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## Exploring the foothills of South Carolina along Highway 11

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BLAKE GUTHRIE / SPECIAL

The cabins on the property of the Red Horse Inn come with plenty of privacy and spectacular views.

By Blake Guthrie

For the AJC

In the early 1990s, Mary and Roger Wolters saved a pastoral parcel of land in upstate South Carolina from exurban development by purchasing it. The couple had been looking for the right property to start the bed and breakfast of their dreams.

It turned out to be a rolling 190-acre tract for sale near their home. Developers had the land slated for a new subdivision, but the project had stalled. The Wolters bought the land and turned it into the Red Horse Inn. Today, the Red Horse Inn is much more than just a bed and breakfast property: It's an expansive horse farm containing a six-room inn, six cottages and miles of hiking and equestrian trails, with the Blue Ridge mountains as a scenic backdrop.

The property is in the Cherokee Foothills of the Upcountry region of South Carolina at the eastern end of the Cherokee Foothills National Scenic Byway. The western end of the byway — SC Highway 11 — is only 90 minutes from downtown Atlanta. The Red Horse Inn is in a section of the Upcountry known as the Dark Corner, a place with a mysterious heritage steeped in moonshining lore. These days, however, the Dark Corner is horse country, dotted with equestrian estates, covered bridges, orchards, vineyards, produce stands and waterfalls.

The best way to explore the area's natural beauty, historic attractions and nearby hill towns is to have some guidance from a local expert. Mary Wolters knows all the nooks and crannies of the region, including a few secret spots. Guests at the Red Horse Inn can get an itinerary with detailed directions, along with a picnic basket lunch, and head out for a day of adventure. Some of the stops are on private property where Wolters has gained special permission for her guests to access the land for viewing old covered bridges and mills. Other spots are roadside attractions anyone can visit, if they know which side road to venture down.

One side trip off the Cherokee Foothills Highway that shouldn't be missed is a journey up the long and winding road to the overlook at Caesar's Head State Park. Caesar's Head is part of the Blue Ridge Escarpment that looms large over northern South Carolina and, at 3,208 feet, is one of its highest points. The park is also home to one of the highest waterfalls in the Upcountry, 420-foot Raven Cliff Falls.

Looking southwest from the overlook at Caesar's Head, Table Rock Mountain stands out like a sore thumb from the rest of the Blue Ridge Mountain extravaganza to the north. At 3,124 feet, the stone-sided mountain is the centerpiece of Table Rock Mountain State Park, whose property straddles Scenic Highway 11. The park is worth a stop for its hiking trails, two small lakes and great views from the summit.

Farther east you'll find two more state parks, Keowee-Toxaway and Devils Fork. These parks are in the Mountain Lakes region of the upstate. Lakes Keowee and Jocassee are the major lakes here, each notable for its clean water and good fishing. Lake Jocassee is a bit of a drive off the Foothills Highway, but if you have a boat it's well worth the effort to get out onto this remote body of water surrounded by mountains where waterfalls plunge into wooded coves. Jocassee is also popular with scuba divers, who come for the deep, clear water and an underwater obstacle course.

Many charming small towns are just off Highway 11, including Wahalla, Pickens and Landrum. In Landrum, the Southside Smokehouse is a surprising find, looking like a typical roadside joint on the outside, but serving up plenty more than just Carolina-style barbecue fare inside. The other surprising find along the Cherokee Foothills Highway is Victoria Valley Vineyards near Table Rock State Park. The terrain and climate of the region make it a good area for a vineyard to produce European-style wine grapes, and that's what they do at Victoria Valley. Stop in at the tasting room to sample the different varietals available.

Though fall is perhaps the most popular time for exploring the Cherokee Foothills Highway — picked by AAA as one of the Top 10 spots in the nation for viewing fall foliage — spring is also a good time to visit, when everything's in bloom and the crowds aren't so bad. In fact, the hill country of South Carolina is rarely crowded compared to other places Atlantans usually go when they want a hilly escape, such as the mountains of North Georgia and western North Carolina. You can easily see those higher Blue Ridge peaks from the South Carolina foothills, but the roadways aren't nearly as choked with sightseers during the peak seasons.

Back at the Red Horse Inn, you'll feel like you have the place to yourself to while away the day, because Wolters operates her bed and breakfast differently than most. She likes to give her guests as much privacy and room to roam as possible. Breakfast is ready and waiting in your room or cottage, on your own time, so you don't feel pressured to come to the dining area at a set time early in the morning and mingle with the other guests. But you'll want to get up as early as possible, anyway, to fit in as much time for adventure, sightseeing and relaxation in these bucolic foothills. And don't forget to have a photo-op with My Little Secret, the beautiful star mare at the Red Horse Inn, who also happens to be the great granddaughter of famed race horse and Triple Crown winner Secretariat.

### If you go

The western terminus of the Cherokee Foothills National Scenic Byway is 90 minutes from downtown Atlanta. Take I-85 north to the first exit after crossing over the S.C. line.

### Stay

The Red Horse Inn has rooms and cottages available. One cottage is pet friendly. In-room breakfast included. Rates start at \$175. 45 Winstons Chase Court, Landrum. 864-909-1575; [www.theredhorseinn.com](http://www.theredhorseinn.com).

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