

TRAVEL & CULTURE

YOUR GUIDE TO THE SOUTH NOW

ROAD TRIP

High Country Hideout

Make tiny Blue Ridge, Georgia, your base for exploring one of the most beautiful parts of the state

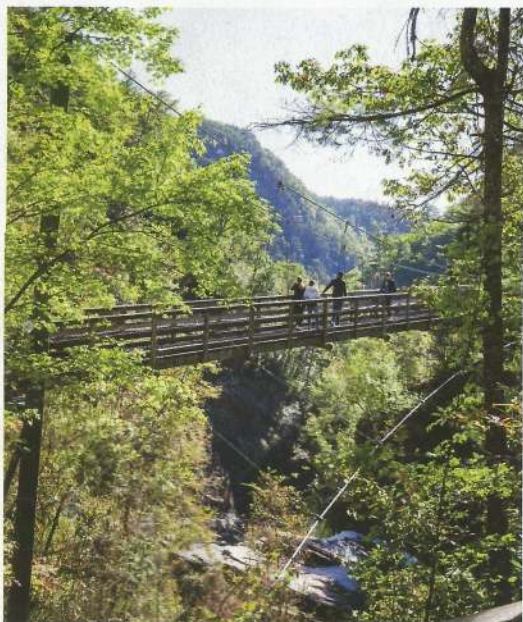
BY VALERIE FRASER LUESSE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBBIE CAPONETTO

ROOM WITH
A VIEW:
IMAGINE
HAVING YOUR
MORNING CUP
OF COFFEE
RIGHT HERE.



Side trip: The stunning Tallulah Gorge State Park is about an hour and a half from downtown Blue Ridge.



NESTLED IN NORTH Georgia's mountainous Fannin County, Blue Ridge is a hipster of a village where Appalachian roots branch out in all sorts of interesting directions. The town is part mountaineer, part hippie chick. It's authentic, adventurous, free-spirited, and inventive. And given its proximity to Atlanta and Chattanooga, Blue Ridge has become an enticing option for people who want to escape city life for the weekend or turn their commute upside down, embracing small-town mountain life and going to the city to do business.

Blue Ridge is tiny—about 1,400 residents—but it's jam-packed with local shops and restaurants lining East Main Street. It lies in a scenic region that's known for apple orchards and wineries, and it's a manageable drive

from some of Georgia's most popular small towns, including Dahlonega, Helen, and Ellijay.

The Blue Ridge Mountains, Lake Blue Ridge, and the Toccoa River (which becomes the rowdy, raft-tipping Ocoee River at the Tennessee state line) offer spectacular natural beauty that attracts hikers, anglers, and paddlers. With Blue Ridge as your home base, you can also plan jaunts to other attractions, such as Tallulah Gorge State Park (about 70

miles away) and Amicalola Falls State Park (roughly 35 miles away).

"Blue Ridge really became more of a tourist attraction about 20 years ago," says local Tabetha Whitaker, managing owner of Mountain Top Cabin Rentals. "I think we're so fortunate to have had all the things that naturally occurred here and just fell into place. There was no master plan, because nobody knew we were going to become the booming tourist town we are now."

Chill time: Book views like this one from Mountain Top Cabin Rentals in Blue Ridge.





Farm to table: Harvest on Main helped transform Blue Ridge into a popular dining destination.

Made to order: Add a fresh local egg to your Painted Hills Burger at Harvest on Main.



People from all over the world come to Blue Ridge for weeklong classes at **Oyster Fine Bamboo Fly Rods**. Oyster says that his students love the idea of heading to a small town where they can stay at the inn above the shop, walk to dinner, make something they'll keep forever, and try out their new rods in Georgia's prime trout-fishing waters. And he also likes raising his children here: "We are breaking new ground with this generation—the kids who are growing up with an iPad in their hands. Everything is so virtual and immediate. Nature needs caring, thoughtful, and good people to be actively involved in it, because as soon as you're not, you won't notice when it's going away."

Designer Lynn Kemp might not be wielding a fly rod, but her work is very much in touch with the natural beauty of Blue Ridge, where the water and mountains have inspired the soft, neutral color palettes that have made her **Canoe** lifestyle brand a success.

Kemp had a second home in Blue Ridge when she launched the jewelry-and-accessories business that grew into Canoe. Eventually, she left Atlanta and moved here full time.

"I credit the town of Blue Ridge for making it possible for me to expand the business," says the former Macy's buyer, citing the serene surroundings that inspire her; the affordable building that houses all her production; and the reliable, long-term employees who efficiently make her designs. "There are things we don't have—like taxis and a Target—but everything's just easier in a small town."

Chef Danny Mellman and his wife and business partner, writer Michelle Moran, are the sort of couple who laugh a lot and finish each other's sentences. They were living in Florida when they discovered Blue Ridge and bought a



The Canoe look: Designer Lynn Kemp takes inspiration from the mountains.

Whitaker makes a good case for renting a cabin, where you can have all the amenities to yourself. "People have the romantic idea of a house in the mountains, and ours live up to that," she says. "They all either have mountain views or are on the water—the two things that make a cabin special."

Chat with the locals, and you'll find that many of them are transplants who

came here to visit, open a business, or spend time at their second homes but then decided not to leave.

Bill Oyster is among them. He's a self-taught maker of fine bamboo fly rods—prices start at \$2,400 and go all the way up to over \$20,000, depending on the kinds of artistic embellishments requested. He has even made one for former President Jimmy Carter.



second home here. “We just kind of stumbled onto this little place that reminded us both of where we grew up (small towns in Connecticut and Pennsylvania) but without all of the snow,” Moran says. “Back then, Blue Ridge was just starting to develop a little bit of a community downtown.” Eventually, the couple decided to make Blue Ridge their permanent home and launched their flagship restaurant, **Harvest on Main**, in the heart of town.

“When we were opening Harvest 10 years ago, people thought we were absolutely nuts to do high-end, farm-to-table food in a place that had only a few restaurants,” Mellman remembers. “And Blue Ridge was dry when we first bought property here—there was no beer, wine, or liquor.”

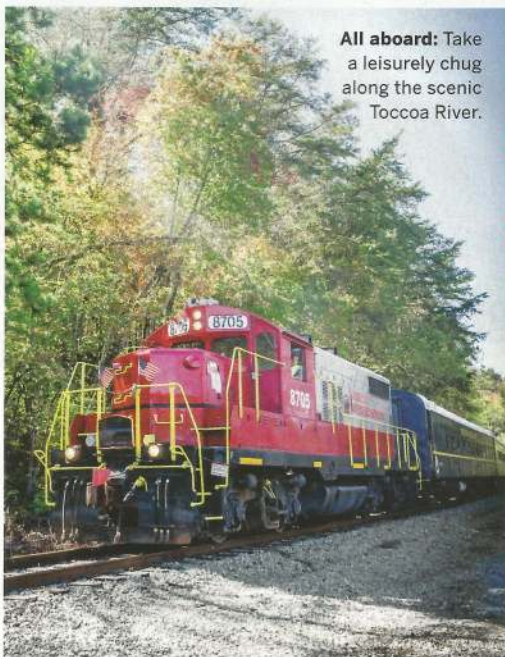
The two quickly got involved in the community. Locals have reciprocated, patronizing their restaurants as well as

recommending them to visitors. Along the way, Mellman and Moran have helped Blue Ridge become a successful food destination, opening a total of six restaurants. The couple also owns a 30-acre farm, where they grow and raise fresh ingredients.

“Sustainability extends far beyond what’s on the table,” Moran explains. “It’s really about helping people in the

community elevate themselves. We want to make sure our businesses are approachable both for customers and employees. We have told our staff that if somebody has a great idea and is willing to work hard, then we’ll invest in them and advise them. We want to provide jobs for locals and give back as much as we’ve received.”

Part of giving back means working



All aboard: Take a leisurely chug along the scenic Toccoa River.



▲ **Apple country:** Shop for everything from hard cider and baked goods to produce at Mercier Orchards in Blue Ridge.

◀ **Upscale Italian:** Find Boar Ragu and Quail on the menu at Cucina Rustica in Morganton, near Blue Ridge.



▶ **Local farms:** Fortify Kitchen & Bar gets its fresh ingredients from area growers and producers.

At your service: Enjoy a casual vibe at Fortify in Clayton.



with community members to maintain their town's authentic character as it welcomes newcomers. In the future, Mellman and Moran hope to retire to their farm and establish a mountain retreat where adults can unplug in a beautiful natural setting—a “grown-ups’ camp” which, they realize, might seem strange to some people. “We’re excited,” Moran says, “but everybody thinks we’re crazy.”

PLAN YOUR TRIP

To stay in the Blue Ridge area, book with Mountain Top Cabin Rentals. If you’re including an overnight visit to Tallulah Gorge during your vacation, try **Lake Rabun Hotel & Restaurant**.

Chef Danny Mellman and Michelle



▶ **Make it special:** Owner Jack Nolan and chef/owner Jamie Allred take pride in Fortify's warm ambience.

to the Lake Rabun area, try **Fortify Kitchen & Bar** in Clayton.

Wine lovers, be sure to check out newcomer **Bear Claw Vineyards**, located about 4 miles from downtown Blue Ridge, where you can stay in a tree house built

Moran's restaurants include **The Blue Ridge Fry Shop**, **Blue Smoke Barbecue**, **Masseria Kitchen & Bar**, and **Harvest on Main** in downtown Blue Ridge, as well as upscale **Cucina Rustica** and **La Pizzeria at Cucina Rustica** in nearby Morganton. Back in Blue Ridge, don't miss **Chester Brunnenmeyer's Bar & Grill** downtown; next door, shop at **Chester's Provisions**. If you venture

by the team from DIY Network's *The Treehouse Guys*. The more established **Crane Creek Vineyards** in Young Harris is beautiful. Sip Georgia wines at **Blue Ridge Cellars** downtown, or sample the hard cider at nearby **Mercier Orchards**. Shoppers, stop by **Canoe** and the **Blue Ridge Cotton Company** on East Main Street to find cool gifts and souvenirs from your trip. **SL**