

## Wild wild east

PRISTINE MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS. SPECTACULAR PRIVATE RIDGE-TOP HOMES. DECK-SIDE JACUZZIS OUT UNDER THE STARS. MORE THAN 100 MILES OF WORLD-CLASS HORSE RIDING TRAILS. UNPLUG, SADDLE UP AND DISCOVER WHAT NORTH CAROLINA HAS TO SAY ABOUT LUXURY



**Butch** Cassidy could retire at Leatherwood Mountains. Draped in virgin forests and twirling mists, the Blue Ridge Mountains' wrinkled shoulders rise and fall over each other into a watercolour horizon. Deer and foxes hopscotch through luxuriant forests and hawks wheel and turn lazily high above the mountains and valleys. Handcrafted homes and rustic log cabins are tucked away on saddles and crests, capitalising on some of the best views in America. Strains of bluegrass music sing through the fresh mountain air. Leatherwood breathes horses and history; serenity and adventure; luxury and isolation. Like a movie waiting to happen.

Hidden away some two hours from Charlotte in the American state of North Carolina, Leatherwood Mountains is the perfect stage for cowboy fantasies. Part pristine wilderness, luxury holiday destination, real estate development and equine establishment, this 2,300-acre mountain tract has been lovingly designed to offer guests the chance to stay for as long as they please – be that a few days, a few weeks or even forever. Visitors come from all over to drink up the unparalleled

Blue Ridge Mountain views offered from just about every property, to take their horses out on miles of woodland mountain trails, to enjoy the fresh air, to spend quality time with their families, or even to get married. The French might have invented *joie de vivre*, but Leatherwood has taken it one step further, creating one of those rare places that never truly leaves you.

On arrival, I am introduced to the Leatherwood Mountains Welcome Centre, a historic cabin that dates back to 1902 and is

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said to be haunted by the ghost of the farmer that first lived there, and I tour the onsite barn, which is full of bright-eyed, glossy-coated horses. My host, Wesley Whitson, drives me

up the steep curls of Elk Ridge Road towards Mountain Gait, which will be my home for the next few days. Wes, Leatherwood's rentals manager, is the son of Phil Whitson, the manager of home and land sales. His brother Trevor also works in sales. Leatherwood is very much a family business.

As we drive, Wes points to high wooden roofs and log homes hidden in the trees and perched on distant ridges. There is no central hotel at the development – it could never offer the privacy, peace and comfort owned by these gracious mountain homes. "Leatherwood was inspired by the equestrian lifestyle," Wes explains. "Fifty percent of our guests are horse people, who bring their horses to ride our trails or rent some of ours. The other 50 percent are stressed-out folk who fall in love with the serenity and mountains. It's the kind of place they can truly unwind."

Mountain Gait is a striking three-bedroom, two-and-a-half storey peaked-roof home framed by glorious wraparound decks and finished with luxury furnishings. One entire side seems to be made from glass, delivering views of the rippled blue horizon everywhere in the house. The gourmet kitchen is stocked with cutlery and crockery, bagels and fruit, turkey and cheeses. There is a spa in the master bathroom and an outdoor jacuzzi stands at the end of the lower deck. In-house massages can be arranged and the team is on hand to arrange guided trail rides, fishing or canoeing trips. "This is an upper-middle class home," Wes explains, leaving me to settle in. "We have houses here worth up to US\$1.4 million with acreage, pastures and barns for horses."



Relaxing on its irresistible verandah, I conjure up the most fabulous New York city break I can imagine, and look to the horizon and am happy to find the opposite. Leatherwood offers a rare kind of unplugged luxury that comes from sitting in a steaming jacuzzi at night, gazing at the stars and listening to the sounds of the forest. Deadlines, meetings and conference calls, while absolutely possible, seem light years away.

Meet Abbie Hanchley, Leatherwood Mountains' welcoming director of marketing, in the barn the next morning. She hands me the reins of a friendly grey quarter horse called Ringo. Abbie, Phil Whitson and his business partner Phil Rash are introducing me to Leatherwood's world-class trails. Phil rides a fine-looking chestnut Tennessee walking horse he calls Baby Train. "Gaited" horses like Baby Train are common in these parts, cherished for their velvety "pace" that makes long pleasure rides effortless. "These horses first became popular with the old plantation owners, who were in the saddle all day," Phil explains as Baby Train clips off down the central valley known as the Meadow. "They are the only horses I ride." The other breed accommodated in Leatherwood's barns, American quarter horses, are popular for recreation riding for their intelligence, sure-footedness and perfect manners.

From the Meadow, Abbie turns into a dappled corridor of oak trees and poplars, hemlocks and rhododendrons, mountain laurel and pines. Light filters down from above, plating leaves in gold as the horses' muscles ripple and flow beneath their Western saddles in an easy rhythm. A deer and her faun vault through the undergrowth. From the skyline ridges to the slender gullies, Leatherwood's famous trails have become beloved by America's competitive endurance riders. For the past 11 years, the property has hosted the Leatherwood Mountain Extreme Challenge, a 25 and 50 mile pro endurance race, which populates the trails with some of America's finest Arabian endurance horses. Reflecting its increasing prominence in the equine world, Leatherwood has also become the headquarters for *The Best of America By Horseback*, a television series broadcast nationally and internationally.



Facing page, top to bottom: a typical North Carolina mountain vista; riders out on the trails at Leatherwood Mountains Above: Phil Whitson's Tennessee walking horse, Baby Train

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As the riders talk excitedly about their future plans, the trail winds beside a bubbling stream twisting through the cleft of a dappled glen before striking up a ridge to a fabulous panorama. As we let the horses rest, Abbie says they have submitted a bid to host the American Endurance Riders National Championship in 2011. "We are already considered one of the most prestigious endurance rides in the US," she says. "Some of the most renowned

endurance riders in the US have ridden in our race, and have said 'this is the place to truly challenge yourself.'" The team knows that Leatherwood's increasing presence on the national horse circuit will increase awareness of the resort as a unique mountain getaway. The two feed off each other.

"Rainbow trout or bass. Fishing is strategic; it's a hunt," Wes says the following morning as we pull away from Leatherwood. "You can't fish in one place for too long or the fish will cotton on." Along the way to one of the Blue Ridge Mountains' renowned fishing streams, small rural homesteads perch on the road sides, many surrounded by meticulously cared-for gardens of flowers, tomatoes, carrots and corn. Narrow church spires rise protectively over tiny communities, and drivers of oncoming vehicles – usually giant Dodge



trucks – wave as we pass. To foreign visitors more familiar with New York and Los Angeles, North Carolina offers an intimate encounter with old school America. Children ride to school in yellow school buses. Women teach their daughters to make grandma’s pecan pie. Families say grace before dinner. The Southern twang is unmistakable. Bluegrass and folk music are so ingrained in the local culture that a talented fiddle player may become a local icon.

After casting practice with gleaming fishing rods, Wes leads us down to the river. Fishing our way up the isolated mountain stream in fresh, thigh-deep water, the magic of the sport becomes evident. It requires just enough concentration and coordination that other thoughts – work and city life – are forgotten. “Aim for the patches of still water,” Wes advises, “near rocks and under banks.” After a few mishaps with overhanging trees, I find an easy tempo. After a few minutes, I feel a tug on the end of the line, and reel in a yellow small-mouthed bass. Wes is impressed; I am surprised. As we make our way back down the stream, we encounter a string of freshly-shucked corn cobs bobbing down the river.

The following afternoon, Abbie and Trevor drive up to Mountain Gait for sundowners. A humming bird darts around the deck and cotton mists hurry through the valleys. A storm is on its way. As we watch the weather, Abbie

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points to the house’s handmade furniture and lush bedspreads and says that there is a concerted local movement to preserve the old crafts such as woodworking and quilting as well as the old legends and folk songs. Trevor offers to tell me one of the local legends. “This area was the location of America’s first publicised crime of passion,” he begins. “In the 1840s, one of the local heroes was a fiddle player named Tom Dula. He was engaged to a girl called Ann Melton when he was drafted to the army. When he came back, he fell in love with a younger woman named Laurie Foster, but still harboured feelings for his first fiancé.”

The story goes that one day Laurie went missing and was found murdered. Tom confessed and ended up hanging for Laurie’s murder, but the evidence was inconclusive. Today, the question remains, did Tom or Anne Melton do it? “It’s generally thought that Anne did it,” he concludes, “but we’ll never know. And all that happened just two miles down the road.” Later, The Kingston Trio immortalised the fable in their song *Tom Dooley*. The storm cracks out across the valley as they leave.

As the next day breaks, Abbie offers to take me on a classic American road trip. With an entry just 15 miles from Leatherwood Mountains, the Blue Ridge Parkway runs from Asheville in North Carolina into Virginia, winding through some of the East Coast’s most spectacular mountain landscapes, knitting together the pieces of North Carolina’s culture and history.

Up here, mountain values are preserved and mountain vistas are inspirational. On either side of the parkway, the well-moneyed towns of Boone, Blowing Rock and Winston Salem seduce Blue Ridge visitors with cosy B&Bs, antique shops, farmers’ produce and Southern-twist restaurants. Their proximity to the parkway opens up attractions such as Grandfather Mountain and the charming historic Mast General Store in Valle Crucis, which is said to sell everything from the cradle to the casket. From a clutter of cast iron cookware, local preserves, gifts and Burt’s Beeswax products, I select some bluegrass music.

But the real magic is found in the saddles and ridges that rear above the parkway itself. A few miles past the Linville Viaduct, an engineering masterpiece, we park beside a modest sign that reads Rough Ridge. The locals say it’s special. The canopies are lower in this high altitude area, and the trees grow right to the side of the path, like a secret green corridor. A well-kept boardwalk leads out onto an exposed plateau offering the first taste of the sweeping mountain views for which Rough Ridge is famous for. As I stand at the highest point and gaze into the hypnotic blue mountains layering into a distant horizon, I can imagine the Sundance Kid riding into the sunset. That is something money just can’t buy. ✚

WORDS Kathryn Clark