

IN THE HEART OF

# North Georgia

Soak in magnificent scenery and spend time in some captivating small towns either before or after FMCA's March 2023 convention in Perry.

A stunning view of north Georgia's Blue Ridge Mountains awaits sightseers at Brasstown Bald, the state's highest peak.



BY KATHLEEN WALLS, F522187

**N**orth Georgia's Blue Ridge Mountains have the makings of an RV'er's dream trip: beautiful mountain scenery without the high altitudes and steep climbs of the Rockies.

And in the heart of it all lies the town of Blairsville, about a two-hour drive from Atlanta. You won't find interstates or heavy traffic leading into the area, and parking won't be a problem once you get there. Set in the center of Union County, Blairsville also makes a great hub for exploring the surrounding area.

Nearby **Vogel State Park** is Georgia's second-oldest state park, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in 1931. They constructed a dam on Wolf Creek that created 22-acre Lake Trahlyta as the centerpiece of the park. The lake is open to nonmotorized boats and has a nice swimming beach.

Vogel State Park boasts a campground with 90 sites that have electric and water hookups, accommodating everyone from tent campers to those with large RVs. A dump station is provided. Although no Wi-Fi is available at the campsites, you can access it at the visitors center, museum, group shelter, picnic shelters, and cottages. Some of the cabins in the park are the original structures built by the CCC. A small CCC museum pays tribute to these workers.

**Brasstown Bald** is the highest mountain in Georgia, and Union County's most visited site. From the observation tower atop Brasstown Bald, you can see four states on a clear day: Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Inside, the museum relays the history of the mountain via some unique exhibits, including one that shares the Cherokee legend about how mountain balds — mountain summits topped

Kathleen Walls



with dense native grasses or shrubs — came to be: A flying monster once lived atop the mountain, killing and terrorizing the people. The Cherokee begged their Creator for help. He sent a powerful lightning strike that killed the monster and cleared all life from the mountaintop. He promised the people that to prevent such a monster from hiding there, the summit would remain clear of trees forever.

Another of Georgia's highest peaks, **Blood Mountain**, lies just a few miles north of Vogel. Old Cherokee legends tell of a fierce battle between the incoming Cherokees and the Creeks who already lived there. The two tribes engaged in battle at Slaughter Gap on the mountain. Supposedly, the fighting was so fierce the creek ran red with blood; thereafter, the peak was called Blood Mountain.

**Mountain Crossings** at Neel Gap is on the side of Blood Mountain. Today, it's a hostel/outfitter/gift shop for visitors and hikers. The building was constructed in the 1930s by the CCC as an inn and dining hall for CCC workers in the area. By the 1980s, it was ready to be demolished. Instead, it was recycled as Mountain Crossings. The Appalachian Trail starts 30 miles away at Springer Mountain, making this the first major stop on the trail, which runs through the building itself. Mountain Crossings functions as



Getty Images/SeanPavonePhoto

a hostel with beds and showers for the hikers and plenty of gear should they find themselves missing something important.

An unusual tradition developed here. Hikers who complete the Appalachian Trail return and toss their hiking boots over a tree directly in front of the building, near the steps.

**Byron Herbert Reece Farm and Heritage Center** is the homesite of Union County's most famous poet. The center opened in 2012. Byron Herbert Reece, a double Guggenheim award winner and a Pulitzer Prize nominee, wrote five books of poetry and two novels. He was writer-in-residence at several colleges. In 1958, while teaching at Young Harris College in neighboring Towns County, he fatally shot himself. He knew he was dying from tuberculosis, which already had taken his parents. *The Reach of Song*, a play about Reece's life, is the official Georgia state historical drama.

The facility's self-guided tour starts in the visitors center, once Reece's family home. Outside stands Mulberry Hall, a small red-frame building he constructed for

his writing studio. In the restored barn, visitors can view a video about his life. The center has all the outbuildings and domestic animals that would have been on the farm during Reece's time.

The **Old Courthouse on the Square** and the **Mountain Life Museum** teach visitors about the everyday lives of past area residents. The 1899 courthouse hosts concerts of old-time music on Friday nights in the summer. Downstairs, exhibits showcase the people who have been part of life in Union County.

The **Mountain Life Museum** is a block from the square and located in the Grapelle Butt Mock House, circa 1906. Outside, an early settlers' village includes a barn, a corn crib, and a smithy placed around the relocated 1861 Payne Cabin.

**Granddaddy Mimm's Distilling Company** is the newest chapter of an old family tradition. Back in the mid-1900s, Jack "Mimm" McClure made illegal moonshine in Union and Towns counties. Today, his grandson, Tommy Townsend, is making his grandfather's moonshine legally just a block from the Old Courthouse. Tommy is not only a moonshiner but



Kathleen Walls

a musician as well. He has played with Waylon Jennings and now is the lead singer for Waymore's Outlaws, composed of many of Waylon's original band members. Catch a concert at the distillery if you can.

**Paradise Hills Resort** in Blairsville is another place making adult beverages. The winery and spa sit on the side of a mountain along with rustic cabins that are for rent.

Shoppers of every stripe will find happiness in Blairsville. There are some unique places. **Sunrise Grocery** is somewhat of a landmark near Vogel State Park. It's been in business since

the 1920s and is famous for boiled peanuts, jerky, handcrafted soap, and candles.

Then there's the **Blairsville Pickers Barn**, which is somewhat reminiscent of the "American Pickers" show on TV. You may find anything there. During my visit, I noted a hand-powered lawnmower, a lot of cast-iron pots and pans, and several antique wood stoves, plus some custom-made stained-glass items. On weekends, a flea market takes place behind the mall.

More conventional shopping options include a group of stores

around the town square called **Village Square Mall**, with boutiques, T-shirt shops, crafts, food items, and other individually owned stores.

From June to October, Blairsville hosts the **Union County Farmers Market** at 290 Farmers Market Way. All produce is locally grown. The Hunter-England Cabin sits in front and has a small heritage garden. The cabin is the oldest dwelling in Union County and was built between 1832-1834. On Fridays from mid-May to mid-October, the Trash and Treasure Yard Sale takes place at the Farmers Market.

Kathleen Walls



On a clear day, visitors can see four states from the observation tower at Brasstown Bald (top left). Poet Byron Herbert Reece used this small red building (left) as a writing studio. Built in 1899, the Old Courthouse on the Square (above) serves as a history museum and hosts concerts.



Carters Dam, constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, is the tallest earthen dam east of the Mississippi River.

Head west to the town of Blue Ridge and ride the Blue Ridge Scenic Railway. It takes you along the scenic Toccoa River to the town of McCaysville, Georgia, once a prosperous copper mining location, and sister city to Copperhill, Tennessee, just across the state line. During the two-hour layover, you can walk the blue line that's painted on the street between the towns and stand in two states at once.

Arts abound in the Blue Ridge. The **Blue Ridge Mountains Arts Association and Art Center**, located in the historic Fannin County Courthouse, is the center point, but studios and galleries can be found all around the downtown area. Live theater is represented here at the **Blue Ridge Community Theatre**.

If you are looking for some tasty fun, visit **Mercier Orchards** just outside Blue Ridge. Depending on the season, you can pick strawberries; blueberries; and apples right off the tree. They make the best individual apple or peach fried pies. The orchard offers farm tractor tours. You can buy their fresh apple cider



Kathleen Walls

and sample the hard cider from their homegrown fruit.

A little farther southwest in Cherry Log is a truly unique attraction: **Expedition Bigfoot!**, which houses evidence that the mythical beast is real. Owner David Bakara works at researching Bigfoot. His all-terrain vehicle set up for research — B.R.A.T. (Bigfoot Research and Tech) — is on display at the museum. He was on a research expedition in Florida in 2011 when, he says, he saw two Bigfoots.

Expedition Bigfoot! has one of the largest collections of Bigfoot artifacts in the world, including footprints, hair samples, recorded vocalizations of Bigfoots communicating, and even Bigfoot feces. The latter is under glass, so no smell.

Deeper into Gilmer County, the town of Ellijay boasts lakes and streams perfect for kayaking, swimming, or fishing. Some 65 miles of undeveloped shoreline surround

3,200-acre **Carters Lake**, created by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers when they built Carters Dam. It's the tallest earthen dam east of the Mississippi. The lake is filled with bass, walleye, crappie, bream, and catfish.

Downtown Ellijay overflows with antiques shops. It is also home to **Tabor House & Civil War Museum**, which shares information about Gilmer County's history. **R&A Orchards**, a few miles east of town, has a large assortment of fruits and vegetables, most grown by them. They operate a pleasant cafe as well.

Heading east to Towns County, one finds the communities of Young Harris and Hiawassee, both of which offer interesting places to explore. **Brasstown Valley Resort & Spa** in Young Harris is worth a visit. You can enjoy a meal in the Dining Room, on the veranda for the mountain views, or cozied up



to the fireplace. At Brassies Grill, you can eat a light lunch while you play a game of pool or darts. Or pamper yourself with a visit to their full-service spa. If you're a golfer, you might want to play a round at their 18-hole course, ranked as one of the best in the state. For something different, take a horseback trail ride.

Just a little way up the road in Hiawassee, **Hamilton Gardens** has the largest collection of rhododendrons and native azaleas in the Southeast. Its 33 acres are filled with native plants on the banks of Lake Chatuge.

**Lake Chatuge** is fun to explore either from the Towns County Recreational Beach or on the water. You can rent pontoon boats, ski boats, jet skis, kayaks, canoes, or paddleboards if you don't have your own.

A drive along the Richard Russell Scenic Highway leads to **Helen**, where you can visit an authentic-

looking Alpine village, with whimsical shops and attractions.

If your tastes run instead to early Americana, visit the town of **Dahlonega**, explore an old gold mine, and see how the discovery of gold spurred the Trail of Tears relocation of American Indians.

Festivals are common in this area. Blairsville's longest-running event is the annual Sorghum Festival, held the second and third weekends in October. Scottish Festival & Highland Games take place the second weekend in June. The Georgia Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival happens in July, and the Mountain Heritage Festival is in September.

Hiawassee's biggest festival is the Georgia Mountain Fair, held each August at the fairgrounds. Blue Ridge has several art festivals and others throughout the year. The Georgia Apple Festival in October



is Gilmer County's biggest but not its only festival.

Since most of this area is part of the **Chattahoochee National Forest**, plenty of primitive camping is available, and several RV resorts in the area offer a more upscale stay. You will find music — usually old-time Appalachian ballads — all over the area. With so many creeks, streams, and mountain lakes, boating of all kinds is popular.

The beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the charm of Blairsville and other small north Georgia towns await RVers at any time of year. However, FMCA members planning to attend the "LUCKY 13" convention March 15-18, 2023, might want to add a stop in this area to their itinerary either before or after that event.

**FOR MORE INFO**  
Explore Georgia  
[www.exploregeorgia.org](http://www.exploregeorgia.org)  
(800) 847-4842

**Blairsville Union County Chamber Of Commerce**  
[www.visitblairsvillega.com](http://www.visitblairsvillega.com)  
(877) 745-5789