



Clifftop: a Beginner's Guide

By **Hilarie Burhans** - June 4, 2019

All photos by Sandra Parks

Three to four thousand old-time musicians, all in one place. If you're one of the few who regard this scenario as heaven rather than hell, you owe it to yourself to go to that Mecca of old-time music that is the Appalachian String Band Festival, generally called Clifftop. Chances are that if you go once, you'll be hooked. I'm often asked about the festival by friends who are considering going, so in this article, I'll try to answer some of the questions a first-time attendee might have. Please keep in mind as you read this that I'm not officially representing the Appalachian String Band Festival. I am an experienced Clifftop attendee, though, and I'm someone who truly loves the festival.

The Appalachian String Band Festival – the brainchild of Will Carter and first held in 1990 – was a project of the West Virginia Department of Culture and History. It's still held in the original location near an unincorporated community called Clifftop in Fayette County, WV, at Camp Washington-Carver. Named for both George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington, the camp served from 1942-1957 as a 4-H camp for WV children of color and is on the National Register of Historic Places. The Great Chestnut Lodge at Camp W-C is the largest log structure of its kind in the world. The camp is adjacent to Babcock State Park.



It's important to understand that Clifftop is essentially split into two parts: "pre-camping" and "the festival". The official festival runs for 5 days, from the Wednesday before the first full weekend in August until the following Sunday. These days include all the competitions, the vendors are there in full force, and lots of people who are just there to listen and watch. And then there's the pre-camping, the date for which seems to get earlier every year. Pre-camping is when old-time musicians show up just to camp, jam, and hang out.



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Pastarama!!!

Getting There

On Google Maps, Camp Washington Carver is here <https://goo.gl/maps/UUrHsdpKndZcXSDh9>. It's in a part of West Virginia that has no public transportation, so getting there if you don't own a car generally requires ride sharing or renting a vehicle. If you're staying the entire 10 days, renting a car that will just sit there all that time could be more than you're willing to pay. Both Uber and Lyft are apparently now operating in WV. A quick check of Uber fares from Charleston WV shows at least the theoretical possibility of a ride from the airport there to the festival, at \$86.00 one way.

The closest **international** airports are:

226 miles: Pittsburgh, PA (PIT) Pittsburgh International Airport

232 miles: Columbus, OH (CMH) Port Columbus International Airport

255 miles: Charlotte, NC (CLT) Charlotte Douglas International Airport

293 miles: Raleigh, NC (RDU) Raleigh-Durham International Airport

The nearest **domestic** airports are quite small. Of these, CRW and ROA have the most flights.

35 miles: Beckley, WV (BKW) Beckley Raleigh County Memorial Airport (Contour)

45 miles: Lewisburg, WV (LWB) Greenbrier Valley Airport (United Express)

67 miles: Charleston, WV (CRW) Yeager Airport (a bit larger than the preceding airlines; United, Delta, American and Spirit)

121 miles: Bridgeport, WV (CKB) North Central West Virginia Airport (Allegiant, United)

126 miles: Huntington, WV (HTS) Tri-State Airport (Allegiant, American)

130 miles: Roanoke, VA (ROA) Roanoke Regional Airport (Allegiant, American, Delta, United)

Thinking outside the box, there is also an Amtrak train stop on the Cardinal Line at Prince, WV, just 22 miles from the festival, and theoretically you could arrange for an Uber to pick you up and take you to the festival for around \$30. But no matter how you arrive at the festival, please be sure to arrive between the hours of 7 am and 11 pm, or you'll be sleeping in the parking lot waiting for the gate to open in the morning! If possible, try to time your arrival for the daylight hours, as finding your way to and around the camp is a lot more difficult after dark. Setting up your tent in the dark is no fun either!

Weather – and dressing for it

Well, whatever the weather is, if you don't like it, just wait 10 minutes and it'll change. But seriously, one really must plan for pretty much anything. It is sometimes VERY wet; there was

one year that I think of as Clifftarp, as pretty much the whole time was spent under one tarp or another. Another year was so chilly that I remember thinking, “They should hold this festival in the summer next year!” But generally, given the elevation of 2,520 ft (770 m) above sea level, the weather is quite nice. The nights are cool, with an average temperature of 58 F, while the days are warm (80 F). Thundershowers occasionally roll in in the late afternoons. In order to dress for the weather, you’ll want to bring clothing you can layer, and something warm to wear to sleep in. You’ll also want to bring some sort of footwear that you can slip into easily when going out to answer the call of nature, and footwear that can get muddy. (Crocs work as both for me.) Finally, you’ll want something waterproof. A cheap poncho can also go over your instrument to keep it dry.



Sleeping

Sleep? Nobody sleeps at Clifftop. Too many tunes, so little time! But when you finally do crash, you’re going to want to be comfy. If you are driving and bringing camping stuff from home, you’re all set. If you’re coming in an RV, there’s a designated place for you to park it, but please be aware that while there is a dump station and water available, there are no hookups. Generator use is not allowed in the RV area on the festival grounds, although generators may be used in the lower parking lot. Check the website for the latest RV rules.

If you flew in from far away, your situation is a little different. If you want to camp onsite at Camp Washington-Carver, you could rent a minivan or other vehicle that can also serve as a roof over your head at night. If you’re traveling light, you can stop in Oak Hill or elsewhere and buy an air mattress, a battery lantern and/or headlamp, and a cheap sleeping bag. In this case, you might want to pre-arrange to attach yourself to a friend’s campsite, preferably one with cooking gear.

Another alternative would be to reserve a cabin at Babcock State Park next door. These cabins go quickly, so call them at least a year in advance to find out how and when to book your stay. There are also a few motels and B&B lodging not *too* far away. There are also a few local-ish motels or B&Bs. If you need to use a CPAP machine at night, you'll either need to stay off-site somewhere where there's electricity or, if you're camping, use a CPAP battery at night and charge it during the day.

Hygiene

There are 10 or 12 showers for men, and the same number for women, in the building behind the lodge. There are also 4 or 5 sinks and 10 or so flush toilets. Needless to say, when there are 3000+ people at the festival at any one point, that's not ideal. But somehow, it works. Showering very early or else later in the day seems to be my strategy for getting hot water to come down out of those shower heads. Your chances of a cold shower are higher during times of highest use, like, say, 9:30 am. Also, the showers are closed part of the afternoon. Festival staff will post the available shower hours. I like to wear water sandals or Crocs while I shower. The shower floors are concrete and while there's a drain in the shower, the rest of the private dressing area for each shower gets pretty wet and doesn't drain well.

There are flush toilets in the building you'll pass as you head down into the swamp, and a couple of sinks with cold water. There's also a flush toilet in the small building you'll pass on the right as you head up toward the water tower. There are lots of portable toilets distributed around the grounds.

Get Your Dishes “Clifftop Clean”(hat tip to David Lynch of Lynch Graphics!)

There are three official dishwashing stations that I know of. They're marked on the map with little blue rectangles. Don't forget to pack dishwashing liquid, a scrubbie, and a dishpan to carry your dishes to and from the dishwashing area.

Get your dishes Clifftop Clean*!



I've "cleaned" all the dishes. Wade!

Then let's get drunk and play in the shade!

**...All you do is *RINSE* and *NEGLECT*!
Then start tuning your instruments as
DRONE seals the scum onto your dishes!**

Tired of waiting in long lines to wash your dishes while surrounded by the sounds of hot old-time jams you yearn to join? Skip the drudgery and get your dishes "Clifftop Clean" with new improved **DRONE**!

DRONE soap's exclusive "lick-and-a-promise" action will lethargically amend your dirty dishes by coating the putrefaction with a patented film that seals in the salmonella, allowing you to re-use the dishes in the morning without subjecting them to an actual tedious washing process!

NOTE: "Clifftop Clean" is a sleazy, misleading marketing catch phrase that in no way ensures or represents a pure or sanitary condition.

That dingy, grey mottled patina tells you it's working!



OLD-TIME FUN FROM LYNCH GRAPHICS
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Stuff to bring

- A small LED lantern or two, and/or an LED headlamp (the headlamp makes setting up camp and doing chores at night much easier)
- Some sort of bedding, and some sort of roof over your head
- Shower stuff and a towel, and maybe some sort of shoe you can wear in the shower.

- Earplugs for sleeping (Many people use them. I don't like them, but I use a small battery-operated white noise machine. There is music being played 24/7.)
- A charged battery pack/power bank for your phone and charging cable or portable solar charger. There are various sanctioned and unsanctioned places to plug in your phone to charge it. None are attended, but I've not heard of phone theft at Clifftop. Still, it makes me nervous and we charge our own phones and extra batteries at our camp using a marine cell battery.
- Insect repellent and sunscreen, if you like. Mosquitos aren't generally a problem, but please do check yourself and your loved ones for ticks regularly. As for sunscreen, a lot of the area is shaded by trees, and most of your jamming will probably take place under a shelter. But you will be walking through sunny areas.
- A recording device of some sort, as you're going to want to remember those tunes!
- Your reusable coffee/tea mug and water bottle. The water at Clifftop is safe to drink but doesn't look or taste great. A filter pitcher is a nice addition to your camp.
- One or more beverage "coozies" (that's how folks pronounce the word) to slip your canned beverage into, to keep it both cold and anonymous. The policy is that there is no alcohol allowed at the festival. Do not, under any circumstances, bring an alcoholic beverage anywhere near the "public" areas (stage area or lodge.) What you do in the relative privacy of your own camp is generally hassle-free, as long as you are discreet.

Nice to Have

I polled fellow members of the Clifftop Campers Facebook group to compile this list. The first item is mine.

- A hot water bottle. My feet get cold, and when it's chilly out and my husband is still out playing tunes when I want to go to bed, it's nice to have something warm to hug!
- A canopy and a couple of chairs, to form a "pickin' parlour." You can put old tennis balls on the feet of your folding chairs to keep them from sinking into soft ground. For the canopy, take note at the festival of the various methods of keeping the canopy from developing puddles on the roof in the rain. "Pool noodles" are often used for this. Bulldog clips can be used to stop rain from dripping down between canopies. At our camp, we have a gutter system I developed.
- A Mad Mat or two. These outdoor rugs, made of 100% recycled plastic, really class up your campsite, and keep everything nice and dry and relatively clean underfoot. Google them... they're sold lots of places and come in cool designs.
- A little sewing kit, nail clippers, folding umbrella
- A pee bottle (or pee bucket for the gals) if you don't want to leave your tent in the rain when nature calls. (In our camp, we use the adorably-named "Luggable Loo" with liner bags called "Double Doody.")

- A battery-operated fan
- A small notebook. One contributor writes down the names of people in jams he plays with, as a way to recall the sessions later.
- Bacon. Is there a better way to make friends?
- Soap and/or wipes that you can carry in your pocket
- If you're sleeping in a vehicle, bring some bricks or lumber or something to attempt to make it level, as it's often hard to find natural materials to do the job.
- Some type of reflective cord or ribbons to keep folks from tripping over your tent/shelter guy-lines at night. Or solar-powered lights for the same purpose.
- More than one towel and extra clothes, in a plastic bag to stay dry.
- Rope to make a clothesline to dry damp stuff on
- Extra tarp just in case
- A 'welcome' mat for your tent, aka a dry/clean space to stand in in your sock feet at night/in the morning.
- Extra strings and tuner batteries
- An umbrella and a trash bag to cover your instrument case
- A "butt buddy" (cushion for your chair, which you'll probably be spending lots of time in jamming. Referred to by some jokers as a "stool softener.")

Scoring a Campsite

For some people, Clifftop begins a day or two before the gates open. After getting a number for their place in line, these enthusiasts then play tunes for a day or two with the other super hardcore folks until the gates open at 1pm on the Friday before the festival. And when the gates do open for camping, there's a sort of land grab. People tend to set up camp in roughly the same spot year after year. There are no specific campsites laid out by the organizers – folks just camp where they find a good spot. Level ground is at a premium. As a newbie, you'll want to be a little sensitive about where you camp. You'll see lots of attempts to save space for others, with tarps, chairs, and so forth, which is technically against the rules. But if a neighboring camper lets you know that the spot you're considering is right where so-and-so has camped for 20 years, perhaps you should consider moving over a bit.

The various "neighborhoods" all seem to have their own feel. Some are on higher ground, and catch the breeze nicely, but finding a level spot can sometimes be a challenge. Some camps are tucked away at the ends of little paths and don't get as much foot traffic, while the flat area past

the blacktop, near the flush toilets, is a good bit more public, where you'll be greeting all your friends as they pass by. As you go deeper into the woods toward the bottomland, the shade is more intense and the tunes are apt to go on all night long. Basically, there's something (and somewhere) for everyone! And while you may worry that all the best spots will be gone by the time you get there on, say, Thursday... don't despair! There are always folks who come for the earlier period who leave later in the week, preferring the more relaxed pre-camping atmosphere to that of the more intense festival days, so that their prime camping spots then open up.



Martini Monday and The Infamous Rockem Sockem Robot Tournament

Keep in mind, if you're arriving in a car, that in some locations you might get "camped in" (surrounded by other campsites so that you're unable to get your car out until the end of the festival.) One solution to this problem is to move your car to the parking lot down near the entrance gate once you've unloaded. There is a shuttle up the hill that runs regularly during the festival. Day trippers are required to leave their cars in the parking lot, but part of your camping pass is a windshield sign that allows you to bring your car in.

Retail at Camp

After days and days of playing tunes, if you're like me, you want a chance to shop a bit. Fortunately, by Wednesday, there's tons of stuff to buy: LOTS of instruments, both new and used; CDs from the Field Recorders' Collective, John Hatton's vast collection, or from one of the many CD release parties you'll attend (just look for the fliers near the bathroom and stuck to port-a-john doors); fresh produce from the Farmer's Market stand (it's not all local, but it's really convenient. Hint: if you know you'll need a produce item the next day for a meal, just let them know and they'll probably bring it for you.) There are some clothing and pottery stalls, and a booth or two where you can buy the extra strings you forgot to pack or the capo or tuner you lost. There's a coffee vendor so you can get your mocha latte when you're tired of cowboy coffee. Also, by Wednesday, several food vendors will have sprouted up. The Camp Washington-Carver

dining room also serves food during the festival. Bags of ice and a few small sundry items are sold in the camp store beginning on the Friday before the festival. Some vendors accept credit cards and some do not, so having some cash with you is a good idea. You'll probably see young people walking around with a wagon taking ice orders. These "ice urchins" generally charge \$3 per bag delivered, while ice you get at the camp store yourself costs \$2. We often contract with one enterprising youngster or another to provide all our ice for the week at a slightly reduced rate. (Incidentally, I heard a tale about one young kid who was raking it in selling ice, and spending all his hard-earned cash on massages at the massage tent!)



Retail Near the Camp

"Near" is a relative term. We go "to town" for groceries once during the 9 days of Clifftop. There's a Kroger grocery and a Walmart between Fayetteville and Oak Hill. It takes about half an hour by car to go the 20 miles to the store. In the other direction, you can go just 15 miles to a little Kroger in Rainelle, but the road is so curvy that it still takes half an hour to drive there. If there are just a couple things that you need, you might want to find out from your camping neighbors if there's anybody going to the store. We generally need something from the Walmart (unfortunately,) so usually we go the Fayetteville route. Right in Fayetteville, there are some quirky and decent little restaurants where you can stop for lunch during your shopping trip. We also detour to the Pies and Pints in Fayetteville every year on the way home from the festival, just to have one of their huge antipasto platters and a Thai coconut shrimp pizza every year to reward us for getting our camp broken down and packed up on Sunday!

The Social Scene

Clifftop may be one big party, but there are LOTS of smaller parties every year. Look for signs posted in the restrooms and on the porta-johns for the many CD release parties. Spend some time dancing at the Cajun tent. There are also various big dinner parties and potlucks which

require loose or no invitations; some of these include dinner parties at Burhania and the Cajun tent, and the PastaRama potluck. The No-Talent Contest is another highlight. And at some point during the week, lots of women meet up for the Estro-gin Jam. If you're looking for a big loud "onion jam" where you can feel comfortable participating even as a beginner (more experienced players will be in the core, with lots of other players all around them) head down most evenings to McManustan, Keith McManus's big shelter with room for everyone, it seems! If the weather is hot and you need to cool off in the afternoon, ask around for directions to where you can swim. And if you feel you want to get away for the day, you can book amazing whitewater rafting adventures nearby.



Estro-gin Jam underway

If you or a significant other need a break from playing tunes, there are also square dances in the Great Chestnut Lodge each evening during the festival, and various other organized events including yoga and crafts, including some stuff for children. There's often some sort of New Tune Swap for folks to share their original tunes. The official schedule on the website lists these events.

Contests and Concerts

While Clifftop is mostly about jamming with friends old and new, there are also organized contests and a few concerts during the Wednesday through Saturday festival days. These take place on the stage but are moved into the Great Chestnut Lodge in the event of rain. You can check the schedule on the website, but the contest schedule in a nutshell is banjo and fiddle contests on Thursday, the NeoTraditional Band contest on Friday, and the Traditional Band and Flatfoot Dance contests on Saturday. Contests have three judges, and new judges are chosen each year. The winning band in each category returns to play a short concert the following year. If you and/or your band (or the group of people you just met and had a blast jamming with into the wee hours the night before) decide to enter a contest, you'll show up to draw a number for

the order of play in the morning. Please be aware, though, that there are sometimes large gaps between numbers, so that you can easily miss your chance to get on stage and compete if you don't show up and hang around by the stage well in advance of when you think your number will be up (this is the voice of experience talking!)

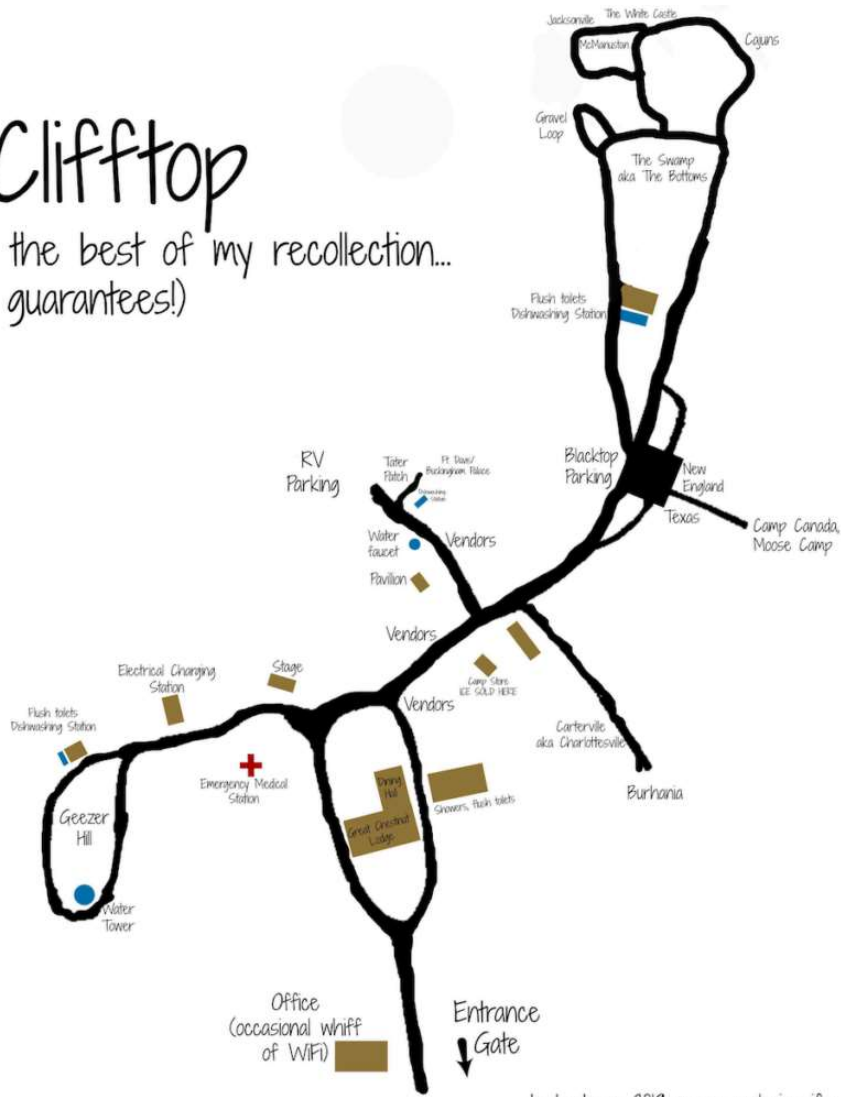


When It's Not All Peaches and Cream

My husband and I came to Clifftop for the first three years, then didn't go for many years before we began attending again. We weren't playing a whole lot of old-time music during that time, but more than that, we had felt that it was difficult to meet and socialize with folks at the festival. They all seemed to know each other already, we felt like we had a hard time getting invited to play with others, and we didn't know very many people. When a friend of ours talked us into going again, years later, she suggested we camp in the neighborhood where she and her friends camped. We did and we had a blast. There were a couple of reasons for the difference. One was that we decided to do what we do best (throw dinner parties, in our case!) and invite our neighbors. We planned for a few extra folks for each meal and it worked out just as we'd hoped. We have since made lifelong friends with many of our Clifftop neighbors and my life feels tremendously enriched by knowing them.

Clifftop

(to the best of my recollection...
no guarantees!)



appear on this map, I did what I could do.

Another reason that it was different when we began coming again is that “meeting” like-minded people on social media (in my case, Facebook old-time music groups) meant that when we met in person we had already had a lot of communication and found it easier to be invited and to invite others to play tunes together. My suggestion, therefore, if you’re at all apprehensive about not knowing folks to play with, is that you take care of some of that getting-to-know-folks stuff before you ever leave home, by interacting with folks on old-time music topics that interest you in Facebook groups or on Banjo or Fiddle Hangout and so forth. Talk to other musicians you know from your area and think about camping near each other, perhaps. Or come see me and introduce yourself. I’m friendly!



Jamming

Confession: I used to feel that moments spent at the festival doing anything other than playing in a hot jam were sort of wasted. I'm SO much happier now that I have let that notion go by the wayside, and possibly as a result of my more relaxed attitude, I now find myself in more hot jams than ever! I get asked by my banjo students sometimes about how to navigate the jam scene at festivals. For some folks with great social radar, it comes naturally to know when a jam would be receptive to having a stranger whip out a banjo and start playing. For some other folks, not so much. So here are a few guidelines. As they say, Your Mileage May Vary.

- 1) The first rule of jam etiquette is to play EITHER quietly or well.
- 2) Listening is more important than being heard, especially when you don't know the tune yet.
- 3) Some folks seem to have an unwritten rule that there should be only one banjo in a jam (unless it's a big free-for-all type jam). In the same vein, at an old-time music festival, you should be extra cautious about inserting yourself into a jam situation if you play any instrument other than fiddle, banjo, guitar or upright bass.
- 4) If there are more than 10 or 15 people playing, it's getting to be a pretty big jam, and probably safe to hang on the outskirts and play quietly. Or loudly, depending on how raucous the jam seems to be. It's never wrong to ask whether it's ok to sit in on a jam, though, unless it's really large, in which case I wouldn't bother.

- 5) In my experience, wandering around in the dark late at night down in the swamp with an instrument forlornly looking for people to play with is a potential bummer. Wander around with a recording device instead, with the intention of collecting tunes to learn. Next day, in the daylight, meet folks to play with and make plans with them for a jam after dark.
- 6) If it's a small jam and the players are obviously very good, best not to ask to sit in. If you stand there long enough listening, they'll invite you if they want you. But this may be their only jam of the year with each other in that combination which they carefully orchestrated and want to keep small, so be respectful of that.
- 7) There are always folks who play better than you and folks who don't play as well as you. It's human nature to always want to play with people who are better than you, but it's lovingkindness to ask people who don't play as well as you to join you for a jam. And you may be surprised by the magic that can happen when you don't expect it.

As you can probably tell, I really love this festival. Writing this has really put me in the mood for the festival season, and I can't wait. Hope to run into you at Clifftop! Be sure to say hi!

Hilarie Burhans

Hilarie Burhans has been playing and teaching clawhammer banjo for more than 40 years. Check out her Patreon banjo instructional video page:
<https://www.patreon.com/hilarieburhans>