



Altitude Adjustment

For total relaxation, nothing beats a weekend in the High Country

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CHARLES AND MARY LOVE

“Is the gate open? Great! Have a safe drive up!”

This slightly cautionary greeting emerges from a call box at the entrance to a private road that ascends to one of the most beautiful places in the Great Smoky

Mountains. My husband and I are on our way to The Swag, a mountaintop inn about 40 miles west of Asheville, North Carolina.

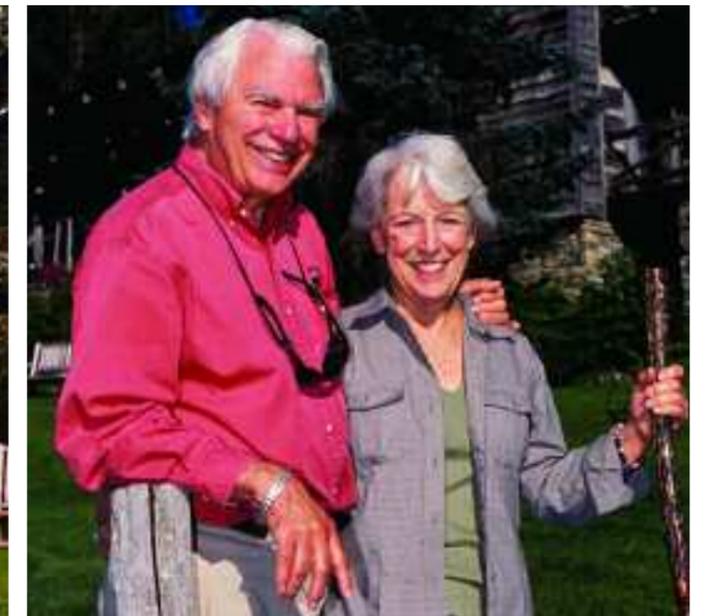
I have been here before and I know that the journey up is a pleasant ritual. The slow, two-and-a-half mile climb—and 1000-foot

elevation change—gives me time to reflect on my goals for the next two days. I have come here to relax, to reflect—to re-create myself in the true sense of the word.

The road is overarched by branches heavy with late summer foliage. Below the canopy



Photo courtesy of The Swag



are stands of rhododendron and mountain laurel. Each of the 56 curves we round brings an “attitude” adjustment—or should I call it an “altitude” adjustment?

At the top is the view I remember well: a panorama of mist-shrouded peaks stepping to the horizon. This was the view that, in 1969, inspired an Episcopal minister and his

wife, Dan and Deener Matthews, to purchase 250 acres of land at the top of a ridge near Waynesville, N.C. The couple erected their first building in 1971, using logs from a

century-old church and parsonage in Hancock County Tennessee. They planned to use the property both as a second home and as a place to host church outings. (Back then, Dan was rector of a congregation in Nashville. In 2003, he retired as rector of Trinity Church on Wall Street.)

Now, almost 30 years since they began to take in guests, the Matthews have turned The Swag (the name for a ridge that gently dips or "swags" between two mountains) into one of the most acclaimed small inns in the United States. In 2009, readers of *Condé Nast Traveler* ranked The Swag No. 2 on their Gold List of best small hotels in the United States, while National Geographic Adventure magazine described its ambience as "haute rustic." Last year, the inn, once again, made Condé Nast's Gold List.

The Swag has 15 guest rooms, spread across five log buildings that look as if they had sprouted from the mountain. The

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entrance to the main house is paneled in a warm and rare wormy chestnut. The living room, with its vaulted ceiling and stacked stone fireplace is decorated with country-style furniture and antiques. In the morning,

sunlight streams into this room, illuminating the menagerie of wildlife that lives in the rafters: a trio of beavers, a bobcat and a little bear. (Rest assured, these stuffed animals all died of natural causes, consistent with the Matthews' eco-friendly attitude.)

In the living room, I sit down for a morning chat with Dan and Deener. Dan, attractive and nearly always smiling, has the assured and assuring demeanor you'd expect of a minister. Deener, dressed for her morning workout in a slim-fitting jacket and pants, is very much the beauty she was in The Swag's early days. At the moment, she's just finished one of her favorite tasks—drawing up the seating plan for the evening meal.

So, I ask, what is it that makes The Swag so special, and that keeps so many guests coming back?

"When you get to The Swag," says Dan, "you're not in an environment that,

architecturally, reminds you of the fast and demanding life most people live." Many luxury resorts, he explains, eagerly adopt all the trappings of success. And with this "brass and glass" lifestyle come hidden stresses. Guests may feel they have to dress up for dinner, or behave a certain way in order to be accepted. "These log houses," Dan says, "bespeak a totally different world. They remind you of earthiness, of simplicity, of natural behavior..."

His analysis is spot on. When I step into my cabin, I realize it offers all the amenities I'd expect in any high-end resort—a large, modern bathroom (complete with steam shower and sauna), a comfy robe, a refrigerator stocked with drinks and snacks—even a satellite radio. But there's something more: precious details that bring back memories of an earlier, simpler time.

It might be the string latch on the front door. Or the red plaid wing chair by the

There are many ways to enjoy oneself at The Swag. Hiking is an obvious one. In the dining room, a box overflows with trail maps. Some trails are on The Swag's property; others are in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

stacked stone fireplace. Or maybe it's the fact that the books on the nightstand are ones I might actually enjoy reading ...or that the cabin's back porch, with its outdoor rain shower and rack of fluffy towels, looks into a

quiet forest.

Or, as Dan had suggested, maybe it's just the effect of all those logs...

There are many ways to enjoy oneself at The Swag. Hiking is an obvious one. In the dining room, a box overflows with descriptive trail maps. Some trails are on The Swag's property; others are in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which shares a mile-long boundary with The Swag. Apart from hiking, there's badminton, croquet, horseshoes, and racquetball. Less strenuous activities include reading or contemplating the mountain views from an Adirondack chair.

On this visit, we decide to climb to Hemphill Bald, a must-do hike. My husband and I pick up our bagged lunches at the main house, draw a roughhewn walking stick out of the bin on the porch and step through the split rail fence into the park.

Hemphill Bald is the highest point on the



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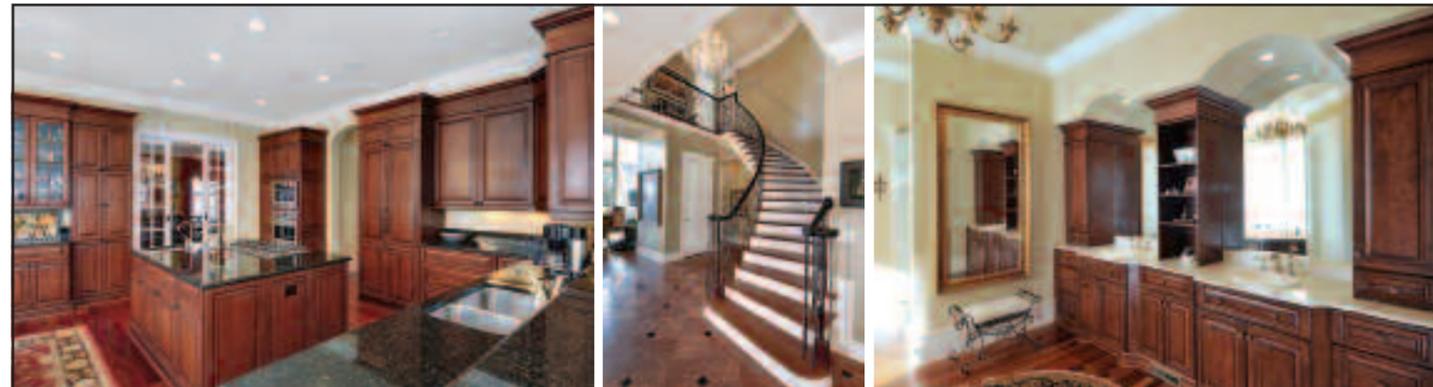
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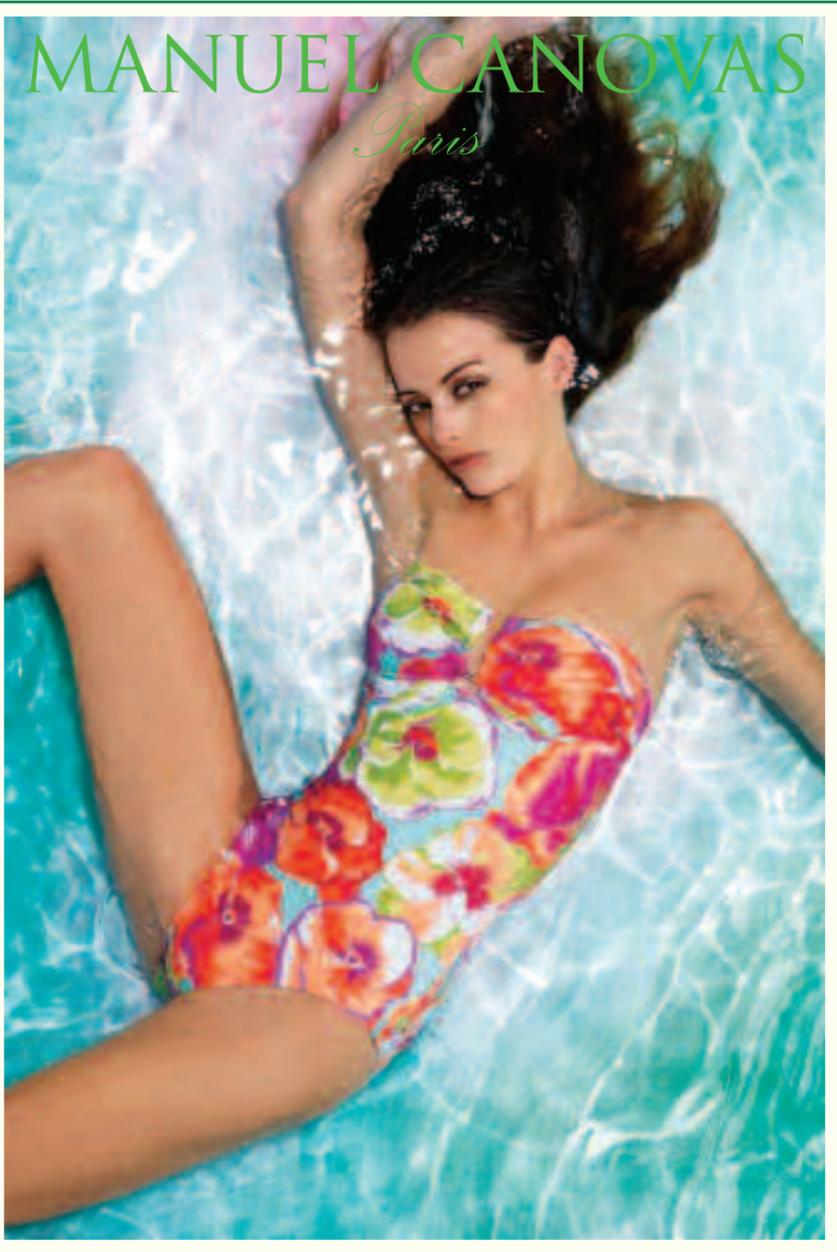
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Cataloochee Divide, which forms the Eastern boundary of the park. The moderately difficult, mile-long hike to the top rewards us with panoramic views of the Cataloochee Valley, the Balsam Mountains and The Swag itself, 550 feet below.

The hike offers another kind of attitude adjustment. The woods are alive with late-summer life: Tiger Swallowtails and Monarchs flutter over flat-topped clusters of white snakeroot blossoms. A gaggle of wild turkey rustles in the underbrush. Flies whine by my ear. As I walk up a natural staircase of hard-packed earth and exposed roots, I think to myself, "This is a lot more fun than the running machine at the gym."

At the end of the day, The Swag is all about sharing. At 6 p.m. guests return to the main house's porch to watch the light fade from the mountains. It's a time for cocktails and hor d'oeuvres—a time to link up with old friends (like Malcolm, the Matthews' cat) and make new ones. Since this is a dry county, guests have brought their own bottles, which the staff has stashed in an antique Coca Cola cooler in the breezeway. People come to The Swag for a variety of reasons. I chat with a honeymoon couple, on leave from jobs with the State Department in Cairo. They were looking for a peaceful, relaxing spot "as far away from sand as we can get." Others are here for an important anniversary or birthday. The Matthews' photo album confirms that The Swag is also a great place for small weddings and family vacations.

Soon, guests move into the house for dinner. Deener has seated guests according to their dining preferences—at small private tables or at the long communal table under the loft. We choose the large table, unable to resist talking to the Matthews, who are well traveled and have many interests.

Our four-course dinner abounds with fresh, locally sourced ingredients. We start with a couscous salad, enlivened with cucumbers, tomatoes and romaine, and seasoned with dill and lemon oil. It's

followed by a sultry split pea and red pepper soup. Incredibly, there are three choices for the entrée: tender braised lamb shank, shrimp and scallop capellini, or zucchini and spinach frittata. I choose the seafood and am not disappointed.

Of course, at The Swag, every meal is an event. Take the Wednesday lunch, a stylish picnic served on Gooseberry Knob, or the Thursday night barbeque, where guests are served entrees like Kobe beef from North Carolina's Hickory Nut Gap farm, Amish chicken from Indiana and plump catfish from Florida's Lake Okeechobee.

Over the next two days, we take more hikes. The Archbishop's Gentle Trail leads to a secluded outdoor chapel, where we settle down on little log pews to enjoy a picnic. Dessert is a delicious chocolate-and-peanut butter confection called a Swag Bar. One morning, we walk up to Gooseberry Knob to watch the sun rise over the mountains. Between our walks, we become experts in "chilling out."

The end of our stay comes all too soon. As we wind back down the mountain I start to wonder: Is there really a correlation between altitude and attitude? Between logs and relaxation? I believe so...in fact, I'd stake my last Swag Bar on it! ☘

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The Swag's 30th season opens April 25 and runs through November 5, 2011.
Visit their Web site for a schedule of hikes and programs led by well-known authors, storytellers, naturalists and photographers.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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