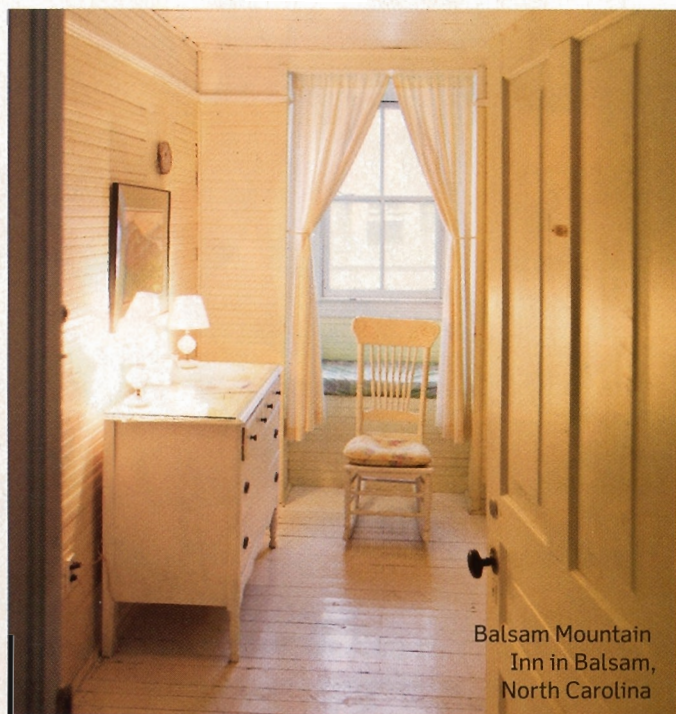


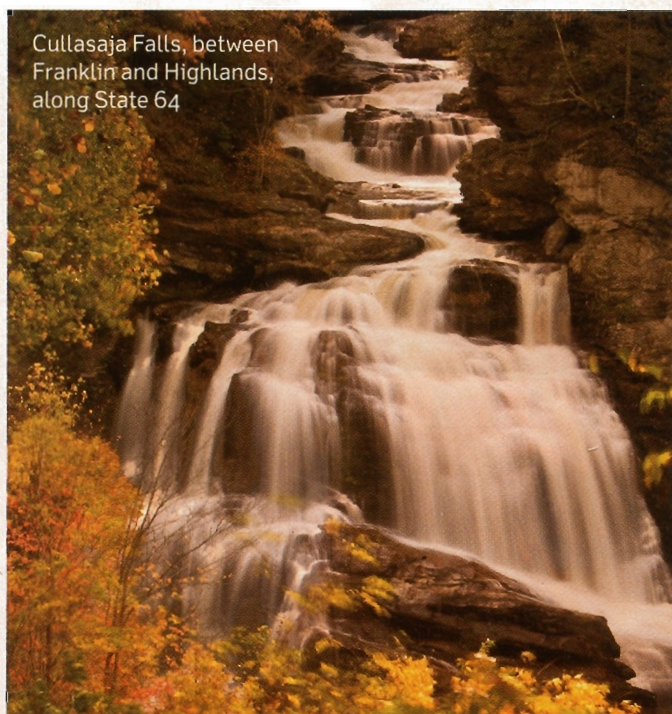
Western Carolina, Inn or Out

Consider our two ways to experience the best of the season in the mountains.

By Taylor Bruce, Jennifer V. Cole



Balsam Mountain Inn in Balsam, North Carolina



Cullasaja Falls, between Franklin and Highlands, along State 64

Stay Inn Even after 100 years of mountain solitude, Balsam Mountain Inn, opened in 1908, remains as tranquil as ever. According to one guest, "I just sort of fell in love with the rocking chairs." Gather on the 100-foot-long, driveway-wide porch (or by one of the inn's 225 windows) to gaze out on a panorama of yellow poplar, sassafras, and the area's namesake balsam fir. When supper calls, follow the aroma of apple-honey barbecue and pan-seared local trout downstairs before you retire to the library or your own cozy room. Without TVs or phones, the 50 spacious rooms could house a family of sleeping black bears until spring. www.balsaminn.com or 1-800-224-9498. Rates start at \$145.

Get Out The distance between Franklin and Cashiers, North Carolina, stretches a mere 30 miles, but the meandering journey along State 64 is nothing short of awesome. Sun filters through a kaleidoscope of orange, red, and yellow foliage. Waterfalls dot the periphery. Mountain vistas take your breath away. And every few miles there's a hiking trail or park to check out. Between Franklin and Highlands, turn off the highway and drive through a cathedral of trees to Cliffside Lake. From here, follow one of seven hiking trails. Just before Cashiers, a short detour on State 107 takes you to Whitewater Falls, the highest waterfall east of the Rockies. Slow down and explore. When was the last time you took a whole day to drive 30 miles? Talk about getting the most out of a tank of gas. ●

Four More Stops

- **For golden apples**, homegrown butternut squash, and a corn maze (\$5), visit third-generation Deal Farms near Franklin. 4402 Murphy Road; www.dealfarms.com or (828) 524-5151.
- **When temps drop to the low 40s**, try Highland Hiker in Cashiers for mountaineer gear of all sorts. www.highlandhiker.com or (828) 743-1732.
- **Pan for nuggets of gold** and gemstones, such as amethyst and citrine, at Jackson Hole Trading Post and Gem Mine between Franklin and Highlands and keep what you find. 9770 Highlands Road; www.jacksonholegemmine.com or (828) 524-5850. Buckets cost \$10 or \$30.
- **Downtown Highlands** is a playground for art lovers. Watch Robin Piscitelli carve logs and tree stumps into lustrous bowls and vases at his Tree Turnings studio. 468 Main Street; www.bigburl.com or (828) 526-3433. Or visit Tin Roof Studio, where 150 artists' works are available under one roof. 1990 Dillard Road; www.tinroofhighlands.com or (828) 526-3900.