

THEY say a picture paints a thousand words, but not even the most stunning photograph can truly do justice to the beautiful vistas of North Carolina, where you can't help feeling like you've died and gone to heaven.

Lush green mountains, The Great Smokies, are everywhere in this under-appreciated state, and as you drive around the long and winding mountain roads, climbing up and up looking over vast panoramas that take your breath away, it's easy to forget you're actually in one of America's southern states, where people really do say "Y'all" and eat grits (surprisingly tasty they are too). Fly-driving to NC is a must, so you can make the most of the wide open spaces and range of activities.

If you're into hiking or nature spotting, the trails winding through the temperate rainforests are many and varied, and you can join guided tours at every standard - or, if you're confident about tackling the wilderness, simply head off on your own.

Lodges and hotels in the Smoky Mountains National Park (celebrating its 75th anniversary this year) are well set up for exactly this activity, with some going the extra mile to ensure your stay is perfectly catered for.

The cosy Snowbird Mountain Lodge in Robbinsville, for example, situated atop a high peak offering unrivalled views of the glorious mountains in all their "smokiness", produces wonderful packed lunches every morning for its outdoorsy clientele - knapsacks packed full with tasty home-made goodies come as part of the fantastic package. Alternatives include the splendour of The Swag, in Waynesville, a gorgeous-looking lodge with fantastic food, forest surroundings and such bizarre (but rather calming) offerings as the resident storyteller, plucking his guitar while regaling the gathered crowd with amusing musical anecdotes.

If it's real luxury you're after, however, you need look no further than the opulent Watershed Cabins, scattered in the woods around the Bryson City area. These beautifully crafted self-catering wooden lodges come equipped with more luxuries than you'd think you'd ever require (until you try them of course!).

Our enormous, three-bedroom forest palace was elegantly furnished to the highest of standards, and my ridiculously comfortable double bed was only bettered by the fantastic hot tub on the decking outside beside an outdoor fireplace, overlooking trees, more trees and utter peace and quiet.

The grand interior housed enormous open spaces, more log fires and even a pool table for those evenings when you've just had too much fresh air - if

Smoky Mountain high

Angela Young takes in the delights of North Carolina - grits and all



■ Fresh air in the lap of luxury at Watershed Cabins, Bryson City, North Carolina

that's possible.

We headed for Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, where peaceful paths take you among some of the oldest and largest trees (they're huge!) remaining in the Appalachians.

If it's more adventure you're after, perhaps taking to the water will quench your thirst for adrenaline. Jet boat riding on Lake Fontana with Smoky Mountain Jet Boats was a real buzz, as the informative guide inter-woven terrifying 180-degree turns with casual meanders and tales of the area's history. Whitewater rafting is one of this area's key attractions, and it's easy to see why, with the Nantahala river providing amazing courses for both beginners and seasoned rafters/adventure kayakers

alike.

My preferred aquatic option, however, was gentle kayaking on Lake Calderwood, an incredibly serene activity which can be undertaken in groups - guided tours with the optional addition of hikes - or alone, and is one of the best ways to spend a sun-kissed day in this beautiful region.

Unrivalled scenery, fantastic wildlife - a water snake and two otters were my favourite sightings of the afternoon - and the option to simply pull up, jump in and take a swim in the invigorating creek whenever the fancy took, made for a truly blissful afternoon's paddling. To continue the aquatic theme I even had a "dummy" go at fly fishing (no hooks) in Waynesville, a surprisingly

■ View of the Smoky Mountains in all their glory from Snowbird Mountain Lodge
PICTURE: Angela Young



factfile

difficult and rather fun skill to master, and my vegetarian sensibilities weren't too offended by the "catch and release" policy in place. Despite the great outdoors being the Smokies' biggest draw, there are still plenty of other activities to be found, with gorgeous towns like Bryson City (don't be fooled by the name) offering unique, quaint little shops (as well as some great eateries, particularly the 50s-style ice cream café) and the not-too-far city of Asheville boasting a surprisingly Continental-style, bohemian quality, contrasting perfectly with the earthy feel of a trip in the mountains. Cultural offerings are vast, too, this being Cherokee land - it's great to immerse yourself in some fascinating Indian history, particularly at the authentic Oconaluftee Village and the well-equipped Museum of the Cherokee Indian.

- ◆ Six-night Smoky Mountains Fly-Drive – from £879 per person (two sharing), including return flights on US Airways (Gatwick – Asheville), economy car hire, two nights' full board at the Snowbird Lodge, two nights' room only in a one bedroom cabin at Watershed Cabins and two nights' room only at the Smoky Falls Lodge.
- ◆ Watershed Cabins, from \$120 to \$170 for a one-bedroom cabin to \$350 to \$490 for five beds – watershedcabins.com
- ◆ Snowbird Mountain Lodge, main lodge rooms \$240 per night, for two people and include breakfast, lunch and gourmet four-course dinner – snowbirdlodge.com
- ◆ Kayaking – Joe Rowland at PaddleFish kayaking (no previous experience required), paddlefishkayaking.com
- ◆ For further information on North Carolina visit uk.visitnc.com or call 0207 367 0937.

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