

GO TELL IT
On the Mountain

History and natural beauty at Mountaintop

BY COLIN SHEHAN



Mountaintop's dramatic par-4 first hole showcases the seasonal colors of the North Carolina highlands. Inset: The recently completed 43,000-square-foot Mountain Lodge. Above right: The crackling fireplace on the Mountain Lodge's cozy porch.

In the late 1880s, while the rest of his family built summer houses in New England and New York, George Washington Vanderbilt II chose the picturesque Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina as the site for a 175,000-square-foot chateau he named Biltmore. Over a hundred years later, the region's mild climate and natural beauty continue to attract residents and visitors alike. And just southwest of Biltmore, on more than 731 wooded acres located between the historic towns of Highlands and Cashiers, Mountaintop Golf & Lake Club offers a setting and amenities not unlike those that Vanderbilt's guests would have enjoyed at the turn of the last century.

Perched at an elevation of 4,000 feet, Mountaintop provides a substantially cooler and less humid climate than you might expect only a few hours from Atlanta. And while the club provides an appreciated respite from muggy Southern summers, it retains a strong sense of Southern heritage. The Clubhouse, for instance, features suites named in honor of Confederate generals such as Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Turner Ashby, all of whom served with early Cashiers resident General Wade Hampton and each of whom would feel at home in the structure's rustic vernacular architecture.

But for all the history contained in this southwestern corner of North Carolina, the real draw is the area's natural beauty and family-friendly atmosphere. "We accentuate the five senses," says Rob Duckett, club general manager. "The smell of crisp mountain air, the dramatic vistas of Whiteside and Yellow Mountains, the chatter of kids playing, the call of the wildlife, the taste of fresh trout and regional barbeque, and the touch of the refreshing lake water, always invigorating upon diving in." According to Discovery partner Steve Adelson, simply arriving at Mountaintop brings a sense of separation from daily life. "The minute people arrive, they get that friendly Southern welcome and they immediately relax," he says. "I call it 'the big exhale.'"

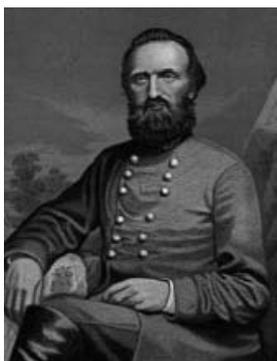
The Blue Ridge Mountains proved to be a summer playground for the large Vanderbilt family and their friends. Similarly, at Mountaintop, outdoor activities beckon. A dozen nearby camps, along with many club-organized activities, cater to children. Fly-fishing enthusiasts will appreciate a number of Blue Ribbon trout streams, while the more adventurous might prefer rock climbing or mountain biking. Families might want to hike to any one of several picturesque overlooks or waterfalls for a secluded picnic.





And an afternoon spent touring the old villages of Jackson County might include stops at antique stores and friendly cafés.

Most families inevitably gravitate to the Lake Club at Mountaintop. Set along the shore of Lake Glenville, the highest lake east



of the Mississippi, the seven-acre campus features a 5,000-square-foot pavilion crafted from Appalachian square-cut logs. The private marina has slips for the club's Jet-Skis, ski boats, sailboats, canoes and kayaks. Fed by three waterfalls, the lake's 26 miles of shoreline is dotted with secluded beaches perfect for a lazy afternoon of sunbathing.

But above all else—even the trout fishing and the Lake Club—Mountaintop's featured attraction is its golf course. Designed by Tom Fazio, who lives just 20 minutes away, the course proves why Fazio's reputation is the gold standard in course architecture. His trademark mix of playability and drama make this alpine golf as good as it gets. The holes weave and tumble across Mountaintop's scenic topography—skipping across a number of creeks and streams—while vistas of the Blue Ridge Mountains provide the backdrop. Mountain laurels, dogwoods and two types of rhododendrons bloom among the tall hemlocks, poplar and white pine. Professional instruction is available to all levels of golfers at the practice range and short-game area. (The region's golf season typically runs from May through Thanksgiving.)

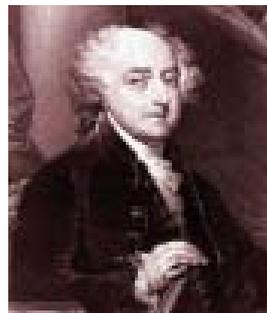
Like everything at Mountaintop, the charm is in the details, seen and unseen. "We believe we have brought a new level of service to Southern clubs," says Adelson. "It's Southern hospitality, but done so in a progressive, attentive service-oriented manner." The club's round-the-clock concierge service will organize activities, handle housecleaning, stock the refrigerator upon arrival and cater parties. A well-trained caddy program gives golfers the option to enjoy the game on foot, which for some is critical to the experience. Two comfort stations let players indulge in mid-round snacks, specially prepared each day by the chef—past

selections have included bacon-wrapped shrimp, halibut tacos and pork tenderloin sliders. Another unexpected surprise is a sunset dinner cruise with a five-course meal served on one of the club's private boats.

Whether on the course, on the lake or in the clubhouse, Chef Roy devises Mountaintop's cuisine to accentuate the region's local flare. But there is an unusual exception to Southern custom—you're never expected to dress up. "A jacket and tie are not required," says Duckett. "Everything is done with elegance, yet very casual and family friendly. Our cuisine is done accordingly: chicken and dumplings, meat loaf, chicken fried steak, fresh trout. It's comfort food, but always done with a gourmet twist."

That sense of blending luxury with nostalgia extends to Mountaintop's General Store, which stocks old-fashioned necessities like fishing poles and homemade goodies: ice cream, beef jerky, malted milk balls, assorted flavors of fudge and "mountain nuts," otherwise known as candied nuts. Two basset hounds—The General and Miss Lilly—preside over the store and serve as the community's mascots.

Labor Day may signal the end of summer, but Mountaintop maintains four-season appeal. Fall foliage—which residents celebrate at an annual Leaf Changing party—can rival that of New England. And while winters are never frigid, there is usually a snowfall around the holidays, making for a memorable Christmas stay. Spring has its own draw, as the forest grows in and the mountain laurels bloom.



Nature still beckons, just as it did when New York society first ventured into the Blue Ridge Mountains over a century ago. And, thanks to the thoughtful design of Mountaintop, grandchildren and great-grandchildren will experience the same delights a hundred years from now.

Available to Mountaintop's members and their guests, the well-appointed Clubhouse suites are suitably named after historical figures, such as Stonewall Jackson and John Adams.