

A High Habit

North Carolina's High Hampton Inn takes pride in its eccentric guests, Southern traditions and monster buffet

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK



The view of Rock Mountain with Jewel Lake in the foreground.

The morning air smelled of crisp apples, wet rocks and fresh pine. Ah, autumn in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Perfect weather for hiking, golfing, tending to a dahlia garden, reading in a comfortable chair overlooking a mirror-clear mountain lake or even chatting with friends while seated in front of a four-sided natural stone fireplace — that is, if you're a guest at the High Hampton Inn & Country Club.

The 1,400-acre mountain estate is a place where some kind of activity is generally preferred to relaxing in private. "If you come to High Hampton, we don't want to encourage you to stay in your room," says general manager Mark Jones.

Offerings for adults and children range from golf to arts-and-crafts classes (where guests might make candles, jewelry or even pet rocks), from tennis to history lectures, wildflower workshops to lawn games, donkey-cart rides to water sports.

Given the High Hampton's program roster and emphasis on community, the dominant feeling of the place is a summer camp with amenities for grownups. Yes, there's a gift shop, someone to schlep your luggage, sheets on the beds instead of sleeping bags. There's also a well-stocked bar, which hasn't always been the case; the property was once owned by someone whose mother was pro-Prohibition.

"We just love it: the clientele, the people who run it, the hostesses and the clerks. You make friends through the years and they continue to go back, too. We always go the same time every year."

SARA MELL EDWARDS
HIGH HAMPTON VISITOR
FROM ALABAMA SINCE 1939

See No Evil, Hear No Evil

The bar excepted, tradition is a core value at High Hampton. Will McKee Jr. is the third-generation property owner. His grandfather purchased the 2,000-acre estate in 1922, and McKee's father managed the estate starting in the 1950s.

Change and modernization are actively resisted here. There are no telephones or televisions in any of the guest rooms. That get-back-to-nature feeling is intentional and extends to the rustic décor. The Inn's exterior has chestnut bark siding. Interior walls are natural woods. Furniture is lodge-traditional. Fabrics are plaids and quilts.

The sounds of cheerful conversation, rippling water and the cracking of golf balls dominate the day; at night it's forks against stoneware, laughter and, sometimes, a wedding reception band. The spirit of the place is perhaps most prevalent in the dining hall, where three meals are served buffet-style each day. The food is simple yet satisfying. The buffet is 40 strides long and features two entrée choices with several side options and numerous desserts. Breakfast items include eggs, corn beef hash, cinnamon rolls and made-to-order waffles. Traditional high tea is served every afternoon between four and five. Gentlemen are required to wear a coat and tie for the evening meal, and women are asked to

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MARK JONES

HIGH HAMPTON GENERAL MANAGER

dress accordingly. “We’re not a five-star restaurant,” admits Jones, who goes on to explain the dress code is in place to “respect Southern tradition and Southern values.”

Customs continue through the loyal clientele. “Many, many times we’ve married off hotel guests or homeowners who bring back their children,” says Jones, who has worked at High Hampton for 18 years. “That’s a short time around here,” he says of his tenure at the property.

For instance, Sara Mell Edwards, of Anniston, Ala., has visited High Hampton every year since 1939. First accompanying her parents as a young girl, she now visits with her husband, children and grandchildren. “We just love it,” she says, “the clientele, the people who run it, the hostesses and the clerks. You make friends through the years and they con-

tinue to go back, too. We go the same time every year.”

If Edwards’ long-standing tradition has any drawback, it’s this: “This year was the first time only one friend came back. The others were all sick or deceased. One couple comes from England every other year.” This was their year off, but she plans to see them next year. In the absence of friends, what’s the draw? “The weather’s beautiful, the accommodations are rustic but comfortable, the views are fabulous, the grounds are pretty and well kept,” explains Edwards. And some details leave an imprint on memory, she says. “In the summertime they have wonderful hummingbirds that come and feed on the front porch.”

The Longest Drive

The key to unlocking High Hamp-

ton’s soul is listening to its caretakers and guests. Every nook and cranny around the place is the setting of a story. One favorite: When one regular guest, the elderly Mr. Adams, started losing his eyesight, he didn’t want his friends to find out. So, to maintain appearances, Mr. Adams would switch seats with his chauffeur at the High Hampton’s entrance and get behind the steering wheel of his car. Not wanting to hit anyone, he would then honk the horn during the entire drive down to the parking lot.

Most stories involve friendships; a few center on rivalries. The 120 rooms (30 in the Inn, the remainder in cottages) boast different amenities. Some have screened porches, others fireplaces. The number and size of beds and private bathrooms varies. (Privately owned Colony Homes, available during part of the year, add rental options with more modern amenities.) Jones says it takes families an average of three to four stays before finding the perfect space; then, “once guests find a room or cottage that fits their needs, they book it year after year.” Assuming it’s available, of course.

Reservations and room requests are granted on a seniority basis, a system that has caused its share of heartache over the years. A corner room at the inn is the source of one legendary battle that has an elderly lady hoping to at least outlive her

If You Go...

High Hampton Inn & Country Club

1525 Highway 107 South
Cashiers, NC 28717

Open late April through mid-November, the Inn and Cottages are priced from \$100 a night, which includes three meals daily. Colony Homes start at \$300 a night for a three-night minimum stay and may be rented with or without meals at the Inn.

Information: (828) 743-2411
Reservations: (800) 334-2551
www.highhamptoninn.com

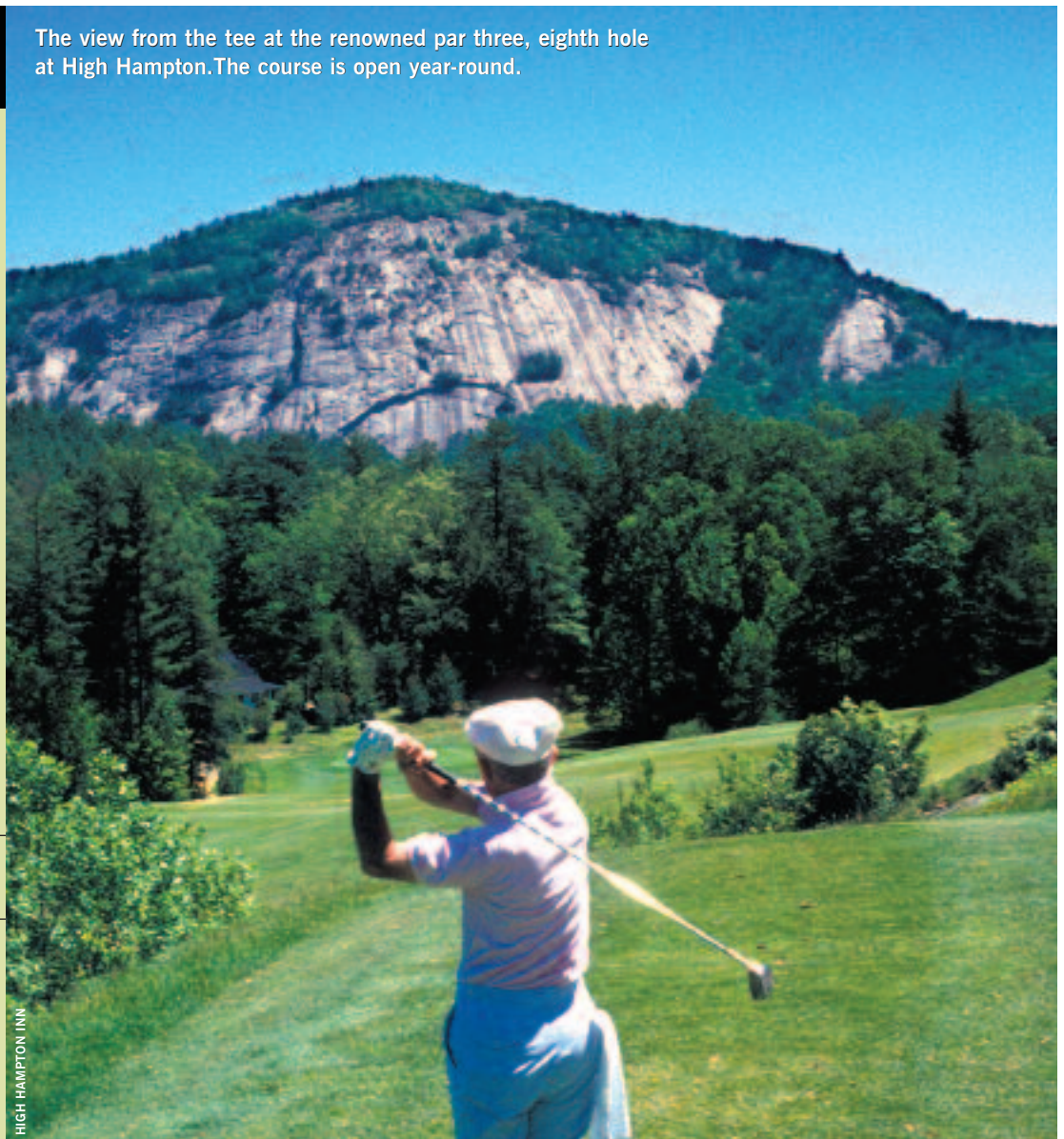
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from **CHARLOTTE**
140 miles

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295 miles

Editor’s Note: Although part of the High Hampton is closed from November through April, some amenities are available year-round, such as cottage rentals, the golf course, tennis courts and hiking trails.

The view from the tee at the renowned par three, eighth hole at High Hampton. The course is open year-round.



HIGH HAMPTON INN



HIGH HAMPTON INN

With the four-sided fireplace in the background, traditional high tea is served every afternoon.

rival (who enjoys the advantage of two years' seniority) so she can finally crawl into the bed she wants.

If one's preferred room is booked on a particular weekend, wouldn't it be easiest to just choose another weekend? "No, you can't make some families change dates or they wouldn't see their same friends," explains Jones.

Returning guests make up "80 to 85 percent [of the total] in the summer and about 60 percent in the fall and spring," says Jones. High-profile guests include members of the U.S. Congress, military generals and writers such as Winston Groom, author of *Forrest Gump*. Andre Agassi and Brooke Shields honeymooned at High Hampton.

Rock Mountain, which dominates the view at High Hampton, has its own stories. "See that piece that curves like a rainbow, except there's no color variation?" asks Jones. The scar marks where a piece of the mountain fell off during the Great Charleston Earthquake of 1886.

Ground-shaking is rare in the area, but High Hampton has stirred the dreams of its guests for generations and continues to do so.

Hope S. Philbrick is a freelance writer because she doesn't think work and fun should be mutually exclusive.

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