

The Swag

By Suzanne Wright

It was a cold, clear night. There was a full moon. We'd just finished a four-course meal (and that's if you don't count the cocktail hour nibbles). Naturalist Liz Domingue announced a moonlight hike in 45 minutes. I turned to my companion Eddy and it was clear that the lure of our cozy room won out. We snuggled into soft terry robes and poured tumblers of bourbon. We built a fire. As it cracked and popped and hissed, we gazed at the luminous moon through a skylight in the darkened room.

We are at The Swag, a 16-room retreat 13 miles north of Waynesville, N.C. A swag means a dip between two mountain peaks; it also means a slice of heaven for its guests. Nestled at the end of a winding two and a half mile drive that climbs to 5,000 feet, The Swag has a private entrance to Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Open since 1982, The Swag is open from mid-April to mid-November. Deener Matthews is the energetic innkeeper. Her husband Dan is an Episcopal clergyman, rector of Trinity Church in Manhattan. In a photo nook in the main lodge are pictures of him with Desmond Tutu and Katie Couric, along with framed photographs of Deener as a competitive skater and their family throughout the years.

Guests gather for an hour-long conversation before dinner (we've packed our own wine and liquor; The Swag is in a dry county). Deener snaps a Polaroid of each of us. Then she rings a bell and says a nondenominational blessing before our meal. She tells us that three couples are celebrating anniversaries. Place cards indicate where we sit for dinner.

We dine communally (except the anniversary couples) and have a fine time sharing our stories. There are numerous repeat guests, like the couple from South Carolina who have been coming for 18 years. Dinner is mountain gourmet: bison ribeye one night, seared chicken another (you make your dinner selections in the afternoon). Elegant soups and salads made with Swag-grown vegetables and herbs precede the entrees. Dessert might be an apple brown betty or mango sorbet. It's a good thing the 250-acre property is rich with hiking trails, since you will need to work off the calories.

The inn features pioneer buildings (think wooden doors with latches, exposed beams, raw planking) reassembled in 1971 in the high meadowland. The oldest structure dates to 1795 and most of the logs were hand hewn from tulip popular trees. We retire to The Cabin, one of several private structures that features a large living room with a stacked stone fireplace, a wet bar, a double whirlpool bath, a fathered king size bed and a private deck. Deener gives Dan credit for the Appalachian chic touches, like a single leaf under the glycerin soap and the rag rug. I dub this "deluxe rustic" living. We've got a mini-fridge with trail mix and fruit juice and satellite radio and *The New York Times* news fax delivered to our door daily.

Within minutes of unpacking, we fall into an easy cadence. We learn this is called "Swag Therapy, a term coined to describe the restive, restorative state.

The next morning, I send Eddy off to the buffet, instructing him to return with breakfast so I don't have to leave the fire or get dressed. He returns with a huge tray that includes fresh-squeezed orange juice, bacon, an omelet, waffles and orange corn muffins. And a form that asks us what time and whether we'd prefer our lunch in a picnic basket or backpack. We make our selections; I can't resist the tomato pie.

The day is warming; we decide to take a hike. We select a walking stick and attach our round wooden nametag to it; guests take the sticks home as a souvenir of their stay. We grab soda from the old cooler and head to Gooseberry Knob to unpack our lunch. We appreciate the gazebo on Gooseberry Knob that David Robinson built of fresh-cut rhododendron and laurel branches; he built our headboard and other furniture and sometimes conducts workshops.

Deener says the place is full, yet no one is in sight; it's 1:30. We stare at the surrounding peaks (including Mount Mitchell and Cold Mountain) letting the purplish vistas enthrall us before we continue to the Natural Trail hike. The crunch of the leaves underfoot and the mountain air are bracing. Three hours or so later, we return to the inn. At the main lodge I see guests in robes—they've been to the redwood sauna. I overhear one man say, a bit guiltily, he's taken two naps and had two steam baths today. In my book, that's a great day and I give him a smile and a knowing nod.

The staff at the inn is fresh-faced and sweet, never intrusive, but helpful and pleasant. Chris lets me check email (he says they are adding access next year). He also doubles as the fire-builder. The fireplace isn't meant to confound the city dwellers; there is a mason jar filled with fire starter. But when my boyfriend, who boasted of being a former Boy Scout became vexed at the recalcitrant flames, Chris came to the rescue. We keep a fire going whenever we are in the cabin, which is most of the time. We even invite in a pure white kitty (one of the inn's pets) that promptly curls up on the ottoman and falls asleep.

It's my turn to deliver breakfast in bed. I opt for the cider-simmered oatmeal with cinnamon apples, an omelet and sausage. After dressing we head to the horseshoe pit where our rusty aims are tested (eventually, we both chalk up ringers). An elderly couple cheers us on from their chairs (a bit close for my aim, I think). Next we try our luck at croquet, with first me, then my boyfriend shouting "do-over" when shots go awry, the ball heading down a slope. Four games later it's a draw and we trek up to Gooseberry Knob for our final lunch and a last look at the magnificent mountains.

We load up our walking sticks and with a fond goodbye to the excellent scarecrow, we depart. We're believers in "Swag Therapy."

For more information or to make reservations, visit www.theswag.com or call 828-926-0430 or 800-789-7672.