Hillenbrand's best-seller "Unbroken: A World War Two Story of Survival, Resilience and Redemption." Talk about tough people enduring suffering and hardship; Louis Zamperini, the downed B-24 bombardier-hero of the book, would likely have survived the winter of 1609-1610 at Jamestown. But most didn't. Wracked by disease and starvation,



Looking down on Newcastle

the weaker ones dug their own graves and then lay down in them awaiting death. It got so bad they ate their horses; they ate rats; they ate shoe leather, they ate each other's dead bodies. Only 60 of the original 214 survived.

In 1619, the first Africans arrived as indentured servants, not slaves yet. The self-perpetuating practice of lifelong bondage that passed from generation to gen-

eration would come later. In 1622, the Powhatan's brother launched a 10-year war against the visitors. It wiped out one-third of the British population in the colony. Still, throughout such hardship and suffering, they survived. And look what we've become today: self-centered couch blobs peering endlessly into illuminated screens. The question is; could we meet such hardship? Could we even come close? Not likely.

We take the ferry across the James to Chippokes State Park and gaze across the water at the receding palisade walls of the first permanent British settlement in the Western Hemisphere. It is ironic that Jamestown, where the British first arrived, is so close to the place where the British last departed our fair state, Yorktown.

From Chippokes the next day we strike out for central Virginia. Not all of this trip is scenic. The sandy soil, scrub pines and tar paper shacks of Surry County do not invite. Neither would we recommend downtown Hopewell as a vacation destination. So we thread our way through, ever loyal to our 'no interstates' rule and eventually emerge in Cumberland County, where we stumble upon a vegetable stand whose proprietor is wearing a T-shirt with the letters P.E.T.A. written on it: People for the Eating of Tasty Animals. A vegetable stand. Well actually his veggies are all thrown willy-nilly in the back of his pick up truck. He has to root around under the corn and cucumbers to find us a melon.

We spend the night in the cozy and family-friendly Bear Island State Park. The next morning I try my luck in the 108-acre lake. Something, maybe a submerged log, snags my lure. Then it moves slowly. This is a big one. He never jumps, so I'm figuring this is a catfish, and sure enough after about five minutes of towing me around the lake, I get him up to the side of the kayak. With no net, and tackle too light to just haul him on board, we stare balefully at one another wondering what to do next. I'm a little leery of his mouth, whiskers, and dorsal fin. I'm not so sure I want to

share these tight quarters with a fish as long as my arm. He resolves the situation by breaking the line, and we both retire satisfied that we fought that one to a draw.

Time to head out. After loading up at the P.E.T.A. truck, we eat a decidedly carnivorous lunch at the

Cumberland Restaurant to the strains of Reba on the stereo and a view of a half dozen gleaming F-350s in the parking lot. Do you really need a pick-up that big to drive down here to eat? Hey it's a free country; it's just the fuel that's not so free.

Our next stop is the Staunton River State Park battlefield. Talk about tough people enduring hardship and suffering; listen to this yarn. Grant wants to cut Lee off from his rail road supply line to Petersburg. So he sends 5,000 cavalry troops and 16 pieces of artillery to blow up this bridge over the Roanoke (Staunton) River, which, by the way, is nowhere near Roanoke nor Staunton. We're in south-side Virginia here, not far from the Carolina border.

Anyway, it's June of 1864, and it's hot, and

these guys have ripped up 60 miles of track coming all the way from Petersburg. And standing in their way at this bridge are 938 Confederates, mostly locals and a contingent of old men and boys. Colonel Henry Eaton Coleman of Halifax wants to help; the only problem is, he is recovering from a head wound sustained at Spotsylvania Courthouse six weeks prior. This wound is so severe that a portion of his brain is actually exposed! No matter. He arranges for a wagon outfitted with a mattress and pillows to deliver him to the battlefield where he directs the building of earthworks and commands the "old men and young boys." All four federal advances were repulsed. Coleman, by the way, lived to the ripe old age of 53. Now that's tough.

How about Hungry Mother? We stay in that state park too, just outside Marion, way down in the southwest corner of the state. Back in the late 1700s Mollie Marley was captured along with her child by Indian raiders who killed her husband and several other settlers along the New River. She managed to escape



GYPPRESSES AT CHIPPOKES