



THIS SMOKY MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY IS A MAGNET FOR INDUSTRY

Like Beekeeping, Doll Making and Berry Picking. Swain County, North Carolina, is rampant with growing industry—cottage industry that is. Just take a look around—The Cottage Craftsman, a friendly little Bryson City shop filled with jellies, candles, honey, dolls and music—almost all of it is produced right here in the shadows of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. “We’re proud to support the mountain folks who support themselves,” says owner Debbie Mills. “Who says you can’t ‘live off the land’ anymore?” she adds with a chuckle.

Going Green Means Homegrown. With national park and forest lands making up 87% of Swain County, it’s no surprise that this green enclave in the Southern Appalachians is a destination for ecotourists. But it’s not only the towering trees and sparkling rivers that draw them here. They also come to experience the down-to-earth lifestyle and exquisite craftsmanship of the local people. In Swain County, “homegrown” is not a trendy movement, but an age-old way of life that goes hand in hand with preserving and protecting the natural splendor of these pristine mountains.

Corn Shuck Dolls and Sourwood Honey. Among the vendors whose wares grace the shelves of The Cottage Craftsman is Annie Lee Bryson, “the queen of corn shuck crafts,” who learned her skills in 1940. “She gets much of the silk for her dolls’ hair from David Higgins,” explains Debbie, “and he uses heritage seeds to grow his own corn to make brooms.”

Store visitors will also discover sourwood honey from local beekeepers and homemade jelly from Molly Shaw, a local mother who personally picks her strawberries and blueberries at nearby farms. A glance around the shop reveals other treasures including bottles of sassafras syrup, goat’s milk soap, delicate wax lanterns known as “bee globes” and local wines, the grapes for which were picked by volunteers from the Episcopalian church. “It’s all about community,” says Debbie with a warm smile.

Walk on the Wild Side. Swain County culture grew naturally out of the wild mountain terrain that dominates the countryside. The trails of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park often lead an observant hiker to an encounter with a 200-year-old poplar, a lumbering black bear, a tiny lungless salamander, a meadow of wildflowers or even a small herd of elk. No temperate zone forest anywhere in the world can match the Smokies for biodiversity.

If walking strikes you as a bit too tame, try a hair-raising kayak ride down the frothy Nantahala River, or a bouncing decent of Deep Creek with nothing between you and a bracing bath but a truck inner tube. Other activities include camping, biking, horseback riding, fishing the depths of Fontana Lake and exploring the mysteries of the Cherokee, whose sacred home is right here in the county.

We’ve Always Been Green. When you grow up in the midst of stunning natural beauty, “going green” isn’t something you have to think about. “Swain County folks just follow in the footsteps of their grandparents,” says Debbie. “Growing what you need, creating simple, beautiful works of art, and taking care of the land is a way of life here. Being a part of that is something real special for our visitors. And for me, too.”

For more information on touring the Smokies, contact the Swain County Chamber of Commerce, 210 Main Street, P.O. Box 509, Bryson City, NC 28713; chamber@greatsmokies.com; or 800-867-9246.

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