

NOTEBOOK

Biltmore staging Flower Carpet encore

ASHEVILLE, N.C. – Biltmore House will celebrate with its second annual Flower Carpet Aug. 14-30.

On the South Terrace of Biltmore, more than 100,000 live plants will be installed to create a design inspired from architectural elements found in America's largest home.

The 14,400 square foot carpet display represents months of planning and engineering.

This year's design was created by a Biltmore employee and was interpreted from stone carvings and intricate details from around the estatehouse.

The plants used for the carpet will be Scaevola Top Pot Blue, Salvia farinacea Evolution, Begonia Prelude Rose, Marigold Janie Bright Yellow, Zinnia Profusion Fire, Iresine Purple Lady and Dusty Miller New Look.

A daytime visit to Biltmore's Flower Carpet is included with the cost of regular admission. On select evenings, the estate will open for Flower Carpet Evenings – August 14, 16, 21, 22, 28 and 29.

On these special nights, the carpet will be surrounded by the glow of soft lighting, beautiful sunset views and live jazz.

For additional information on the Flower Carpet event, please call 877-BILTMORE or visit www.biltmore.com.

Lincoln's cottage wins preservation award

WASHINGTON, D.C. – President Lincoln's Cottage, a National Trust Historic Site located in Washington, D.C., received the Victorian Society in America's prestigious Preservation Award for the restoration of President Lincoln's Cottage and its surrounding grounds.

The award honors the quality of the restoration and the attention to historical detail throughout the cottage.

Charles Robertson III, vice president of the Victorian Society in America and Chair of its Preservation Committee, noted that the VSA was "impressed by the research, planning and high standards of the restoration work, which required the services of skilled architects and contractors, as well as many specialized craftsmen."

For more information about President Lincoln's Cottage or to schedule a visit, go to www.lincolncottage.org.

Aug. 15 a milestone in cave's history

LURAY, Va. – Aug. 15 marks the 131st year since three local men in search of a cave found huge chambers filled with glittering ancient stone.

In addition to the comprehensive lighting system in Luray Caverns, 1,500 candles will glow in the vast chambers, giving visitors a glimpse of the sublime sights the discoverers experienced in 1878.

Guests will see the multitude of candles reflected in Dream Lake, and hear the great Stalacpipe Organ in the Cathedral chamber and see the famous "Fried Eggs," with easy-to-use headphones for a multi-dimensional presentation which allows for tours at a personalized pace. Rangers located throughout the tour route will assist with directions, interpretation and more.

On the surface, live music transports the spirit and to cap off the day, the bells of the Luray Singing Tower lead the call to view a massive fireworks display after dark.

An additional attraction is the Car & Carriage Caravan Museum, included in the general admission. The collection features one of the oldest automobiles ever made, the 1892 Benz and a 1725 Portuguese Royal Carriage as well as a Stanley Steamer, a Cord and a Rolls Royce Shooting Brake, along with many others.

For more information, call (540) 743-6551 or visit www.luraycaverns.com.

From VARIOUS SOURCES



PHOTOS COURTESY ANN YUNGMEYER

The Swag Country Inn sits at a 5,000 feet elevation, bordering Great Smoky Mountains National Park and tucked between two knobs in a "swag" or a dip.

... at The Swag Country Inn, Waynesville, N.C.

EVENT SCHEDULE

Land Rover Adventure Inn-to-Inn Package with Biltmore Estate

This new package combines off-roading through the Blue Ridge mountains of North Carolina with luxurious hideaways, culinary feasts and one-on-one Land Rover driving instruction.

Land Rover Experience Driving School at Biltmore in Asheville, N.C., offers the off- and on-road instruction, and personal pampering is provided by the Inn on Biltmore Estate and The Swag, both recipients of the 2009 Conde Nast Traveler Gold List award.

The package is being offered through Nov. 8. Pricing starts at \$1,895 for two people and includes deluxe accommodations (one night at Biltmore, one night at The Swag) all gourmet meals, two days of driving instruction, tickets to Biltmore House and transportation to and from Asheville Regional Airport, Biltmore and The Swag.

For package reservations, call Land Rover Experience Driving School at (828) 225-1541, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (EDT) daily. For more information about the Inn on Biltmore Estate or Land Rover Experience Driving School, visit www.biltmore.com.

Aug. 9-22: Walk and Talk with Donald Davis

Donald Davis was born in a Southern Appalachian mountain world, surrounded by a family of traditional storytellers who told him gentle fairy tales, simple and silly Jack tales, scary mountain lore, ancient Welsh and Scottish folktales, and most importantly, nourishing, true-to-life stories of his own neighbors and kin.

He will take hikes, if the weather works, and talk about the uniqueness of the place and the people who have lived in these mountains through stories. You will look at nature and ecology, and with the help of Merle, his wife, perhaps even do a bit of Dutch Oven cooking, along with lots of stories.

Aug. 25-28 and Sept. 15-18: Birding and Wildflowers with Bob and Louise Collier

Dr. Bob Collier, an avid birder for more than 20 years and nature columnist for his local weekly newspaper, will offer before-breakfast birding on the lawn, and either half or full-day nature hikes that feature birds, wildflowers and other interesting facets of local natural history of the Great Smokies. Bob and Louise Collier have traveled extensively and have an outstanding series of slide presentations to share each day at 5 p.m.

WAYNESVILLE, N.C. – With the 75th anniversary celebration of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, this year marks a great time to get out and enjoy the wonders of the Smokies.

If hiking in the mountains and enjoying a quiet retreat is your style, consider celebrating your own occasion at The Swag Country Inn, near Waynesville, N.C.

The inn sits at a 5,000 feet elevation, bordering Great Smoky Mountains National Park and tucked between two knobs in a "swag" (as in a dip in a horse's back).

Navigating switchbacks up the inn's long, graveled driveway, our ears popping, we had a hint that we'd arrive on top of the world. Overlooking Cataloochee Ski Area and out toward the Blue Ridge Mountains' highest peaks, it's all about the unsurpassed views for most guests.

But the overall experience of staying at The Swag tends to clinch that top-of-the-world feeling.

Upon arrival we met owner/innkeeper Deener Matthews arranging flowers on the inn's flagstone porch, known as the "dog trot." She and her husband Dan Matthews, a retired Episcopal clergyman, built the rustic mountain house in 1971 as a family and church retreat.

When the Worlds Fair came to Knoxville in 1982, the Matthews decided to accommodate guests and built additional lodging in the same rustic mountain style.

Their intimate 15-room inn, now in its 28th year, has been called a "paradise" for those who enjoy being in the mountains and a bit of luxury in a sophisticated, yet casual setting.

Gourmet cuisine is part of the package – hearty breakfasts, sumptuous picnic lunches and four-course dinners. Three meals are included, prepared by executive chef Bryan Kimmett. New to The Swag in 2008, Kimmett previously owned a bistro in Middleburg, Va.

We first met the chef out in the garden of The Swag. Basket of greens in tow, he explained his preference for using local and seasonal ingredients, and his pleasure in finding new angles on traditional favorites – "comfort food with a twist," he calls it. "Biscuits and gravy might become lobster crème sauce over a hot smoked salmon biscuit, for instance."

Later, we found him digging in the woods, proudly displaying his find – a batch of morel mushrooms and bunches of ramps, collected for two of the evening's menu choices – crab and wild mushroom cheesecake and grilled local trout with creamed wild rice, ramp cloves and asparagus.

REDISCOVER THE OUTDOORS

Besides culinary pleasures and relaxing in a peaceful spot, the main event at The Swag is discovery in the outdoors. Well-marked hiking trails lead into the park beginning just steps from the inn's back door, and the inn makes choosing the perfect hike easy with printed maps and trail descriptions.

The Divide Trail, traveled by early settlers for 200 years and by the Cherokee for centuries before, runs behind the inn along the park boundary, marked by a 75-year-old split-rail fence.

Two outstanding short hikes are the Nature Trail on the Swag's 250-acre property and Hemphill Bald Trail, which crosses into the park to the top of the bald and descends along the edge of a steep meadow. On a clear day from the grassy bald one can see Roan Mountain, Mt. Mitchell, Cold Mountain, Balsam Knob and numerous other peaks identified on a stone marker.

The Nature Trail offers a one- or two-mile option. We took the short loop which leads to the grassy-knolled Gooseberry Knob, where Swag guests enjoy a cookout lunch on Wednesdays while taking in the grand view from well-placed Adirondack chairs.

Just down the hill is "Roger's Hideaway," one of several deck structures perched in secluded thicket for peaceful reflection or for watching a sunrise.

Along the trail, there are plaques identifying trees, plants and wildflowers. We came upon a swinging bridge and further on, a lily pond deep enough for hardy souls to take a cool dip in the spring water. The trail continues past a badminton court in the woods before returning to the inn.

FUN OPTIONS

Back at the inn, there are options of croquet, racquetball or browsing the extensive library. The library houses the inn's only television and a collection of videos produced by Dan Matthews during his years as rector of Trinity Church Wall Street in New York City.

But with mountain vistas beckoning, we opted for a soak in the outdoor whirlpool, perfectly situated for watching a dusky sky transcend the mountain peaks.

In the evenings before dinner, guests are invited to gather for hors d'oeuvres on the dog trot or inside by the fireplace.

We met many folks who return year after year – a couple who were married on the property and others who have come for 25 years.

One reason they keep coming back is The Swag offers every comfort; the Matthews and their attentive staff have thought of all the extras.

Rooms are equipped with XM radio, corkscrew (bring your own spirits, Haywood is a dry county) and pleasant surprises such as candles for the bath, a bedside book of love poems and lavender mist. Many rooms have a fireplace. The newly remodeled Family Room Cottage has a sitting room with a stone fireplace, copper soaking tub, towel warmer, two-person steam-shower and private sauna.

Open from late April to mid-November, The Swag hosts guest lecturers and special walks throughout the season highlighting the flora and fauna of the Smoky Mountains.

Although Matthews hadn't envisioned being an innkeeper, it seems that pampering guests on a mountaintop is what she loves. Admittedly she said, "It's like a seven-month long house party for us."

For information on the inn, visit www.theswag.com or call (800) 789-7672. For events related to the park's celebration check out www.nps.gov/grsm/parknews/75th-anniversary.htm.

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TRAVEL NOTES
ANN YUNGMEYER



PHOTOS COURTESY ANN YUNGMEYER

The view from Hemphill Bald, above, seems to go on forever. A rustic great room, right, is a favorite gathering spot at the Swag Inn.

