

May 2014

# LakeNorman<sup>®</sup>

M A G A Z I N E

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## HIT THE WATER

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From boats to beaches, it's the season to make a splash

Local love at the new Heirloom restaurant

Cheers! Four wine bars to toast new



# Destination Unplugged

Maggie Valley's Cataloochee Guest Ranch offers a family centered retreat ideal for (re)discovering low-tech natural wonders.

by MICHAEL J. SOLENDER • photography by BILL HARBIN

Not quite three hours drive from the northern shores of Lake Norman is a family oriented destination with an implicit promise for those longing for a way to slow down and connect with their family in a traditional way that doesn't involve Facebook, Twitter, video games, or an iPad.

Cataloochee Guest Ranch sits majestically on the edge of the Great Smoky National Park welcoming all comers. Navigating the switch-backed narrow mountain road approaching the ranch is nothing short of breathtaking and for most city-folk, awe inspiring.

Upon arrival guests are greeted by some of the ranch's finest assets before they even enter the main lodge. A thousand acres of tall hardwood forest, mile-high mountain meadows, wild turkey roaming the hillside, and mile after mile of well worn hiking trails and bridal paths invite even the most internet-addicted to leave it all behind, grab a horse and explore what can be found over the next pass.

## Family first

Families are at the core of Cataloochee Guest Ranch's business. It is not uncommon for guests to come back annually for dozens of years, according to Mary Coker, general manager, who has watched the children of guests grow to adults and bring their own kids back to the ranch. "We are just that kind of place where families can spend quality time with each other and enjoy simple things like board games, fishing, or just taking a hike after breakfast," said Coker.

Coker, the ranch's third generation Alexander family member to operate the ranch continuously over the past 80 years, will more than likely be amongst the first to welcome you to the ranch.

"We have worked hard over the years to honor the tradition of hospitality set forth by my grandparents, Tom and Judy Alexander, who for generations have hosted and entertained families from all over the country," said Coker. "Our family is proud of sharing our table and small corner of the world with so many families over the past several decades."

Options for unplugging or getting away from it all include horseback riding (horseback riding not available during winter season) along some of the best trails in all of Maggie Valley, hiking, fishing, birding, winter skiing/snowboarding, or just plain kicking back with the latest thriller in a cozy corner of the lodge or right front of the fire. The ranch offers a small swimming pool for the warmer summer months.



## Hemphill Bald

Whether by your own pedestrian power or with the equine help of one of the ranch's horses, make a point of getting yourself to the top of Hemphill Bald, a 5600 foot clear topped overlook with views in all directions of the majesty of 250 million year old mountain range.

If you simply must connect while at the ranch they have you covered with free access to "Ranchnet" the ranch's Wi-Fi service.

Guests have their choice of 12 individual cabins or 12 rooms/suites to choose from. Each is rustic, yet cozy, and most feature fireplaces. The cabins offer rockers on the porches with vistas of the Great Smoky Mountains and great star-gazing possibilities on clear nights.

The accommodations are all situated within a stone's throw of the main lodge where meals are hosted family style and the

enormous stone hearth burns what seems to be a never-ending fire. Hearty fare is what's on the menu and no guest ever left the ranch's table hungry.

Breakfasts are nothing short of full board. Bacon, sausage, eggs, and oatmeal or maybe French toast are plentiful with a variety with fresh fruit, biscuits, and the ranch's own homemade jellies and jams. Most weeks there are old fashioned cook-outs for dinner featuring steaks, ribs, chicken, and chops. Other nights diners may feast on mountain fare such the ranch's own prime rib, herb baked chicken, or Cornish game hens. Yeast rolls, garden vegetables, and homemade desserts are always on the menu. Keep a look-out for Miss Judy's onion casserole—always a big crowd pleaser.

There is an informal cocktail party every evening before dinner complete with local craft beers from Western North Carolina, tasty morsels from the kitchen, and the ever-raging fire in the hearth.



## Open table

Cataloochee opens its dining table to nearby mountain residents that helps lend to the homey feel of the family style dining. Diners are likely to find themselves in a spirited conversation with new found friends who are quick to share a mountain tall tale or two.

After dinner get ready for some fine mountain family-style entertainment. If you are lucky it might be the Tuckas-egge Boys pickin' and grinin' with some favorite bluegrass tunes or perhaps Miss Judy Coker, daughter of Tom and Judy Alexander, will share an in-depth history of the ranch and its development complete with period photographs and intimate personal recollections. The fire is always ready for toasting marshmallows or making s'mores.

There seems to be an inverse relationship between your blood-pressure and the elevation at Cataloochee Guest Ranch, the higher you climb the more relaxed you get. Most folks find they don't much miss their television or the Xbox while enjoying all the ranch has to offer. Your family just might have to discover that for yourselves. [www.cataloocheeranch.com](http://www.cataloocheeranch.com) **LNM**



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