



Mountain Escapes Near Charlotte: Haywood County

From a mountain cabin base, ride the peaks and valleys here

October 27, 2019 / [Emma Way](https://www.charlottemagazine.com/author/emma-way/) (https://www.charlottemagazine.com/author/emma-way/)

Cataloochee Ski Area is known for its kid-friendly slopes and training center

Visit NC Smokies (Haywood County TDA)

“Remember the Queen?” Tom Knapko asks as he demonstrates a stately wave with one hand while his other grips the steering wheel of his neon yellow-and-silver (or, as he puts it, “ghost gray and squeezed-lime green”) three-wheel Polaris Slingshot. “You have that responsibility now.”

There’s a noticeable difference from my position in this sporty fusion of a motorcycle and sedan and Queen Elizabeth’s in her Bentley limousine—wheels aside, I’m wearing a backwards baseball hat, a bright yellow shirt to match the car, and a fake tattoo sleeve. The driving uniform, Tom explains. I oblige and wave and smile to tourists as we whiz past on the Blue Ridge Parkway in Haywood County.

Tom and his wife, Sue, own and operate Creek 'N Woods Vacation Rentals in Maggie Valley, a small town of 1,200 people about 35 miles west of Asheville. The sage-colored cabin I'm staying in on a weekday in September sits just a few miles from the entrance to the Blue Ridge Parkway, atop a winding road the width of Charlotte's Sugar Creek Greenway.

The Knapkos first drove a Slingshot in 2015, the year the model hit the market. They rented it by the hour from Slinging in the Smokies, a small agency attached to Cabbage Rose gift shop on Soco Road, the main stretch in Maggie Valley. When their time was up, they didn't want to give the Slingshot back. As opposed to a traditional motorcycle, "we can talk to each other, and it feels safer," Tom says over the rumble of the engine and the smell of gasoline (30 miles per gallon of premium).

<https://www.charlottemagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/file4.jpeg>

A ride in the Polaris Slingshot along the Blue Ridge Parkway. *Courtesy photo.*

They bought their own Slingshot in 2018. Tom, who's lived here for 22 years, says it's the best way to see the mountains. The two-seat cockpit is open, and a snap-on canvas roof is optional. Tom usually recommends that his guests rent one, but since I can't drive manual and I'm traveling alone, he gives me a personal tour.

"Get ready. It will be bright," Tom says as he revs the engine over a hill. He drives this road so often, he knows exactly when the sun is about to peek out from the tree line and smack you right in the eyes. I flip my sunglasses down from the top of my head, squinting a little.

<https://www.charlottemagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/LakeJunaluska.jpg>

Lake Junaluska. *Photo from Visit NC Smokies (Haywood County TDA).*

We reach the climax of our two-hour drive at Waterrock Knob, the highest point in the Plott Balsams, just before sunset, the mountains a hazy blue with a tinge of orange. It's a stunning view in all seasons: In October and November, the trees are bright red and yellow, especially

this year, with its “vibrant” fall foliage prediction. You may spot some elk off in the distance too; the nearby Cataloochee Valley has a herd of almost 200. In winter, the view is a misty white when it snows.

After a couple of pictures, we begin our descent. Tom takes me toward Waynesville—or “WaynesVegas” as locals jokingly call it, because it’s the only bustling downtown area in the county—for dinner at Chef’s Table, a tiny, 42-seat farm-to-table restaurant owned by chef Josh Monroe. I order the goat cheese risotto balls and the fig and prosciutto chicken fettuccine, which is hand-rolled to order.

I skip dessert, thinking of the dozen freshly baked chocolate chip cookies Tom and Sue have left for me back at the cabin. “Do you do this for all of your guests?” I asked when I first checked in at the two-bedroom-and-a-loft house earlier that day. “Oh, you’re not special!” Tom shot back, smiling. It’s true—they leave a batch of cookies for every guest. But as I lie in bed, full of cookies and pasta and hair knotty from the windy Slingshot ride, I can’t help but feel just that.

Haywood County

SHOP THE QUILT TRAIL

Throughout Haywood County, quilt blocks adorn the sides of homes, businesses, and barns. Stop by the visitors center in Maggie Valley for a map and see all 54 of them. Visit **Mountain Quilts** in downtown Waynesville and bring your favorite patterns home.

STROLL LAKE JUNALUSKA

Just four miles north of Waynesville, the lake is where church groups and yoga camps come to relax. Walk the 3.8-mile flat trail around the lake at sunset for stunning mountain views illuminated by a 25-foot-tall, lighted cross.

STARGAZE

Max Patch is an hour-drive from Maggie Valley, but it’s well worth a visit. The landmark bald mountain offers stunning views of North Carolina, Tennessee, and, on a clear night, stars.

LIGHT UP THE TOWN

An annual event run by Maggie Valley's Chamber of Commerce, **Lighting Up Maggie Valley** beautifies the town's main drag with hand-painted skis and lights. The daylong event takes place every year the Saturday after Thanksgiving, a.k.a. Small Business Saturday.

BRING BACK

It's been 10 years since the infamous moonshiner and Maggie Valley native Popcorn Sutton died. Today, his legacy lives on in a more, well, *legal* way. Since North Carolina passed Senate Bill 290, which relaxed restrictions of on-site liquor sales and consumption, Dave and Sue Angel have expanded **Elevated Mountain Distillery Co.** (<https://elevatedmountain.com>) and now serve beer, wine, and mixed drinks in the distillery and on the patio. This month, Elevated Mountain is releasing its first straight bourbon, which will be available for tasting or purchase in the gift shop.

STAY

Creek 'N Woods Vacation Rentals (<http://creeknwoods.com>), 828-926-5259, \$180-\$360/night

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