

L U X U R Y LIVING



by Marla Hardee Milling



WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

Recently, www.relocate-america.com pinpointed Asheville as the No. 1 place to live in America on its yearly Top 100 List. Asheville hit the spotlight because it's small enough to be friendly and welcoming, yet large enough to offer vast diversity in terms of lifestyle, politics, culture and experience. Equally appealing to young families and retirees, Asheville is often referred to as "The Paris of the South," because of its abundance of galleries, sidewalk cafes and appreciation for the arts. It boasts four distinct seasons, offers the beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains and serves as an enjoyable year-round playground for those who love the outdoors.

Gated luxury developments are springing up throughout the region boasting world-class golf courses and all of the typical amenities: tennis, clubhouses, pools, stables, fly-fishing, hiking and biking trails, and nature centers. It's commonplace for multimillion-dollar houses to take shape up on lots that start in the six-figure

range and grow to more than \$1 million.

Of course, the draw of this area as an exceptional place to live is really not a secret. In fact, it's been revered for generations. In the late 1800s, George Vanderbilt became enthralled with the area during a trip with his mother. He quickly invested in thousands of acres and built a grand 250-room palace, called Biltmore House, about 10 minutes south of Asheville's downtown area. It took crews five years to complete the 175,000-square-foot house, which remains America's largest private residence.

During Vanderbilt's era, Asheville, along with resorts at Lake Toxaway (just outside of Brevard) and other mountain towns catered to the rich and famous: Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, Thomas Edison, just to name a few. Of course, there are ebbs and flows to everything, and western North Carolina's popularity as a destination took a back seat to events such as the Great Depression in the 1930s and even the oil crisis in the 70s. By the 1980s, downtown Asheville resembled a ghost town. Many anchor stores had gone out of business or relocated to malls; an architecturally beautiful arcade in the center of town, designed as a market by E.W. Grove, had been taken over by the federal government for office-use, and restaurants were few and far between.

Bill Cecil, Jr., the great grandson of George Vanderbilt, has taken over the reins at Biltmore Estate, serving as president and CEO. As a native of Asheville, he has witnessed much change in the town during his lifetime, and he applauds the revitalization and urban renewal that has taken place.

"In the past, when we interviewed people from out of town, we made excuses for not having any restaurants. Now, we have 200 to 300 really good restaurants, and of that, 50 to 75 are extraordinary. And there's all the arts and crafts, plus the Grove Arcade is fully rented. I never expected that to be anything other than the National Weather Service," says Cecil, as he sits in his office in the center of downtown Asheville.

"It used to be that people would come here to visit Biltmore, and then what? They'd go to Chimney Rock or ride the Blue Ridge Parkway. Now, Asheville has become the destination and people visit Biltmore as part of that."

Surrounding towns have also benefited from Asheville's prominence. The Cashiers (pronounced CASH-ers) and Highlands areas have established themselves as towns that define luxury living amidst scenic splendor, and other western North Carolina towns are quickly following that lead as upscale developments rapidly take shape.

With change and a huge growth spurt comes concern about protecting the natural beauty. Some developers, like the Chaffin-Light Development Group, are designing communities as a collaboration between man and nature. At their Balsam Mountain Preserve development in Sylva (about 45 minutes west of Asheville), 3,000 of the property's 4,400 acres have been set aside under a conservation easement. That land will never see a bulldozer, and homeowners enjoy having houses that blend into the scenery instead of obstructing it.

Here, the terrain rises to 5,500 feet, but as Bill Minus, vice president of sales, explains, "we do not develop over 4,700 feet so that the tops of the mountains are left natural." He says purchased lots, which begin at \$350,000 and go up to \$1 million, go under a habitat review conducted by their naturalists, along with the Botany Department at nearby Western Carolina University. Rules include no invasive planting and restrictions on which trees can be cut.

Preserving the environment and natural beauty is key to making sure that Western North Carolina is as appealing to future generations as it is for the current one.

WESTERN N.C. SANCTUARIES

Balsam Mountain Preserve: This 350-home gated community is set amidst 4,400 acres-nearly 3,000 of which are protected against future development. Close to 200 homesites are sold, with prices ranging from \$350,000 to \$1 million. The new Arnold Palmer golf course will be ready for play this fall. In addition, Balsam Mountain Preserve includes more than 50 miles of trails for hiking, biking and horseback riding, 38 miles of streams, a nature center, stables, tennis courts, a pool and clubhouse.
(866) 452-3456, www.atopbalsam.com

Chinquapin: Back to nature is the theme at this Cashiers development that encompasses 2,000 pristine acres. Fly-fishing is a big draw here, especially with the native streams; hiking, horseback riding and mountain biking are also popular. There's a 9-hole walking golf course where the focus is on training and learning. Plus, homeowners have access to Chinquapin's sister property, Trillium Links and Lake Club and its traditional amenities like an 18-hole golf course. Homesites range from two to nine acres and are priced from \$550,000 to \$850,000.
(877) 743-4507, www.chinquapinnc.com

The Cliffs at Walnut Cove: Located minutes from downtown Asheville, this low-density, gated development has its own Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course, a managed trail system, nature center, wellness center, a 12,000-square-foot restaurant and The Pavilion, which includes a ballroom and gourmet market. There are three distinct luxury home collections (homes are priced from \$1.295 million): Village Townhomes located in the heart of the Club Village; enclave residences and estate homes found in the Meadow Collection near the first fairway; and the Millstream Collection situated near the nature center.
(866) 435-5123, www.cliffscommunities.com

Mountain Air: Access is very convenient to this mountaintop luxury golf community-it has its own private airstrip. And the view on the ground is as miraculous as it is from the air, as Mountain Air is located atop the 4,919-foot Slickrock Mountain. The community's Village Green includes a clubhouse, activity and fitness center with spa, pool, theatre and arcade; a putting green and outfitter's store. A host of activities keep residents entertained, from lectures to dinner theatres to gardening workshops. Named the Best Community in America by the National Association of Home Builders in 2003, Mountain Air offers homesites from \$150,000; homes and villas run between \$225,000 and \$2 million-plus.
(866) 342-0637, www.mountainaircc.com

Queens Gap: Located near Lake Lure, this 3,500-acre community features an 18-hole Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course, an equestrian center, outfitter's lodge, wellness pavilion, water complex, tennis facilities and a system of hiking and biking trails. Developers are currently offering an ExploreVacation package, which includes accommodations at a bed and breakfast, dinner for two at a popular area restaurant, a guided nature walk and private tour of Queens Gap. Homesites are priced from the \$200,000s.
(888) 388-4640, www.queensgap.com

RiverRock: All five villages within RiverRock share some of the same amenities-tennis, a family sports and game complex and miles of trails-but each one is distinct in character and design. For instance, one village will offer a full spa experience; another will have horseback riding and an 18-hole championship golf course and another will offer a first-class restaurant on Lake Glenville. Homesites are priced from \$250,000; homes start in the \$800,000-plus range.
(888) 743-2975, www.riverrocknc.com