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SOUTH CAROLINA'S UNPARALLELED *Upcountry*

SCENIC BEAUTY & HISTORIC CHARM
AWAIT IN THIS GEM OF A REGION

(WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY KATHLEEN STEVENS MOORE)

Sucked AGAINST THE LINING OF HER deep velveteen pockets, South Carolina has a secret. Charleston's Lowcountry may be good, but her quiet Upcountry is simply beguiling. A rural kingdom stuffed with historic towns, friendly nods, slow draws, eateries, wineries and equestrian aficionados. Her people blink up at a first peek of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The mountains wink back. They lord over this gem of a region.

More than a B&B

Without question the place to stay is The Red Horse Inn. If pampered elegance is not your thing, then be a doll and tell a friend; for this is a place worth knowing. Proprietors Mary and Roger Wolters are fastidiously focused on providing the ultimate in comfort and hospitality. Roughly 200 acres of

grounds comprise a tantalizing mix of trails, pasture, woods and landscaped botanicals. The perfect setting to unwind.

"This place touches people's lives, which is very meaningful to us," Mary Wolters told me. "Ours is a job of giving."

The main building sits atop the property's highest point, a handsome two-story white clapboard perched on a grassy knoll. Six free-standing cottages lay scattered below, tucked naturally into the landscape.

I was shown to The Gabel, one of six guest rooms at the main house. Bathed in ivory and white, its walls offered instant peace and restfulness. In contrast, the balcony's view got my blood pumping: a sweeping presentation of pure Upcountry utopia. Smokey blue-layered mountains trickled down into emerald hills. Tailored pastures marched to the forefront. They slid to a halt just below my feet. Only one



Facing page: A view from the Red Horse Inn
This page, from top to bottom: Saluda artist Ray Prague; main house at the Red Horse Inn; a storefront in historic Landrum





especially noteworthy. Soft murals on the wall depict a familiar local sight: traditional mounted fox hunting.

“Where do they hunt fox?” I asked.

“Right here,” Wolters answered, gesturing to the nearest pasture. “Several times

a year the Tryon Hounds use our property. It’s something to see.”

Apply a little forethought and coordinate a stay at the Red Horse Inn with a hunt. Sip coffee on the stone veranda and watch a fox streak past the shrubbery. Black jacketed riders, gleaming horses, bugles, baying hounds — the whole nine yards in hot pursuit. Will you root Team Fox or Team Huntsmen? Either way, you’re in dignified horse country.

A Town for Horse Lovers

One visit to historic Landrum will confirm the notion. Street signs direct horse trailers as well as automobiles. Stroll the sidewalks, stopping to peek into antique shops and boutiques. Soon you’ll discover Horse & Home, a delightful store offering equestrian style and furnishings. A basket of taupe and olive ball caps caught my eye, each decorated with a dazzling rhinestone horse shoe charm perched astride the bill.

“Bling has reached the horse world?” I asked owner Lisa Otto.

“Oh, yes,” she answered laughing. “You should see our riding pants.”

A block farther led me to Dutch Country Foods, The Amish answer to Whole Foods with rows of cider, jam, flour and slab chocolate. A customer breezed in



Clockwise from top: Dutch Country Foods owner Nettie Musselman; goats live at the Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site; the streets of Landrum

detail remained absent — horses. Ah, cue the mare.

“That’s My Little Secret,” Wolters laughed, as a rust-brown thoroughbred trotted into view. “Great-granddaughter of Secretariat.”

The Red Horse Inn is a crescendo of southern elegance. The place feels more like a grand estate or historic horse farm than a bed and breakfast. For extra elbow room, request one of the cottages. Decorated with a fox hunting theme, Carriage Bay is

and owner Nettie Musselman greeted the lady by name. Musselman and her white apron whisked themselves over to a gigantic deli slicer. They set to work on a mouth-watering hunk of cheese. I would have sampled, but was saving myself for supper.

Breezing into Stone Soup had me guessing. This being South Carolina, I braced myself for a menu loaded down with pan fried chicken, grits and cheese biscuits.

“What do you recommend?” I asked the waiter who introduced himself as Carl. “Something local please.”

A smile tweaked young Carl’s face. “The fresh trout with toasted almonds, fall vegetable hash and basil infused rice.”

Primed with a first course of kale and caesar salad topped with gorgonzola crumbles, candied walnuts and tangy house dressing, the meal did not disappoint. Its recommended pairing was Chasing Venus Sauvignon Blanc. For dessert, Carl insisted on a wedge of homemade coconut cake. The idea of refusing seemed boorishly rude. Each decadent bite went down silky smooth.

Proprietor Suzanne Strickland has created the perfect atmosphere to house her menu. Swathed in rich wood and equestrian décor, the interior strikes a relaxed, genteel note. Photographs of horses and their grinning owners line the walls.

“My customers bring them in,” Strickland explained, her pretty face breaking into easy smile. “I hang ‘em up.”

Strickland could have broached any number of topics: her food or the restaurant’s success. Instead, like an employee down at the visitor’s bureau going for overtime, she waxed poetic about the land. She rattled off the Carolina Foothills slogan: four towns, two states, one experience. Explaining that the quartet of sister-towns (Landrum, Tryon, Columbus and Saluda) are forever linked via socio-economics and

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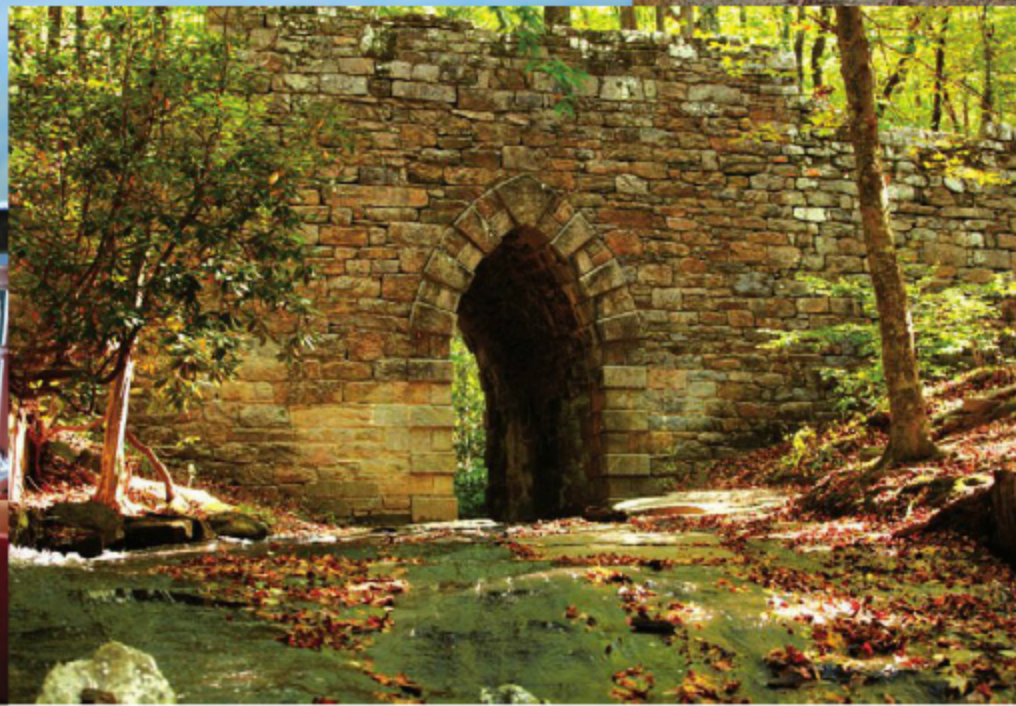
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Almost without noticing, I'd crossed into moun-

tainous North Carolina. The biggest difference was the clouds. Happy white puffers that milled around in an amiable blue sky.

Beneath them, squished between mountains and a ribbon of old train track, the eclectic town of Saluda had me at hello. Historic buildings, kitschy cafes and funky art galleries. A place so artistically inspiring you'll want to access your inner-bohemian and take a painting class. Or photography workshop. Or at least buy something made of hemp.

In Saluda, I met local artist Ray Prague and his friend Niece Lundgren.

"Saluda is the capitol of the universe," Lundgren told me.

"I did not know that," I replied.

"Oh, yes," Prague confirmed, thrusting both arms away from his body. "Everything starts in Saluda and spreads out."

Sure, why not? The place is winsome and groovy. It boasts charming shops, a Fonzie-era diner, wild river action down the way and zip lining. A destination full

topography. Southern enclaves that have each other's backs.

"Have you been to Saluda?" she asked. Her cheshire grin made me realize my exploring had just begun.

Upcountry Adventure

The next morning, I combed and dug and bought my way through the vintage treasures at Landrum Eclectics, a charming, off-beat store not to be missed. Then I

headed north. Using National Scenic Byway 176 as my guide, I took a Sunday drive on Saturday. Sunshine on my right, mountains full steam ahead. I passed the adorable town of Tryon, a community known for its arts and theater scene. I would have sat a spell, but my destination lay onward and upward: highly-lauded Pearson's Falls.

Above all else, this 90-foot dramatic waterfall is user-friendly. Your grandmother could walk to its base. The access trail winds through a glen, home to

Clockwise from top left:

A lookout from Caesars Head State Park; train tracks run through Saluda; historic Poinsett Bridge; a diner in Saluda

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Red Horse Inn
45 Winstons Chase Court
Landrum, S.C.
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theredhorseinn.com

of refreshing people and air. The kind of place that makes you grab the real estate guide wondering, shouldn't I be living here?

A stretch farther up the road, I toured the Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site in nearby Flat Rock, N.C., and then made my way back to the Red Horse Inn. Waiting for me was a dignified mint on my pillow, and a scroll of humorous sayings. Because each day should end with a smile, so says the Red Horse Inn.

Covered Bridges and Curvy Paths

After a lovely continental breakfast the next morning, I went historic bridge hunting. There are several in the area. Especially memorable was Poinsett Bridge. An old-world stone structure built in 1820, it's the oldest bridge in South Carolina.

Its gothic stone arch rises above a babbling stream and velvet bed of ferns. The scene is lovely and hushed. You can almost hear the sound of carriages and foot soldiers making the crossing. It's a hauntingly beautiful timeworn creation worth modern-day notice.

Pop a Dramamine and hoist yourself up the curvy pavement leading to Caesars Head State Park. Your soul shall be rewarded. Somehow, they've built an observation deck over thin air. Its unmatched view reveals a jaw-dropping sight: Table Rock State Park and the South Carolina landscape as it moodily considers flattening.

I stood facing the 3,208-foot elevation. A petite yellow butterfly joined me. It hovered and teased, suspended over invisible air ridiculously sure of itself. Golden wings flitting warmly against the hazy-blue backdrop. It was a delightful surprise, much like the rest of South Carolina's Upcountry, and the incomparable Red Horse Inn.

Ring in at less than three hours from Atlanta's Northside, this special getaway is worth getting to. **PN**

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