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NORTH CAROLINA

3 classic mountain towns in North Carolina

A backroads tour reveals the charm, rustic and otherwise, of three tiny Appalachian Mountain towns. This is what down-home really means.

By Kelly Gray, Special to The Los Angeles Times
March 6, 2008



Gallery: Tobacco Road Golf Club, North Carolina
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Dillsboro, N.C.

These days, helicopters can deposit travelers at places that off-terrain vehicles fear to tread. After viewing killer wildlife on an African safari, you can celebrate with caviar and Champagne in a preassembled tent suite. Close your eyes, point to nearly any place on a map, and you'll find the latest and greatest anti-whatever-ails-you spa package. But for a destination that's down-home and authentic, head to western North Carolina.

Locals say the small towns of the Appalachian Mountains are some of the Old North State's best-kept secrets. Here, it's all about simpler times. A hard day's work ends with time in a front porch rocking chair. Neighbors are like family and strangers are like long lost friends. Old-timers still tell ghost stories to enraptured children sitting around crackling fires.

Not one sightseeing minute will be wasted, even in the driving, thanks to breathtaking views along the Blue Ridge Parkway and the small roads that vein these valleys and mountains. Blink, and you'll miss the unspoiled action of small burgs like Hot Springs, Waynesville and Dillsboro.

DILLSBORO

This walking town — just two blocks long — is best enjoyed by daylight. As Herb Nolan, the town's lone employee, says: "They roll the sidewalks up at 8 p.m."

Sleepy town though it may be, Dillsboro is worth a visit, because among its 235 residents are artists and craftsmen, potters, glassblowers, silversmiths and leather workers. Visitors are encouraged to tour the studios, meet the artisans and watch them work.

At Riverwood Pottery, the husband-and-wife team of Brant and Karen Barnes throw pots, oil lamps, mugs and guitar slides. Then there's the stained-glass studio of Riverwood Menagerie, KMR Handweaving, Treehouse Pottery and M.J. Jewelry.

The town also is the departure point for the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad train. On the scenic 53-mile ride, which crosses 25 bridges, you'll also see what's left of an engine that figured in the train-wreck scene in 1993's "The Fugitive," which was filmed here.

Before leaving Dillsboro, barbecue lovers should stop in for ribs at Dillsboro Smokehouse. It may seem an odd place for celebrity sightings, but the walls are plastered with letters from famous folks such as Tommy Lee Jones and Harrison Ford. Barbecue is a noun in North Carolina, and it's almost a crime to visit the state without trying it.

HOT SPRINGS

You can ask the townsfolk what keeps people coming back to Hot Springs, a town at the junction of the French Broad River and the Appalachian Trail, but don't expect a concrete answer.

"There is something about Hot Springs that can't be explained, but people visit one time and feel compelled to come back," said Heath Anthony White of Huck Finn Rafting Adventures.

Perhaps it's because a river runs through it. Or perhaps it's because the town is home to natural hot springs that are thought to contain healing properties. Native Americans discovered the hot springs, and in the early 1800s a resort was created. People flocked to "take the waters" for everything that ailed them.

Visitors still laze in the waters, but Hot Springs is also a haven for outdoor enthusiasts. The Appalachian Trail — the 2,175-mile footpath that runs from Georgia to Maine — makes a stop here, and the town is surrounded by Pisgah National Forest's half-million acres. Just try to check your BlackBerry while headed over a Class III rapid or as you hurtle yourself off Cody's Cliff into the cool mountain waters. For the less adventurous, there are easy, unguided float trips.

Don't miss the Bridge Street Cafe & Inn, where local musicians play regularly.

Perhaps the best testament to the lure of this tiny mountain town is one group of unusual visitors. Early in the last century, the federal government interned captured German merchant sailors in the area. Postwar, many returned to vacation at Hot Springs.

WAYNESVILLE

Downtown is a bustling combination of mountain charm and sophistication. On one street, you'll find handmade crafts; around the corner, a bottle of 2000 Chateau Petrus for the bargain price of \$3,800.

Stop in at the Wall Street Book Exchange, on Wall Street, naturally. On shelves full of old hard-bound books, it's

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possible to find a mint-condition classic like "Gulliver's Travels" or "Madame Curie" for \$3.

A block's walk will land you in Bob and Kathy Lang's Home Tech Kitchen Shop, where you can stock up on picnic accessories.

Pick up a fresh turkey sandwich with cranberry chutney from Patio Bistro & Coffee Shop and a bottle of wine from Classic Wine Seller. Then drive on Blue Ridge Parkway until an idyllic lunch spot reveals itself.