

Beyond Atlanta: Autumn Pleasures

Concerts, Food, Hiking in Mountain Glory

BY DOC LAWRENCE

This interlude between summer sizzle and the bleakness just ahead is my favorite time in Georgia. Few places compare with Atlanta's autumn grandeur and nature's quilt of garnet and gold. The city's cultural scene, never in recess, is revving up for the holidays. Stages at the Alliance, the Blazer, Kenny Leon's True Colors, Art Station in Stone Mountain Village, Marietta's Theatre in the Square are performing in full throttle. Live theater is a recession beater, a value like no other. It's what visitors call "The Atlanta Experience," a combination of theater, fine dining (the South's best) the Atlanta Symphony, High Museum of Art, Carlos Museum at Emory and the omnipresent live music.

Toe meets leather somewhere each weekend. The Falcons, Dawgs and Jackets are working on a trifecta, across the board winners.

Enjoy our city. Then crank up that fuel-efficient car and head north to the mountains.

High Valley

Lisa and Louis Herrera represent the best of Atlanta, two high-energy Georgia Tech alums who through hard work have done well in life. Their *way off the beaten path* resort between Dahlonega and Blairsville, appropriately named High Valley, (www.highvalleyresort.com), is indeed the highest valley in the state. It's wonderfully different and even has a landing strip. But, who needs to fly? The drive from Atlanta is easy, and the beauty of the countryside entertains.

Some mountain resorts promote golf while others just don't seem family friendly. High Valley combines expertly crafted cabins with camping, RV and basic lodging. While amenities are excellent, High Valley's advantage is the spectacular natural beauty and abundant wildlife. (I had a friendly ancient turtle the size of a tire roaming near my cabin.) Factor in the wholesomeness of the managing family living there, and you know this place is special.

The resort centerpiece is Frank's Place. It serves as a diner, bar, recreation room, bad weather community church and has a patio where I dined on the unforgettable Cuban cuisine prepared by the lovely and effervescent Lucia Perez. Her Picadillo with rice and black beans, fried yucca and plantains served family style beneath a starry sky, accompanied by end-

less pours of outstanding red and white wine created lingering precious memories.

Early the next morning, Louie and Lisa took me on a journey. There were old abandoned barns that even in solitude told a story, a nearly inaccessible waterfall. (I promised not to reveal the location. Stewards of the land, the Herrera's don't like litter.)

I shared a story about dining at the gourmet restaurant at Sterling Vineyards in Napa Valley where the chef served lamb shank accompanied by Georgia's own Logan Turnpike Grits. In no time, my hosts had me at the Logan Turnpike mill on U.S. 129, near the Appalachian Trail. I loaded up with their grits (served in many of the finest restaurants I've visited) and then proceeded to go trout fishing at nearby Lake Winfield Scott. Catch a few trout, head back to the cabin, prepare some grits and lay those trout in a hot skillet. Open up a bottle of Tiger Mountain Viognier. A North Georgia mountain feast for the ages.

Jeannie Cheek, Louis' Cajun mom, served a platter of her Lafayette, La., influenced deviled eggs I enjoyed with a glass of Jameson's Irish Whiskey ("the bar's always open," was part of her welcome), and I met husband Frank Cheek, the namesake of aforementioned Frank's Place, a retired Navy pilot who was Astronaut Alan Shepherd's squadron commander. The mixture of generations and cultures was pure Americana.

High Valley Resort is in Suches. It's home to Cherokee folklore, trails and mounds, homemade cakes and pies sold still warm in the little country store, a public school with Georgia's smallest enrollment and a special Sunday event.

No matter your religion, a must-stop is Fred Whitley's Church Without Walls, a historic congregation that meets under a WPA constructed outdoor pavilion beside Lake Winfield Scott. For a good hour, Reverend Whitley takes center stage: a combination sermon, college lecture (he's retired from Young Harris College faculty) and a high-energy performance that left me wondering if I actually saw Jack Nicholson preaching. When the weather is challenging the church meets at High Valley inside Frank's Place.

Hiking, dining, fly-fishing, rejuvenating body and soul with cool, clean air and dining on all-local food with some good wine (Georgia wines add to the experience) guarantees

a spectacular and very affordable long weekend. The Herrera's and their family are right out of a good Celestine Sibley story. I remember Louis saying farewell with a message given to him by a Jamaican friend: "Walk good in your travels."

Everything is recharged now, ready for autumn and then the holidays. Urban living is good if you are oriented to the *joie de vivre* Atlanta offers. In another season, I'll return to High Valley when I feel the need to retreat to a friendly sanctuary, even for pleasure.

An Atlanta native, Doc Lawrence stands almost alone with his knowledge of our city and all that Georgia offers for getaways, vacations and outdoor recreation.
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Church Without Walls has been a Suches, Georgia Sunday fixture since 1940. Just up the road from High Valley, the diverse congregation (all religions are welcome) meets under the pavilion along the shore of Lake Winfield Scott. Reverend Fred Whitley, a longtime faculty member at Young Harris College presides with good-natured humor and a face that reminds many of actor Jack Nicholson. Photo by Doc Lawrence