

Creature Comforts

Dog tired? Three pet-friendly B&Bs in the mountains show plenty of hospitality to humans — and their canine companions.

by Britta Waller

My dog Loretta is 6 years old, but she still has puppy-dog eyes. She aims her adorable brown peepers right at me when she wants a biscuit, a walk, or a tummy rub. Never are her eyes more pleading than when I am about to go on a trip. She knows my suitcase and the hurried rushing around I do when packing. She follows me with those eyes from room to room expressing her worry and uncertainty about her owner's impending departure. And if I have to leave her in the care of a friend or at a kennel, guilt follows me on my trip. Thankfully, I'm able to take her with me to more and more places throughout North Carolina as vacation properties in our state have begun opening their doors to pets. Loretta and I recently traveled to western North Carolina, exploring some mountain getaways that would become homes away from home for both of us.

Buffalo Tavern

Calling ahead to talk to a B&B owner about their pet policy is often a smart idea. I did that when checking out Buffalo Tavern Bed and Breakfast in West Jefferson. Owner Karon Torrence explains that she didn't start out welcoming dogs to this historic inn. "I kind of went back and forth on it," she says. Although a dog-owner herself, she wasn't sure it was the right choice for her business. Then a guest who was traveling with a Labrador came to stay. He explained that he planned to leave his pup in his car while he took a room in the inn. Torrence offered to let the Lab indoors on a trial basis. (I'm guessing that dog had the same puppy-dog eyes as Loretta.) The experiment worked. "He was such a good guest," she says. The pet policy was begun.

Torrence's dog, Cooper, holds the position of innkeeper at Buffalo Tavern. Most of his duties center around welcoming guests to this special hideaway and setting a good example for behavior around the property. "He gets along with everyone," Torrence says. Cooper is a Shiloh Shepherd, a purebred with a gentle disposition. "I wanted a big couch-potato dog." Cooper does one more thing: He's the standard for the weight limit of canine guests. "As long as your dog weighs less than mine," Torrence tells her guests, "we're fine." Cooper tips the scales at 130 pounds.

Torrence and Cooper bought Buffalo Tavern in 1998. She was looking for an old house to restore and turn into a business. "It was a dump," she says of the building's state of repair seven years ago. Buffalo Tavern was built in 1872, originally the residence of George Washington Ray. A wealthy landowner, Ray's residence was the first in Ashe County to have glass windows. The stone and timber for the building were harvested from the surrounding mountain property. Ray's craftsmanship is highlighted in the woodwork of the house's two staircases and the brickwork of its seven fireplaces.

In the late 1880s, Ray opened his home as a guesthouse for merchant travelers between North Carolina and Tennessee. It was also a favorite accommodation for sporting types visiting the Buffalo Hunting Grounds. Later, the tavern was said to have become a brothel. Overall, it has had a rough-and-tumble past. Things were particularly lively during the Prohibition Era of the 1920s. "There was a fight guaranteed every Saturday night," Torrence says.

Today, after extensive renovation to the plumbing, wiring, and main structure, Buffalo Tavern is a quiet getaway with a focus on romance. The three guest rooms have names that hint at Buffalo Tavern's past — the Flapper's Room, the Madam's Room, and the

Governor's Room (early state leaders were said to be among Buffalo Tavern's guests). Each room is decorated with period furnishings and has a gas fireplace and two-person claw-foot tub. Plus, there are no televisions in the rooms, so couples can actually converse.

Torrence makes sure not to take herself too seriously — after all, she has her dog as her innkeeper. Buffalo Tavern's website also warns that she's only recently learned her way around a kitchen. "It's true," she says. "I did have to learn how to cook [before the inn opened]." And even though she doesn't have any of what she describes as the "stuffy" experience she's seen among other inn owners — no lessons from Julia Child or classes at the Cordon Bleu on her resume — she seems to do a pretty good job of impressing at breakfast. By candlelight, guests breakfast on baked pears with whipped cream, egg soufflé with bacon, fruit, croissants, juice, and coffee.

And has the dog policy worked out? Absolutely. "Most people who travel with dogs are so considerate." Loretta and I would have to humbly agree.

Buffalo Tavern Bed and Breakfast

958 West Buffalo Road

West Jefferson, N.C. 28694

(336) 877-2873

www.buffalotavern.com.

Room rates are \$115 to \$150 per night in summer and fall, \$95 to \$115 in other seasons. There is a \$20 fee per visit for bringing your dog.

B&B at Ponder Cove

What do the best dog-friendly bed and breakfasts have in common? They're owned by innkeepers who are themselves passionate dog owners. Martha Abraham and Gary Van Rawlins, who run the B&B at Ponder Cove in Mars Hill, have two canine business partners: Henry, a mellow weimaraner who sets the example of good manners (don't get on the furniture if it doesn't have a doggie throw protecting it; don't tromp on the landscaping), and Ponder, an exuberant Spanish water dog with curly brown locks who might be considered the activities director (chase sticks, rest a bit, then chase sticks some more). Loretta is delighted with the chance to play with new dog companions, and the fun gets more intense after two other couples arrive with their dogs.

Martha explains that this is just the kind of experience they hope their guests have: a chance to visit North Carolina's beautiful mountains, of course, but also the chance to meet other dog owners at a bed and breakfast tailored to their needs. For me, my room has a beautiful four-poster bed designed and built by Van Rawlins, who is a custom furniture maker. For Loretta, there's a welcome bag with treats, a bandanna with the property's logo, and a set of clean-up bags.

Abraham's tastes have been honed by years in the fashion industry as a buyer for upscale department stores. The room where I'm staying, the Madison, is a well thought-out combination of red toile bedding and Asian-inspired accessories. The floors are beautiful hardwood, with a few no-nonsense berber carpets downstairs. The great room has several pieces of furniture designed and built by Van Rawlins, including a wonderful oversized rocker with buttery-smooth arms and a perfect gliding motion. Art by friends and local craftspeople decorates the space, and a wood-fired stove adds to the warmth. Along the open hallway upstairs, we can see the gallery of photos of other guests — the canine guests, that is.

Abraham has thrown herself into innkeeping, happily exchanging the pressures of high-end retail work for the freedom to own a business and design its details. Even the property's logo — a cartoon dog with a suitcase — shows her personal touch. The pup is wearing a pair of dark, round glasses just like Abraham's. She explains that she's really doing what she did before, creating a brand that appeals to a distinctive type of dog- and mountain-loving guest.

It seems to be working. One of the couples at the B&B during our stay are return guests, and they ask about openings in the reservation book for their next visit even before this one is over.

House rules say dogs cannot be in the great room during breakfast, leaving us human guests the chance to enjoy fruit, juice, and Monte Cristo sandwiches on croissants at leisure. Afterward, everyone hikes up the hillside nearest the house to sit and look over the property and sip coffee. There are 93 acres here, from muddy trails for doggie romps to landscaped terraces around the main house. In the distance down the hill, we can see a small red barn that will eventually become a private cabin, and the restored building Van Rawlins uses as his wood shop.

Abraham has become a quick expert on the area, with recommendations for where to dine in the big city (nearby Asheville, that is) or Weaverville; where to hike near the Blue Ridge Parkway; and local artists and galleries she frequents. But what Loretta and I like best is just relaxing on the porch chairs amid our state's beautiful mountains.

B&B at Ponder Cove
1067 Ponder Creek Road
Mars Hill, N.C. 28754
(828) 689-7304
www.pondercove.com
Rooms range from \$165 to \$195.

Madison Inn

Black Mountain is a doggy town. The unique downtown shops offer fun gifts, books, handcrafts, and clothes, of course. We discover that many of them have resident canines, as well. We spot a napping mutt at the back of the Wilde & Woolly yarn shop; pass by a vigilant toy breed barking from the doorway of a paint-it-yourself pottery studio and visit with Bella Joy at Mountain Spirit Gifts. She wins the prize for merchandising: She can spin a rack of jewelry with her nose. Loretta's favorite shop, however, is the Bone-a-Fide Bakery. A few samples lead us to our selections: homemade (and very reasonably priced) cheddar biscuits.

We leave downtown and drive into the woods to our accommodations at the Madison Inn. The property is tucked away from the main thoroughfares in a quiet neighborhood of family homes and church retreat cabins. The ground-level and second-story porches look out across the valley and roadway to an appealing mountain view.

Each of the 11 bedrooms at the Madison is uniquely decorated but offers a private entrance and shared balcony space. Individual care has clearly been put into the look of each room, and a range of tastes can be satisfied with styles ranging from the wood-paneled room called "The Cabin" to the numerous quilts in "Granny's Room." Our room is "The Charleston." There's a long walnut dresser, tapestry wall hangings, and a four-

poster bed. Loretta's favorite part of the room is the door. It's all glass, so she can look out on the neighborhood and wildlife while I'm fetching the luggage.

Leaving Loretta to munch on her cheddar biscuits, I adjourn downstairs to Madison's restaurant for dinner. As in the rooms, each space in the restaurant is uniquely decorated. I choose a table in the middle section, called the library, where books and curio-filled shelves give an intimate feel to the space.

Entertaining presentation is the specialty of this restaurant, and several tables of guests are clearly celebrating special occasions. Portions are huge; I fill up on two plump crab cakes, mashed potatoes, and garlicky steamed green beans. I don't have space for dessert, but I enjoy seeing those around me order it. The waitress becomes a chef, cooking buttery bananas Foster and cheesecake with cherries jubilee for several groups. The brandy-fueled flames light up, and the guests respond with cheers and laughter. "Look at the ceiling," the maitre d' jokes when asked if he or the waitress is bolder with the flambé desserts. "You can see my scorch marks."

After the festive mood of the dining room, it's pleasant to retire back to my quiet room with Loretta. We take an evening walk in the neighborhood, then tuck under the covers for a night's sleep.

The breakfast chef, it seems, doesn't like to be outdone by the dinner chef. When I tell the waiter I'm not really up for eggs Benedict (that morning's selection), he says that perhaps I can just eat the side dishes. Sure, I say. He returns with a plate of peppery fried potatoes and onions, pancakes with chocolate and butterscotch chips, and a buttered English muffin. It's all delicious, but what really wows me is his offer to scramble eggs for me to take up to Loretta. "We do it every day for our dogs," he explains. Loretta is delighted with her special bed-and-breakfast treat, and we both depart with full and happy tummies.

The Madison Inn, Restaurant and Mountain Lodge
15 Dixon Drive
Black Mountain, N.C. 28711
(828) 669-4785
www.madisonsblackmountain.com.
Rooms from \$59 per night for two,
including breakfast.

Britta Waller is a senior editor at Pace Communications in Greensboro.