



Waterfront ESCAPES

Lake Toxaway and The Greystone Inn

WITH A MYSTIQUE THAT HAS ENDURED MORE THAN A CENTURY, LAKE TOXAWAY SPARKLES IN THE CRISP MOUNTAIN AIR, CROWNED BY THE TIMELESS ALLURE OF A GRACIOUS SOUTHERN HOTEL.

BY Marie Baxley | PHOTOGRAPHY BY John O'Hagan

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The Greystone Inn sits on a panoramic peninsula of North Carolina's Lake Toxaway with mountain vistas and multiple spots to relax and get away from the daily grind. Boating is a major pastime on the private lake, from kayaking to canoeing. Open to the public for touring, the hotel has two handcrafted mahogany boats and the *Lightning Bug*, a three-person vessel with a quiet electric motor. Larger groups of visitors delight in leisurely sunset cruises on the *Miss Lucy* to take in the scenery and glimpse at some of the luxurious private homes on the waterway. *Miss Lucy* is named after the late Lucy Armstrong, a longtime resident whose 1915 mansion is home to The Greystone.



If you build it, they will come—twice, in the case of North Carolina's largest private lake. On Lake Toxaway, you'll discover pristine Blue Ridge beauty, enveloped in natural forests and waterfalls, and a storied inn that will bring you back to the days when wealthy Gilded Age families with private railcars rolled in.

The spectacular fall show of changing leaves draws visitors in autumn, but there is plenty to do on the lake year-round, whether boating, fishing, hiking, or paddleboarding. "Lake Toxaway is a magical place," says Geoff Ellis, who owns and operates The Greystone Inn with his wife, Shannon.

With 30 rooms, most offering lake views, The Greystone is the only public

hotel on Toxaway's freshwater shores. You'll find a long list of amenities, from golf and tennis to special tours of the nearby Southern Highlands Reserve, a high-elevation garden that features rarities like an azalea boasting two different color blossoms on the same bush. Halfway between the popular resort towns of Cashiers and Brevard, venturing out for a little antiques or local dining is easy.

But part of the appeal of a mountain lake resort is to retreat from the bustle of everyday life and enjoy the blue—skies, waters, and Appalachian ridges. "We have fireplaces, a wonderful restaurant, a great spa, so you can have an intimate experience just within our property," says Geoff. "You can hike, do water sports, anything that you want to do, or you can

sit and relax and do nothing at all. That's what we love about it."

Mahogany tour boats, much in the style of early 1900s vessels, putter across the water and allow guests to soak in the views. Transylvania County, where Lake Toxaway is located, owns the moniker "Land of Waterfalls" with more than 250 for exploring. You'll find trails for all levels of expertise in the hiker's paradise of the surrounding Pisgah National Forest, Gorges State Park, DuPont State Recreational Forest, and Nantahala National Forest.

Clark Lovelace, whose family owned and operated The Greystone for nearly four decades, says Lake Toxaway got its start in the late 1800s when families came to enjoy a cooler climate, outdoor fun, and good food. Not much has





Located between Brevard and Cashiers, Lake Toxaway is in the heart of northern Transylvania County's "Land of Waterfalls," including small roadside cascades and Whitewater Falls, which has the highest drop east of the Rockies. The area is appealing for nature lovers—hikers, bikers, equestrians, and rock climbers—who can explore the surrounding parks and forests. Less than 5 miles from The Greystone, you'll find Panthertown Valley with trails suited for all ages.



changed in that regard. "It's a getaway in the true sense of the word. It's a climate that's not like what they're leaving behind in the city. It's stepping into a little bit of the past in a way you wouldn't normally do," says Clark, now executive director of the Transylvania County Tourism Development Authority.

The main structure of The Greystone was built in 1915 as a second home for a prominent Georgia couple, Lucy and George Armstrong of Savannah. Known back then as Hillmont, it's one of only four early 20th-century shoreside dwellings to survive a devastating 1916 dam break and massive flood that left the lake bed a mucky mess.

The dam on the Toxaway River had been completed in 1903, spawning a body of water with 14 miles of shoreline, as part of a development that attracted the families of wealthy industrialists with names like Ford, Firestone, Edison, and Reynolds. Plots of land had been sold for vacation homes, and a large, successful inn served patrons



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Under the guidance of executive chef Tomas Prado, The Restaurant at The Greystone is a go-to spot for guests and locals alike. When owners Shannon and Geoff Ellis renovated the lodging, they paid particular attention to the bar and restaurant, hoping to attract area residents and welcome the community. Since the inn reopened four years ago, Nory LeBrun of the Historic Toxaway Foundation says folks do gather there, savoring the menu of Southern dishes with a modern twist.



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until its business dried up when the lake did—never reopening and being sold for scrap in 1947. The lake basin gave way to a forest until 1960, when a group of investors led by Reg Heinitsh Sr. of Columbia, South Carolina, built another dam and created a new waterway at the same 3,000-foot elevation.

In 1985, Clark's parents, Boo Boo and Tim Lovelace, agreed to open Hillmont as a small inn with the Heinitsh family as silent partners, and The Greystone Inn was born.

Tim, who at the time was a semiretired investment banker, and Boo Boo are credited with instilling the friendly ambience and fashioning The Greystone into a four-star resort. "Even though they had never done this before, my parents were always the consummate host and hostess," says Clark, who worked there as a youth and ran it for nearly a decade before the family sold the enterprise to a company that opened it for only one season. Serendipitously, the Ellises stayed at The Greystone that one season and

became intrigued. It remained shuttered for several years until the Ellises bought it, renovated, and reopened in May 2018.

The pair was touched by the passion and enthusiasm of the community, especially when they first viewed the property to consider buying it. "The people in the community heard that we were coming, and, on their own, these people, who have housekeepers and expensive homes, were at The Greystone mowing the lawn, planting flowers, cleaning up, putting up candles so that it looked nice for us," says Shannon. "The community has done nothing but go above and beyond to be helpful to us."

The Ellises, who own another historic lodging in South Carolina, The Willcox, also were enamored with the lore of The Greystone, especially the accomplished woman who had a hand in designing the home, Lucy Armstrong. "Lucy had traveled all over the world to wonderful places, but she always felt that Lake Toxaway was the most

beautiful place on earth," says Geoff, noting that she modeled her residence after a Swiss chalet.

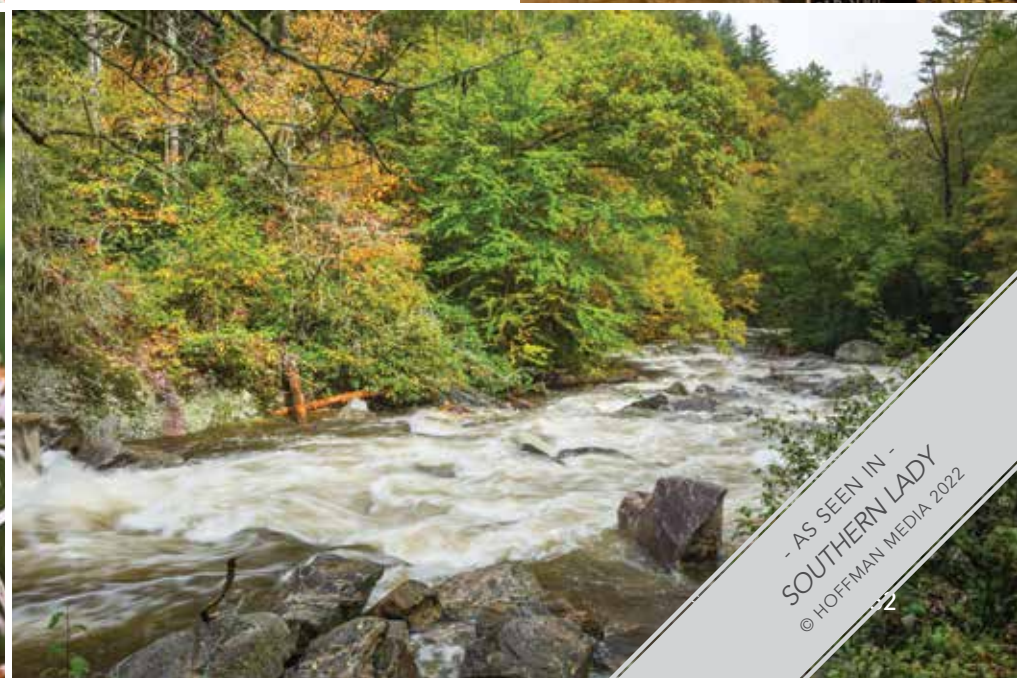
Using the original architectural plans to guide their renovations, Shannon and Geoff reopened spaces that had been closed off. On their first visit after completing the sale, they removed a bulky air conditioner that had been sealed into a bedroom window. "It was screwed in and taped, and as we pulled it off, you could almost feel the house exhale and finally start breathing again," says Geoff.

According to Clark, Shannon wrote Boo Boo a note thanking her and her late husband for cultivating The Greystone and promised to be a good steward. Shannon says she believes Lake Toxaway is unique. "For whatever reason, there's something in the air and something in the culture of the place—you relax a little," she says. "You live a little differently; you slow down."

For information, visit greystoneinn.com. See page 53 for our story on the Southern Highlands Reserve.



You'll quickly work up an appetite while enjoying outdoor activities at Lake Toxaway, and friendly year-rounders will welcome you at restaurants and markets serving satisfying fare. (Clockwise from top left) Relish a cinnamon roll and a cup of java in one of the rocking chairs on the porch at the Historic Toxaway Café. Visit the Historic Toxaway Market for picnic libations and the Mountain Cafe for ice cream and treats. The fresh air and gorgeous scenery will keep you mesmerized as you explore the Panthertown Valley wilderness and Gorges State Park. Indulge in breakfast or lunch at nearby Panthertown Cafe, where owner Sean Ruddy prepares locally sourced food from a menu that includes favorites like homemade soup, Angus beef burgers, and fried chicken.





Slice of Heaven

A stunning natural forest preserve high on Toxaway Mountain will make your spirits soar.

BY Marie Baxley
PHOTOGRAPHY BY John O'Hagan

Southern Highlands Reserve, a high-elevation, native-plant garden lush with colorful azaleas, a spectacular labyrinth, and a towering tree that supports endangered flying squirrels, not only visually delights, but also touches your soul—just as intended.

“The first thing we want people to experience when they come to the Southern Highlands Reserve is an almost spiritual connection back to nature,” says Kelly Holdbrooks, executive director of the privately owned garden, open by reservation only April through October.

The trails, a seven-ring Wildflower Labyrinth, and other rooms of the

20-acre plot designed by renowned landscape architect W. Gary Smith are masterfully created to include an element of surprise. “We’ve got pathways to purposely hide that big reveal from you so you can have that experience,” says Kelly.

With only the sounds of nature—rustling leaves, chirping birds, whirring insects—you walk through alcoves and archways into magnificent areas that leave you wondering what may be around the next corner. The Maple Entrance leads to the main part of the garden, the Woodland Glade, with more treasures in store—the Azalea Walk, the Vaseyi Pond (named after a high-elevation azalea species), and the

Viewsite with its wide-open Blue Ridge Mountain vista.

The garden and the larger 120-acre preserve are also an integral part of conservation, research, and nurturing of horticultural species native to the Southern Appalachians, like *Picea rubens*, commonly known as the red spruce. Once readily found along the eastern seaboard, the tree is part of the spruce-fir forest which is now considered the second most endangered ecosystem in the United States. The staff works with government agencies to collect red spruce seeds from public lands and grow seedlings in the reserve’s friendly habitat until they are strong enough to return to federal and

state forests. The tree has a symbiotic relationship with the endangered Carolina northern flying squirrel.

Two native rhododendrons, vaseyi (Pinkshell Azalea) and the Gregory Bald, are widely featured. The Gregory Bald rhododendron, which peaks in June, was naturally hybridized by butterflies and bees, a so-called “swarm hybrid,” and has more than the usual genetic material. The result is vivid colors and multiple traits from several varieties. “It would be like you or me having four parents. Isn’t that wild?” says Kelly. “We have one azalea that expresses two different colors. It’s like a Dr. Seuss plant.”

The Pinkshell Azalea migrated down the spine of the Appalachian Mountains

during the last ice age. Unable to survive warmer climes, pockets of its pink, fluffy blooms survived throughout the Appalachians, including the 4,500-foot elevation of Toxaway. “We literally became an island in the sky for this species,” Kelly says.

Outdoor enthusiasts Betty and Robert Balentine of Atlanta opened their property to the public about 20 years ago to share the joy it has given their family and to help protect its natural gifts. Private docent-led tours can be arranged for larger groups, or you can sign up online for visitor days, the first Tuesday of the month.

For information, visit southernhighlandsreserve.org.