

A Day of PEAK EXPERIENCES in the Alleghenies

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THERE IS SOMETHING COMPELLING ABOUT HIGH PLACES. Sages, adventurers and just plain folks find great satisfaction in scaling these special places. In the U.S., thousands of people embark on annual “highpointing” expeditions to mountaintops, usually with the goal of “bagging” as many peaks as possible.

Now, in the age of the automobile, it’s much easier to visit the high points of each state. In some regions of the U.S. it’s possible to visit several of these sites in one day. The practice has become popular enough to spawn groups like the Highpointers Club (www.Highpointers.org). Even so, these peaks retain an appealing sense of loftiness both physical and spiritual.

One such popular expedition includes visits to the **HIGHEST POINTS IN MARYLAND, PENNSYLVANIA AND WEST VIRGINIA.** Although all are situated in the Allegheny Mountains, each has its own story to tell.

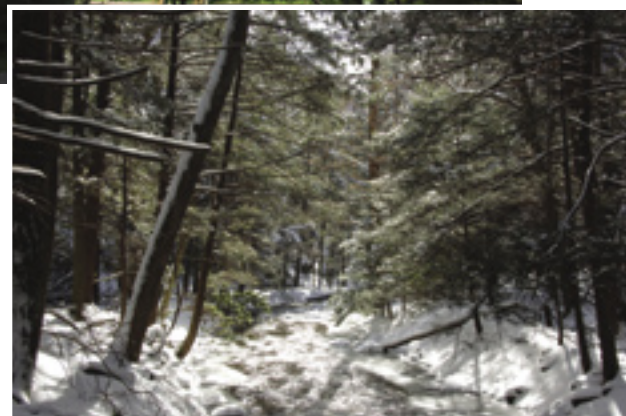
Should you decide to embark on this journey, your point of origin will determine your itinerary. Because you’ll likely find cooler temperatures and strong winds at each of your destinations, be sure to bring warm clothing and dress in layers. Drinking water will keep you hydrated and some snacks will help sustain the energy you’ll need. Although some come alone, it’s a good idea to bring at least one companion.

If you choose to go from the lowest to the highest point, you’ll begin with Mount Davis in Pennsylvania (3,213 feet), head southwest to Maryland’s Hoyer Crest on Backbone Mountain (3,360 feet) and end your highpointing journey at Spruce Knob in West Virginia (4,863 feet). It’s interesting that this journey includes the lowest—Mount Davis—and highest—Spruce Knob—of the state highpoints along the Appalachians from Pennsylvania to Georgia.

Mount Davis is the most accessible peak of the three. Located in Forbes State Forest in Somerset County, it is the highest point of a 30-mile ridge line known as Negro Mountain. Mount Davis is named for its surveyor, John Davis, a pioneer farmer, Civil War veteran and educator known for his knowledge of the mountain’s flora and fauna. You can park your vehicle as close as a mile away in the picnic area lot, where you’ll find the High Point Trail that leads to the observation tower. Your reward for climbing its steep metal steps is a panoramic view of Penn’s Woods that unfolds like an enormous, bluish-green blanket with ridges forming its folds. An occasional microwave tower is the only sign of man’s impact on the horizon. A bronze relief map of the region will help you get your bearings.

At the base of the tower, you’ll find several plaques describing the area’s geological history and local legends. One tells the story of Lydia Shultz, who, in 1830, was sent into the woods to gather the cows and lost her way. For months

Spruce Knob, West Virginia



The lookout tower at Spruce Knob, WV, (above) is the highest point in West Virginia. The magnificent view on the facing page is taken from atop this tower.

Top Right: The tower at Mount Davis, the highest point in Pennsylvania. Near the base of this tower are plaques and educational materials describing the area's geological history and local legends.

Right: Meadow Mountain location of Backbone Mountain, the highest point in Maryland. While there is not a public overlook, the view and scenery from the mountain is spectacular.

she lived off the land, as wild as the native bobcats and rattlesnakes that still live there. Another offers a geologic history that includes information on the settlement and development of the area around Mount Davis. You'll find frost heave rock formations scattered about, each characterized by a rock thrust upward through the center of concentric stone circles. The USGS (United State Geological Survey) marker sits atop one of these rocks. These formations are the legacy of Mount Davis' location at the edge of a glacial zone where intense freezing and thawing activity produces characteristic features and landforms.

Moving south to Maryland's Hoyo Crest, you'll find a much different scenario. Hoyo Crest sits upon the Backbone Mountain ridge that stretches about 10 miles from northern West Virginia into Garrett County, Maryland. Its name honors Captain Charles Hoyo, one of the first permanent

settlers in Garrett County and the founder of the Garrett County Historical Society.

To get there from the north, you have to cross into West Virginia and find the trailhead to the left, at a logging road near trees with orange blazes and park in a small area along the main road. It's a little more than a mile's hike uphill to your destination. Because the trail twists and turns, you'll need to pay attention to the orange blazes. Along the way, you'll pass an obelisk marking the Maryland-West Virginia boundary. A cairn of stones on the right next to the marker marks the summit. Next to the cairn is the Hoyo Crest marker, where you'll find a mailbox with a guestbook you can sign, plus completion certificates. The view, limited to Maryland on the east, reveals a bucolic scene of rolling, wooded hills above valleys sprinkled with houses, reminiscent of Maryland's reputation as "America in Miniature."

You'll enter a different world as you head towards "Wild, Wonderful" West Virginia to Spruce Knob, located within the Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area, itself a part of the Monongahela National Forest. In the Southern Appalachians, the highest point in a ridge is often called a knob. Spruce Knob lies along the ridge known as the Allegheny Front.

To get there, you'll wind and wind, up and up, along a narrow gravel road that seems endless. You'll pass through a dense spruce forest similar to those found in northern New England and Canada. As you approach the summit, you'll notice spruce trees with limbs on only one side due to winds that can reach 100 mph, hence the reason the area is called "The Land of the Whispering One Side Spruce." Spruce Knob's Canadian arboreal climate gives it an alpine aspect, with temperatures that will prompt you to reach for those layers you brought.

This summit is indeed a mountain, with a stone lookout tower worth climbing for a 360° view. Unfortunately, it's not uncommon to find misty or foggy conditions because of the altitude. But on a clear day, you can see the steep drop to the pastoral Germany Valley on the east side and the rugged Allegheny Plateau to the west. Meadows and forests lie peacefully below.

The half-mile Whispering Spruce trail circles the upper part of Spruce Knob and provides panoramic views highlighted by interpretive signs describing the alpine vegetation, geology and animal life. Along the summit lie boulder fields mixed with meadows and trees adapted to an environment where winter temperatures often reach -20°.

There's a rugged grandeur to Spruce Knob that likely impressed those who once roamed its hunting grounds. Years ago, only settlers with highly developed survival skills and strong spirits could survive in this wilderness. These pioneers developed a pride reflected in the state motto that mirrors the spirit of the Appalachians, "Montani semper liberi – Mountaineers are always free."

The region you'll traverse as you "bag" these three state summits played a significant role in our nation's quest for freedom, especially during its formative years. The early settlers were often a contentious bunch, unwilling to go along with dictates from government officials. Some attempted to form a 14th colony that encompassed this area, to be called Pittsylvania or Westsylvania, but were unsuccessful primarily because of the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, settlers of European descent moved across the Allegheny Mountains to points west.

Once you've had a taste of highpointing, you may find new worlds to explore as you "Climb Every Mountain."

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