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Profiling The Profile Trail

By Morgan Klein

My first ascent up Grandfather Mountain's Profile Trail almost three years ago bore a striking resemblance to a beautiful girl I once dated. Initially it was really easy going and smooth, but then things started to get a little tense and I wasn't sure if I wanted to continue the relationship. But I remember looking at her and thinking how beautiful she was and how it would be a shame to end it after we had gone so far together. So we kept at it. But eventually our compatibility became so rocky and strenuous that it took all my energy to keep it going those final moments, until I finally reached the end and had to break it off. Thankfully it was all downhill after that.



Photo Courtesy Of Hugh Morton

Ok, so that might be a little melodramatic, but inside that analogy there is truth. Well, the part about the Profile Trail is true anyway. The beautiful girl dumped me after two weeks because I had a penchant for making bad analogies.

The Profile Trail is one of the greatest short hikes in the southern Appalachian Mountains. The actual profile of Grandfather Mountain is one of the most photographed and painted images in the entire south, and you'd be hard-pressed to enter any one of the art galleries in Boone, Blowing Rock, and Banner Elk and not see some medium of art with the Grandfather Mountain profile as its subject. The adoration that accompanies the Grandfather profile makes hiking up it even more special.

Starting on Highway 105 between Seven Devils and Tynecastle, the 2.7 mile Profile Trail is considered by many local hikers as the Mercedes of Grandfather Mountain's 11 hiking trails. Built by Kinney Baughman and Jim Morton between 1985 and 1989 with iron rods, shovels, pulleys, and winches on a donated tract of land, the Profile Trail's concept was to reroute traffic around the soon-to-be destroyed Shanty Trail and possible future development. In fact, if Baughman and Morton had not undergone the 4-year endeavor to connect the trail to Grandfather property 2 miles up from Highway 105 there would be no hiking on the west side of Grandfather Mountain, thus that side of the mountain would be inaccessible.

"Building the trail was a lesson in medieval technology," says Baughman, referring to the tons of rock that had to be moved with nothing more than hand tools. "The first time I saw the rocks I came back down feeling depressed. But with every rock we pulled up we literally had a pile of possibilities."

But the hard work was well worth it for Baughman. "I'm as proud of (the Profile Trail) as anything I've ever done. It's my lasting legacy."

The result of Baughman and Morton's hard work and dedication to keep the west side of Grandfather open is a trail that, when combined with the Calloway Trail, ascends over 2,000 feet up one of the highest and most famous mountains in the east.

The trail begins with a meandering 1-mile leg-stretcher through rhododendron-lined trails and several passes over the infant Watauga River. After the initial stretch the trail begins to traverse through the hardwood canopy and gradually becomes steeper. At 1.7 miles is Foscoe View, where the hiker can take a breather and look northward up the valley toward the town bearing its name. After Foscoe View the hike becomes considerably more strenuous, but the effort certainly enhances the reward of the striking views from here on up.

The 2 miles between Foscoe View and Shanty Spring, the end of the Profile Trail, contain some of the most stunning and massive rock formations of any hike in the High Country. One of the most amazing features is that despite the extreme amount of rock on this trail, not one stick of dynamite was used when the trail was cut. The natural rock formations add an even more versatile aspect that not many other hikes of this caliber possess. Of particular note is a section called "Peregrine's Flight" where hundreds of boulders have been arranged into a stunning rock walkway.

At 2.3 miles is a view that anyone who has seen the profile of the "old man" can appreciate, the profile itself, and the namesake of the trail. But what makes this view special is the proximity that only those who hike this trail can experience. Those who regularly drive up Highway 105 towards Banner Elk and Linville tend to not take note of the profile anymore, but pass it off as second nature or even a scapegoat for the high traffic of summer tourism. But being so close to the profile with all its majesty brings a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction that only those who have taken in this view can truly appreciate.

The Profile Trail concludes at Shanty Spring, a total of 2.7 miles from the start with approximately 1.5 to 2.0 hours of hiking time. At Shanty Spring the trail connects to Calloway Trail, which ascends to the very top of Grandfather Mountain and offers the most spectacular views anywhere of the surrounding area. But the reward comes with a price.

The Calloway Trail is short in length, but long in stature. The .3 mile ascent takes the hiker out of the familiar North Carolina hardwoods and up into the exposed crest of Calloway Peak at nearly 6,000 feet above sea level. Up here the trees grow short and the weather can change with little notice. This is in addition to the arduous nature of the trail itself. It's steep, rocky, and narrow with several almost vertical switchbacks where one can reach out and touch a hand on one side of the trail but see the mountain virtually disappear on the other. This section



is the epitome of "the more work, the more reward".

For your effort to the top of Grandfather Mountain is a view from the highest peak in the Blue Ridge chain, extending from Georgia to Pennsylvania, and an immense feeling of accomplishment, peace, and tranquility. After taking in the view it's back down the way you came.

After the nearly all-uphill hike to reach the top, the hike down is approximately three times faster and feels almost relaxing. The round-trip time of the hike to Shanty Spring is between 2.5 to 3.5 hours depending on ability, and the hike from the top of Calloway Trail round-trip is 3.5 to 4.5 hours.

The Profile Trail and adjoining Calloway Trail do have one slight drawback, and that is you have to drop four George Washington's and a half-dollar to make the hike. But the money goes to the upkeep of the trail, and once you start the hike and experience for yourself how clean and clear the trail is you will thank those who came before you for their "donation". Permits can be picked up at Foscoe Fishing Company and Eckerd drug store in Tynecastle, or at the entrance to Grandfather Mountain on Highway 221.

So if you love to hike and explore, or if you need an excuse to remember why you live in the High Country, hike the Profile Trail. James Cagney said it best, "On top of the world!"

This Week's Outdoor Events

Riverfest 2003

Saturday, May 17, 10 AM to 3 PM at Valle Crucis Community Park. Riverfest is an afternoon of entertainment and education on the Watauga River. Admission is free.

Events for children include a duck race and water sampling for insects. This portion of the Watauga River will be stocked with fish and there will be a catch-and-release Fish for Fun (rods provided). There will also be entertainment by The Jane Gang and Lost Ridge Boys, food by Creekside Deli, gem mining, storytelling, a silent auction, and an exhibition of rescued wildlife. Activities include fly casting demonstrations, fly tying demonstrations, and a bird-identification walk. Exhibitors on hand will have information on well-water screening as well as river-cleaning organizations and events. This event is sponsored by Watauga River Conservation Partners. Call 963-8682 for more information.

Stop the Litter Community Meeting

Wednesday, May 14, 4 PM to 5:30 PM at Fairfield Inn and Suites by Marriott. 2059 Blowing Rock Road. Come and see how you can help to keep the High Country green and clean! Sponsored by The Mountain Keepers. For more information call 264-3061

Have an outdoor event that others should know about? Have an outdoor topic or event that's newsworthy? If so drop an email to morgan_klein@hotmail.com.

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