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Cabin fever

Retreat from the city with an excursion to Cashiers, North Carolina

By Suzanne Wright

Drawn in by established locales with deep roots, guests of the High Hampton Inn & Country Club are tended to by experience and excellence. "We have third-generation staff and fifth-generation guests," says the genial, silver-haired Les Green, resort manager. "And a 70 percent return guest rate." Looking around the living room, with its four-sided stone fireplace, rustic furnishings and the easy, convivial buzz of families and couples, it's easy to see why.

Located in Cashiers, the High Hampton has a rich history that dates back more than 2,000 years. Once, Cherokee Indians roamed the valley, followed by French fur traders and, ultimately, whites who settled the land as a summer retreat from heat and humidity in the early 19th century. Built by General Wade Hampton, one of the Civil War's most colorful generals, in 1892, ownership passed to Dr. William Stewart Halstead, a surgeon known for his pioneering use of anesthesia (a group of doctors still holds an annual retreat here). In 1922, businessman E.L. McKee purchased High Hampton, and it has remained in the family ever since. The current owner, Will McKee, warmly greeted me during Sunday lunch.

Named one of the best 100 best family resorts in North America [BY WHO?], the 1,400-acre estate is located 3,600 feet above sea level in the Blue Ridge Mountains. A member of the Historic Hotels of America, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Register of Historic Places, the High Hampton is situated in a peaceful valley featuring a 35-acre lake and sandy beach and a hiking trail with history markers. There's no TV or phones in the main inn (cottages have both), but plenty to do. In addition to a children's program, in warm months there is fishing, boating, golf, tennis, bocce ball, horseshoes and badminton. Oh—and two miniature donkeys, Fred and Ed, in a pasture next to fairway No. 9.

It's the end of the season when my friend Laura and I visit, so our activities largely consist of rocking on the front porch, walking, board games, reading and dining. It's a companionable setting: pumpkins decorate the inn, leaves crunch under foot, sunset comes early, times passes slowly, far more slowly than in Atlanta. The friendly, hard-working staff hails from 15 different countries and participates in a school/work co-op program with the local community college. Three times a day they put out generous buffets in the dining room. I'm not sure where they find such ripe, red tomatoes in November, but I pile them onto my plate, along with other comfort foods like fried chicken, baked trout, squash, New York strip and apple fritters.

"Social season" is summer, but many couples and families have gotten to know each other over the years and seek each other out, stopping to greet each other and longtime servers tableside. Every guest is assigned a table for the duration of her stay and a table tent lists her last name and hometown. Two 60-something gals from Chattanooga send their husbands ahead to the tavern and come over to introduce themselves. There's such a sense of hospitality from the other guests and the staff that we feel like members of an extended family.

After dinner the first night, Laura and I each buy a \$1 bingo card. A fire is roaring in the main room. The plaid couches are filled with kids and adults all exclaiming, "Oh, yes," as Denny, the versatile waiter/bellboy/bingo master calls the lucky numbers. I consider it a stroke of great luck that both Laura and I each win a pot, \$13 and \$17, respectively. It's a wholesome evening, evoking childhood me memories of sleep-away camp. We realize we're part of a long-standing tradition, as surely as the chestnut timbers, as we climb the stairs to our room with its screen door, comfy beds, pine paneling and twig



High Hampton Inn & Country Club is nestled in a valley beside a 35-acre lake. CREDIT: Courtesy of High Hampton Inn & Country Club

If You Go

Cashiers is located 150 miles north of Atlanta, about a two-hour drive.

High Hampton Inn & Country Club is open from late April through mid-November, with a limited number of cottages open year round. For packages and reservations, log onto www.highhamptoninn.com, or call 1-800-334-2551.

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furniture. In deference to the rhythm of the place, we put lights out early. The following morning, in the pre-dawn hours, the smell of morning coffee wafts through an open window—that's the "wake-up" call. Shortly thereafter, I'm off to the health club and spa for an hour-long therapeutic massage. My back is sore from cleaning the basement, but the therapist, Troy (who happens to be blind) quickly finds the tension knots and releases them with practiced hands.

We settle into the three-room Schoolhouse Cabin, which really was a schoolhouse for our final night, where Laura and I practice our fire-building skills, feeding logs to the crackling flames throughout the afternoon. Nestled in the woods, it's quiet, quieter than in the main lodge and we relish the silence. At the sun slips from the sky we throw on fleeces and jeans and head to the Rock Mountain Tavern, in the lodge's lower level. Amidst the charm of mismatched leather sofas and green walls, we sip bourbon and martinis before heading upstairs for an early dinner. We leave the property only once during our weekend visit, heading to Highlands to the Instant Theatre Company. Seated in director's chairs in a modest room with surprisingly good acoustics, we enjoy the music of guitarist and songwriter Jack Williams. Driving the mountain-darkened roads back to the High Hampton, we sigh with pleasure, words unnecessary. I curl up on the sofa, snuggling under a chenille bedspread; Laura stretches out in a chair. Warmed by the fire, the comfort of our friendship and the ease of this place, we declare our intention to visit every season. **SP**

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