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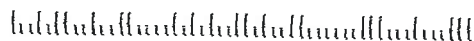
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# Star of the South

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GENIE STEWART-SPEARS

Get the most out of your money and time spent with your horse with a vacation at Leatherwood Mountains Resort, located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. This equestrian facility, nestled in a valley crevice below the mountains, offers stalls, arenas, a round pen, wash racks, turnout paddocks, hot and cold running water, and more than 75 miles of riding trails with spectacular views.

Located in Ferguson, near Boone, Leatherwood Resort boasts year-round trail riding. Unlike Boone, which is situated at 3,000 feet elevation, Leatherwood sits at 1,200 feet, and its highest trail is 2,100 feet, making for mild winters. And not only is Leatherwood an ideal riding-getaway spot, it's also a fully developed equestrian community.

Endurance and competitive trail rides, horsemanship clinics, and club trail rides are regularly held at this

well-maintained, down-home facility. Last January, Tom Seay, the host of *Best of America by Horseback*, announced he's moving his corporate headquarters to Leatherwood. A *Best of America by Horseback* Trail Ride is scheduled for October 2009, featuring a horsemanship clinic with Kerry Kuhn.

"I'm truly excited to discover Leath-

erwood Mountains," Seay says. "From the first moment you visit and ride, you feel a sense of magic about the Blue Ridge Mountains and a belonging to the Leatherwood family. The location is perfect, the trails are wonderful, and the Leatherwood folks give you an instant sense of family home and values."

The gated community was established in the early 1980s. Dick Johnston originally purchased the 3,000-acre property to harvest timber, but soon recognized it as the perfect setting for an equestrian community. Johnston remains the developer of Leatherwood, while Phil Rash and Phil Whitson co-own Leatherwood Rentals, Inc., under which falls the management of the stables, Saddlebrook Restaurant, and vacation-home rentals.

Rash and Whitson also own Leatherwood Mountains Homes & Land Sales, CONTINUED →



*Above:* Leatherwood's rental horses are carefully selected for guests who either don't own a horse or would rather leave their horse at home.

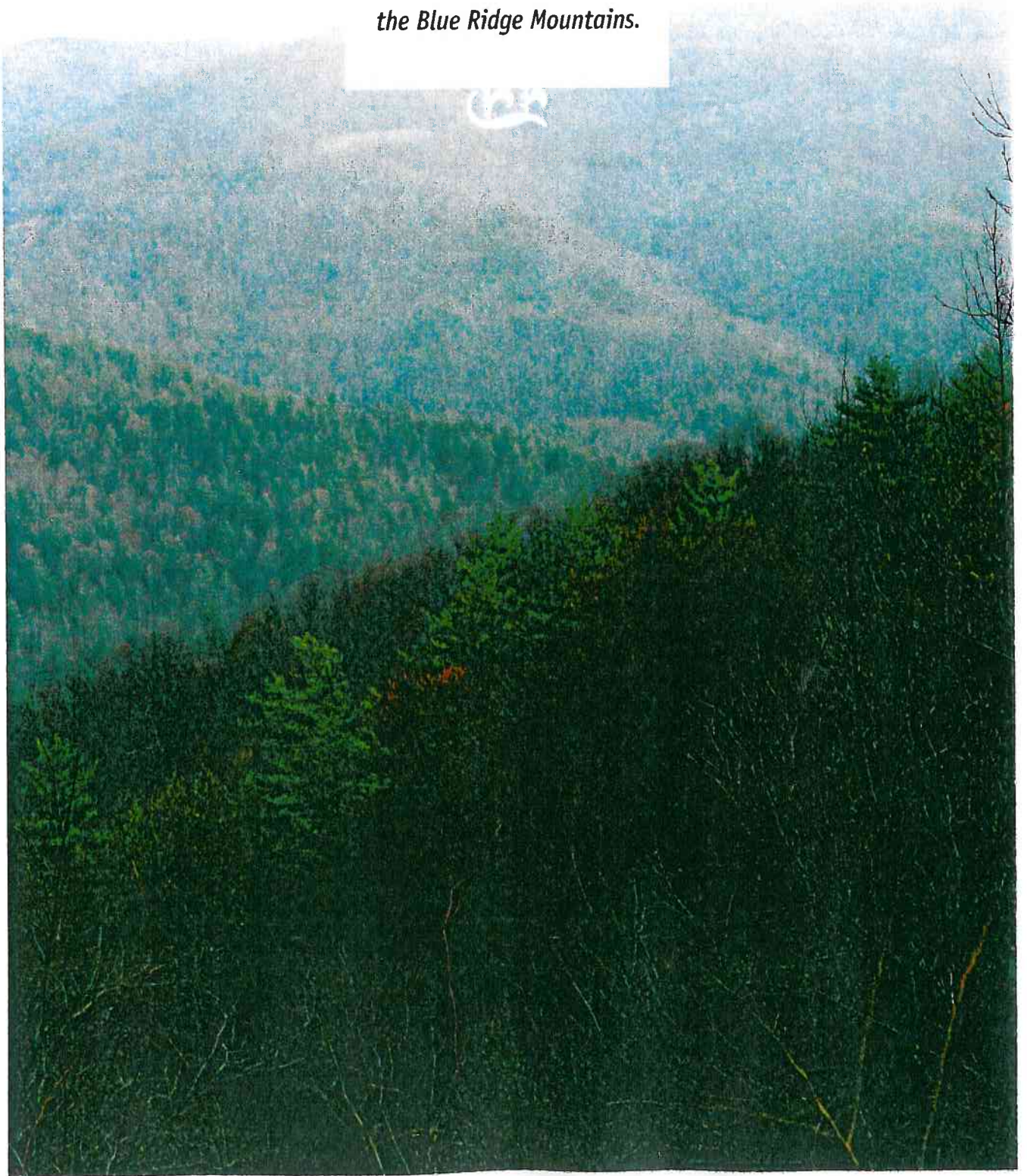
*Right:* Leatherwood Mountains Resort, offers riders the opportunity to ride 75 miles of well-maintained and well-marked mountain trails in the Blue Ridge Mountains. You can camp or you can stay in a rental cabin or home; some feature a hot tub on a balcony with breathtaking views.



*Opposite:* Joetown property is 1,550-undeveloped acres contiguous to Leatherwood's northern boundary that will soon be incorporated into Leatherwood. "Many trail and endurance riders come to Leatherwood to enjoy the miles of trails," says co-owner Amanda Johnston. "The trails in Joetown are somewhat more rolling [than Leatherwood's], with several good climbs, and good footing for riding fast or just moseying along and enjoying the mountain scenery and time with your horse and friends."

RESTORATION

*Rough it a little — or take  
a luxury vacation with  
your horse — at Leather-  
wood Mountains Resort in  
the Blue Ridge Mountains.*



DESTINATIONS

*Right.* Whether you're just starting the day, need to refuel, or are ready for dinner, the Saddlebrook Restaurant and Snack Bar offers excellent food and drinks as well as wi-fi and souvenirs.

*Below:* Leatherwood Mountains Resort offers rental packages, including this one with a two-stall barn and turnout pen.



## Star of the South

CONTINUED

Inc. The smallest tract of land for sale is two acres. Although more acreage is occasionally available, most tracts are between two and 25 acres.

"You don't see developments like this very often," says Abbie Hanchey, an equestrian, and Leatherwood's marketing and event director. "The homes are situated so that you can't see your neighbor's home. Tree-cutting restrictions enhance privacy, and all utilities are underground. We work hard to maintain the pristine forest and trails for all our landowners and guests to enjoy."

## Horse Heaven

There are more than 40 homes and cabins included in the vacation-rental program, some with barns and corrals. You'll be surprised to discover that there are 110 homes and cabins nestled in the mountainsides, secluded and camouflaged by the forest.

If you'd prefer to camp, there is an easy-access campground with electrical, water, and sewer hookups. Campsites are along the bank of Elk Creek, where you'll be lulled to sleep by the peaceful sound of flowing water. Horses aren't allowed in camp, due to the fragile ground. But the barns, which also house the restrooms and showers, are just a short walk away. For your peace of mind, there's 24-hour security at the barns.

Reservations are required, and you must have a current, original Coggins cer-

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## Haunted Hills

Abbie Hanchey, Leatherwood's marketing and event director, trail rides when time allows. "It's amazing to me to be riding in this wilderness and see the remnants of old home places and think about the people who lived here generations ago with no electricity or running water, and how they farmed these inhospitable mountain slopes," she says. "This area is rich in history and folklore. For instance, the Daniel Boone Trail shows remnants of old wagon trails, and some say Daniel Boone passed through here.

"Then there's the Tom Dooley Trail," she continues. "Remember the song, 'Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley,' by the Kingston Trio? This area is where Dooley's legend originated. He reportedly had lots of girlfriends, but one lady he courted was Ann Melton. When Tom Dooley went off to war, Ann married someone else. Upon his return, Tom courted Laura Foster. Ann Melton was lividly jealous.

"Tom Dooley and Laura Foster got married, then Foster ended up dead. Dooley hung for Foster's death, but years later, it came out that Ann Melton had killed Foster. Dooley's grave is located 15 minutes from here. Melton's grave is on private property, not far from Leatherwood.

"It's said that Ann Melton still haunts these hills."

## Star of the South

CONTINUED

tificate (showing that your horse has tested negative for equine infectious anemia), and a current health certificate, if your horse has crossed state lines. If you lack these papers, you'll be turned away before you unload your horse.

Once you and your horse are happily ensconced in your vacation digs, saddle up, and check out the trails. Trail maps show each trail's rating, from easy to difficult. The 75 miles of trails are made up of loops and interconnecting trails on Leatherwood property, as well as the adjoining Joetown, a 1,550-acre tract that will soon be incorporated into Leatherwood.

There are five trail-entry points directly accessible from the stable area, and six loops ranging from five to 20 miles long. Although trail distances aren't listed, Hugh Hanchey, the stable manager, will give you fairly accurate distances and make route suggestions according to your and your horse's abilities.

If you're a relatively seasoned rider, I recommend a nine-mile, moderately difficult trek that will take you onto a mountaintop, where you can enjoy a picnic with an awesome view. Along the way, you'll see Grandfather Mountain, Deep Gap, and Raven Rock, and glimpse Elk Creek.

Pack a lunch, and head out past the old Keyes log cabin and to Apple Tree Trail. Then get onto Black Rock Trail, which is scenic and is an easier climb than some other routes to the ridge top. From there, turn left on the Daniel Boone Trail, where you'll spot a great place for lunch. After enjoying your lunch and the view, mount up, and ride until you connect onto Johnny Cake, then to Eagle Eye and Ambush Trail, which will lead you back to the stables.

All trails feature ever-changing scenery as they twist and wind up and down through old-growth hemlocks, massive oaks, dogwoods, and a thick growth of mountain laurel and rhododendron. During spring and summer, the foliage comes alive with wildflowers, including the most impressive trillium. On the mountaintop, you'll be rewarded with spectacular views that end at the far horizon, with mountains and foothills in between.

You may glimpse deer, fox, raccoon, coyote, possum, wild turkey, and all types



All trails feature ever-changing scenery as they twist and wind up and down through old-growth hemlocks, massive oaks, dogwoods, and a thick growth of mountain laurel and rhododendron.

DESTINATION



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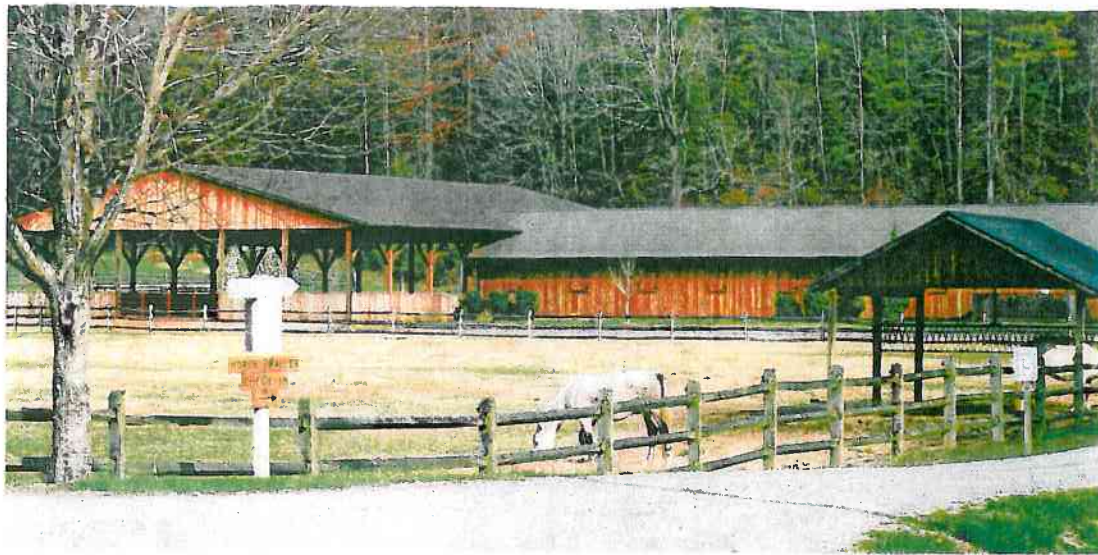
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Leatherwood Mountains Resort offers natural beauty, top-notch equestrian facilities (shown), well-marked trails, outstanding views, friendly personnel, and an on-site restaurant.

of birds. You might even get a rare view of a bobcat or mountain lion. There are bears, but they tend to shy away from humans. You might see an occasional hiker or fellow rider, but no motorized vehicles are allowed.

Although some of the trails can be challenging because of the climbs and descents, the footing is soft, with little to no rocks, so hoof pads aren't necessary. However, breastcollars are recommended, to keep your saddle in place on steep trails.

Trails are well-marked, and the map and trail signs are easy to follow. Fanciful trail names include Ambush Trail, Eagle Eye, Hogback, Slick Rock, Johnny Cake, Thunderbolt, Tricky Creek, and Trot-A-Lot.

### Inside Tips

During the heat of the summer, plan to ride early in the morning and late in the afternoon, although it's typically 10 degrees cooler on the shaded mountain trails. The rest of the year, wear layers, and pack raingear. Even though it may be pleasant when you head out for a ride, the weather can change as quickly as the elevation.

You'll find abundant water for your horse in the lower elevations, but fewer places on the higher trails. Bring electrolytes if you plan to go on long rides, especially in the summer months. Don't forget your drinking water and bug repellent. Although the flies and ticks aren't a big problem, gnats can be worrisome in the summer.

If you don't own a horse or can't bring him with you, stable horses are available for lessons and guided trail rides. You might want to take a day to

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DESTINATIONS

## Star of the South

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visit the high-country town of Boone (18 miles away), or sightsee at Blowing Rock (25 miles away) or Grandfather Mountain (40 miles away). On the last weekend of April, you can catch the four-day Bluegrass Merle Fest (800/343-7857; [www.merlefest.org](http://www.merlefest.org)) 

For more information on the Leatherwood Mountains Resort, call (800) 4NC-MTNS [462-6867], or visit [www.leatherwoodmountains.com](http://www.leatherwoodmountains.com).

Genie Stewart-Spears ([www.geniess.smugmug.com](http://www.geniess.smugmug.com)) is an equine journalist and photographer who lives in the center of Illinois' Shawnee National Forest. After garnering more than 3,000 endurance and competitive trail miles, she's now an avid recreational trail rider. She writes and photographs for top national equine magazines; her photography appears in numerous equine-oriented advertisements, books, and periodicals.



Left: There are five trail-entry points directly accessible from Leatherwood's stable area, and six loops ranging from five to 20 miles long.

Below: Leatherwood's barns offer 24-hour security. Both barns are situated across the road from the campground, and feature restrooms and showers.



RESOURCES

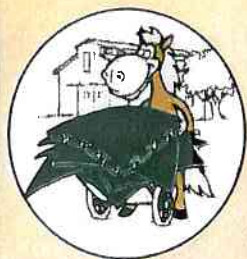
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