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SPECIAL SECTIONS



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N.C. mountain town offers magnificent scenery, rafting

By Robert J. Nebel
Staff Contributor

The steep road leading into the mountains was packed with leather-clad Harley Davidson bikers, retirees in their Lincoln Town Cars, 30-somethings in their family SUVs and me in my economy-sized car. Our common mission was to climb this terrain into Maggie Valley, N.C.

I'm not certain what my fellow roadsters' agendas were, but mine was clear: I needed to get away from suburbia's rat race.

Aside from the escape factor, I also came here for budgetary reasons. High gas prices had put a dent in my travel plans. As the Budget Director in the house, I came up with the idea of a trip to the Smoky Mountains-area town, an easy, three-hour drive.

My wife and daughter were skeptical at first. After some convincing, both admitted that they are fans of places like Maggie Valley, with magnificent scenery, great restaurants, unlimited shopping and a wide selection of lodging options.

Golf club lodging

One of the places that stands out among the pack of hotels and motels in the area is the Maggie Valley Club, a picturesque golfing community that features luxurious, affordable places to stay. A staple to this area for more than 40 years, the Maggie Valley Club added spacious condominiums about five years ago.

Cooking at these one- and two-bedroom condos is a snap, as they come equipped with a modern stove and microwave. It's practical to shop for groceries to stock your refrigerator for the length of your stay - I wish we could have done this instead of visiting area restaurants.

Recently, the Maggie Valley Club finished renovations to its grounds and buildings. The club is reaching out to more than just golf aficionados with cozy units, an outdoor pool, a premier workout facility and an on-site restaurant. Now, families from the Southeast and beyond are coming to the area to rent property or snatching up units as second homes.

Area attractions

If the Maggie Valley Club isn't enough to keep you busy, there is a whole world outside its grounds along U.S. Highway 19, the main drag also known as Soco Road. A number of shops and restaurants line this massive boulevard. You can spend days buying tchotchkes and dining at places like Joe's Pancake House or Smackers Sports Grill.

The talk of Maggie Valley these days is the reopening of the Ghost Town in the Sky amusement park. The wild west-themed park is located atop a mountain. Maggie Valley natives are especially thrilled at the park's comeback. It closed about five years ago after 41 years of service, and the new owners reopened it in May.

When you have seen it all in Maggie Valley, visit the nearby Museum of the Cherokee Indian, located in Cherokee. The fascinating display is informative for visitors of all ages. Because my daughter Caitlin learned so much about this subject in school, she was mesmerized throughout the entire visit.

Rafting brings

family together

After our trip to Cherokee, we were looking for adventure. My wife wanted us to go on a whitewater rafting trip. We hadn't done the rafting thing in 14 years, and back then, it was without child. I have to admit, I was nervous to have our 9-year-old on the raft.

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Special Photo: Maggie Valley Club
Relax at one of Maggie Valley Club's condominiums, which feature spectacular views.

Did you know?

- A group of investors converted old tobacco and cornfields into what became the Maggie Valley Country Club. The club welcomed its first golfers in 1963.
- The Maggie Valley Club recently opened its 18,000-square-foot clubhouse, featuring stone accents, rustic timber beams and a dining room.
- The Nantahala Outdoor Center has been operating since 1972 and leads rafting trips on seven rivers.
- R.B. Coburn conceived Ghost Town in the Sky in 1960 after visiting several ghost towns throughout America.

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My fears subsided once I arrived at the Nantahala Outdoor Center to check in. I spoke with the center's personnel, who assured me that the Nantahala is a class II and III river, which is great for families.

After check-in, we quickly put our water-resistant river protection gear on over our clothes.

"You might be warm in all of this, but believe me, once you hit the 50-degree waters, you will cool off," a fellow rafter commented.

Our guide, Tommy, gave us the ins and outs of rafting, and topped his lesson off with a video and short quiz.

After we took our places on the raft, Tommy called out the instructions on how many times to paddle and in what direction. It was a thrill a minute as we went down the Nantahala. Caitlin screamed at the top of her lungs as our raft went through huge waves and hit rocks. When things would calm, Tommy told us his life story and a few corny jokes.

After the ride, we worked up an appetite and ate at a nearby diner before heading back home. I left western North Carolina with this thought: This quintessential American tourist mecca is friendly, charming and relaxing.

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