



Rockin' And Relaxin' At Balsam Mountain Inn

by Jeff Corydon

Folks heading for North Carolina's mountains to ogle roadside colors this autumn—or beat Florida's heat next summer—will find Balsam Mountain Inn an ideal place to chill out.

Half a mile from the Blue Ridge Parkway entrance, it offers squeaky-clean accommodations, super-friendly service and the ultimate in laid-back rural tranquility. You'll be so busy drinking in crisp mountain air, savoring the picture-book natural setting and admiring sunsets from the old rockers on the front porch that you might never notice your room has no telephone or TV!

Awhile ago we rolled into owner-innkeeper Merrily Teasley's unique hostelry 50 miles south of Asheville and spent 48 hours memorably and 'merrily' recharging. Two decades of restoring and running other small-town inns make Teasley the right one to have discovered this offbeat mountain enclave and made it an oasis for relaxing and recapturing bygone times.



Back in 1908, the Southern Railway brought the first guests ever to vacation here at what began as the Balsam Mountain Springs Hotel. The posh hotel

on the slope of Balsam Mountain, where the Blue Ridge and Great Smoky Mountains picturesquely meet, was one of many luxury health spas being opened along that era's burgeoning railroad network. Five large springs on its property reputedly had curative powers and the clear air at 3,500 feet was heralded as supremely healthful.

Capitalizing on these attributes, the hotel went on operating sporadically until the 1980s. As new sanitary standards evolved, though, authorities banned bathing in or drinking from the springs. Without this signature attraction, the hotel lost clientele and eventually degraded to a point it was condemned and closed.

In 1989, serendipity brought it back to life as Balsam Mountain Inn, with veteran innkeeper Teasley the instigator. While on vacation from

running her small inn outside Chattanooga, she went night-hiking on Balsam Mountain and spied the abandoned hotel from afar. Illuminated by moonlight against the southernmost Appalachian ridge, it made a lasting impression...

"I saw it up on the ridge," Teasley says, "and the moon hit the front and glowed off all the windows. I was infatuated with it, and that image wouldn't go away. When I returned the following spring, I hiked up hoping to go inside, and found it was for sale.

"Next morning I met the real estate people here at 6 a.m. and said I wanted to buy it. After that, I returned to Tennessee and put the inn I already operated up for sale."

Teasley followed Federal guidelines in restoring her dilapidated prize to qualify it as a National Historic Landmark. To retain the early-1900s look, she kept the original poplar bead-board walls in guest rooms and had the badly worn hardwood pine flooring refinished. She repainted all 50

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rooms in as many vivid colors and decorated them with rustic curtains, bed ruffles and wicker and twig furniture typical of the region.

Again respecting the hotel's past, she decided against putting telephones, TV or air conditioning in the rooms. Phone service and a community TV are available in the lobby, of course, and there are ceiling fans in public areas and some accommodations. The inn furnishes portable fans on request.

Large windows in guest rooms admit mountain breezes to temper the summer heat. During winter, a reconditioned furnace and century-old cast-iron radiators assure the rooms' warmth, and two huge fireplaces blaze in the lobby 24/7.

Conversational lobby furniture groupings and displays of local arts and crafts on sale along all the corridors nudge even more reticent guests into sociability. So does the cozy library, well-provisioned with Teasley's own eclectic assortment of more than 2,000 volumes, plus free coffee always bubbling.

While perusing her neatly alphabetized works on world travel and tourism, we met Connie and Jerry Allen of Conover,



NC, who said they had returned regularly since 1997.

"It's just breathtaking looking out at mountains all around," Mrs. Allen volunteered. "It makes us feel far away from Conover, though it's only 100 miles away. But we feel at home here, too. The people running the inn always remember you."

"We're happy staying right in the hotel, without going out," she went on.

continued on next page...



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"If we sit down in the library, before long we're talking with someone. We love that

seeking soft adventure, Great Smoky Mountains National Park and vicinity offer countless facilities for hiking, biking, fishing, boating, whitewater rafting and other outdoor activities—as well as a sightseeing bonanza.

For history buffs, the fascinating Native American community of Cherokee is 15 minutes up the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Biltmore Estates and Grove Park Inn, and shopping in its upscale boutiques also are popular.

The front desk arranges picnic lunches for daytripping guests, according to assistant innkeeper Forest Ray, and does a lot more to make excursions smooth sailing...

"For the average visitor, this is a wonderful area to vacation," he said, "and totally out of the box. Roads go so willy-nilly you miss many interesting things using guidebooks or brochures. Our staff knows about great stuff the maps don't show—little waterfalls, swimming holes and picnic places just off the highway, and



lots of people with varied experience come from all over, even overseas.

"Like us, many are hungry for the old days this inn brings back to life. It makes me sort of wish I'd lived back then."

While the inn itself and its interesting clientele captivated the Allens, many guests are also drawn by the area's recreational and touristic options. For those

Antiquers find quaint villages near the inn with intriguing flea markets, antique and collectible dealers, and arts and crafts shops. Visiting Asheville's famous architectural gems,




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historic local communities, like Cataloochee, all places you wouldn't find or hear of otherwise."

Teasley herself, who lives on the second floor over the restaurant, often mans the reception, and relishes briefing guests on what's cool about this inn of her dreams.

"We have a hiking trail right here on the property," she told us, beaming. "It goes from the parking lot outside the library, through the woods for about half a mile, along a stream, past the springs and back up the hill to the rear of the inn.

"You can get on a longer trail out front at a marker down by the railroad track.





It's part of a projected 720-mile Mountains-to-Sea trail that will go some day all the way from Great Smoky Mountains National Park to Nags Head on the Outer Banks."

Teasley said the inn's year-round Songwriter-in-the-Round series was a hit. Two weekends a month, country musicians from Nashville like Cowboy Jack Clement, Marv Green and Bill Edd Wheeler sign into the inn to perform in the restaurant during dinner.

"The program is self-perpetuating," explained Ray. "Those who play bring friends, and before long the friends want to come back and give performances, too. They like playing here because the crowd's into listening, not talking like in Nashville."

When the sun sets on those "songwriter" evenings, the inn starts rockin' inside as well as out on the front porch. Fact is, Balsam Mountain Inn rocks in so many ways that almost everyone finds a lot to remember fondly—and plumb forgets about the rooms not having a telephone or TV!

If You Go...

Doubles are \$110 to \$170 a night, gourmet breakfasts included. Contact **Balsam Mountain Inn at P.O. Box 40, Balsam, NC 28707, tel: (800) 224-9498, or online at www.balsaminn.com**. It's a two-day drive from Tampa, mostly on I-75. From Atlanta's beltway take I-85 northeast to Gainesville, GA and, from there, go onto US-23 toward Asheville. Once you pass Sylva, start checking the "mile-marker" signs on the right. After "marker 93", turn right off US-23 onto Cabin Flats Road, bear right up the slope and cross the railroad tracks. When you cross back over the tracks a bit farther on, the inn is just ahead up the hill.

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