

HIDDEN IN THE MOUNTAINS
AND REMINISCENT OF LUXURIOUS
WILDERNESS RETREATS POPULAR
IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY,
THE GREAT CAMPS OF THE SMOKIES
WERE BUILT AS PLACES
TO RELAX AND ENJOY

THE CRISP MOUNTAIN AIR

Ask two friends what paradise is, and one may summon images of tropical beaches while the other refers to snow-laden ski slopes. But what Jose Rosado, a Miami businessman who fell in love with North Carolina in the '80s, calls paradise is a secluded body of water named Lake Santeetlah and its surrounding mountains. After spending a weekend on Lake Santeetlah just 90 minutes outside of Asheville, I must say I'm now firmly rooted in Rosado's camp on the paradise question.

And camp is the key word here. Rosado's visionary developments, Santeetlah Lakeside and the future Wildsprings, located in the western tip of North Carolina in the Great Smoky Mountains near Robbinsville, are inspired by the Great Camps of the Adirondacks — luxurious wilderness retreats built in the late 19th century.

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PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF GREAT CAMPS OF THE SMOKIES / GIL STOSE PHOTOGRAPHY



NOW THIS IS CAMPING: One of the Great Camps' custom homes, appropriately nicknamed The Treehouse, features an outdoor living room overlooking Lake Santeetlah.



The surroundings of the Great Camps of the Smokies encourage comfortable outdoor living: Try your morning coffee on the deck of The Treehouse.

These retreats, or compounds as they were called, immersed their summer residents — often large, extended families — in the thick of nature without sacrificing the comforts of civilization. The Great Camps furnished the backdrop for many fond memories as families and friends celebrated the outdoors and each other.

Rosado had his own memories to guide him in the creation of the Great Camps of the Smokies, an upscale second home community destined to sell quickly. His first-hand experience — numerous summers at his grandfather's compound on Lake Placid — left a lasting impression. Fun-filled days and nights on the lake emphasized the essential role nature plays in family

bonding through outdoor activities and campfire conversations.

I arrived with my own family on a Friday afternoon to get a taste of life in Santeetlah Lakeside, a Great Camps community. A winding, shoreline blacktop delivered us to the Great Camps Lodge, a three-story, waterfront “cottage” that renters can use as a base camp when striking out for the abundant outdoor activities the area offers. The recreational list is long, but highlights include numerous nature trails, national forests, exciting white-water rafting runs, peaceful campsites hidden within the trees on the shoreline of Lake Santeetlah, as well as prime fishing in the lake.

It was the fishing my boys were raring to do. Although



Wilderness seekers, welcome to paradise. Homes at the Great Camps of the Smokies combine stunning water views with mountain landscapes.

we'd tried before, neither boy had ever caught a fish. So after exploring the spacious lodge, our first stop was the Santeetlah Marina to get bait.

The marina figures prominently in the Great Camps of the Smokies concept as all the communities have access. While many Santeetlah Lakeside residents have boat docks, the future inhabitants of Wildsprings, a mountain living development being created a few miles away, will have their own lake access through 72 new boat slips the marina is adding.

The true gem of the Santeetlah Lakeside community, however, and what has garnered much attention, is the architecture of its unique homes — rustic, but elegant dwellings that blend into the trees and curves of the shoreline using indigenous materials such as stone and heavy timber — and their commanding views. The Treehouse, in particular, is a spectacular cabin with numerous decks perched among shoreline poplars and oaks that indeed give the illusion you're nestled high in the trees. Adirondack-style furniture, from the nearby Moose Hollow Trading Company in Murphy, supplies the perfect complement to the 2,800-square-foot structure.

Other houses include lake-view cottages named Twin Falls and The Dragonfly. Twin Falls takes its name from the two waterfalls cascading down both sides of it. In fact, several waterfalls weave throughout the development in thoughtful

landscaping that accentuates the natural beauty of the steep slope grounds.

If the crisp mountain air isn't enough to help the residents of Santeetlah Lakeside breathe easy, then the knowledge that their pristine views will remain unsullied during their lifetimes and beyond will ensure restful breaths. More than 80 percent of Lake Santeetlah's shoreline is protected as well as the mountains beyond because they're part of the Nantahala National Forest.

The natural, uncluttered view provided a peaceful Friday evening as I helped the boys fish off the lodge's dock. Randall Veal, the owner of Santeetlah Marina, had recommended red worms, so we spent an hour tempting the fish population with the little wrigglers. No takers. My 5-year-old, Cort, lost interest quickly, but John, 7, persevered. Reluctant to give up when it was time for dinner, he agreed to go up only when I promised him we'd return afterward. And we did, but still no results. At the end of day one, it was Fish 2, Fishermen 0.

Friday night treated us to a dramatic thunderstorm on the lake. Mesmerized by the view from the vast windows of the lodge's master bedroom, I was thankful for our sophisticated "camping" experience. I've weathered one wicked thunderstorm from inside a tent, giving me the epiphany that it's much better to watch such a storm from a shelter like

the lodge versus dodging leaky seams and being concerned the entire structure was on the brink of collapse from wind and water.

But not everyone shares that opinion. For those who want to rough it in a real tent, Great Camps can accommodate. After fishing again in the morning with the same results — score one more for the fish — I linked up with Javier Rosado, Jose's son and project manager for Santeetlah Lakeside and Wildsprings, to learn more about the developments. With coal-black hair and an easy grin, Javier, 30, gave my family and me a boat tour of the lake pointing out various campsites tucked behind the trees on the water's edge. For residents and lodge guests, Great Camps has concierge services that will pitch tents, gather provisions, and drop participants off at the lakeside campsites. Campers can stay up to two weeks on the campgrounds, which charge no fee for the stay.

Any true wilderness retreat brings the outside in: Interior amenities include a focus on natural materials, like a stone fireplace, exposed wooden beams and window frames, and Craftsman-inspired furnishings.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF GREAT CAMPS OF THE SMOKIES / GIL STOSE PHOTOGRAPHY

Glamping: glamorous camping. “It’s the adventure without the hassle.”

For those who desire an experience somewhere between the supreme comfort of the lodge and the cramped quarters of small tents, Great Camps has grand plans at its future Wildsprings development. In this mountain living community, with its themed villages built around community gardens, meadows, trout streams, and hillside forests, the Rosados have set aside an area for “glamping,” the term coined for glamorous camping. Here campers will sleep on real beds in large, hard-canvas safari tents with hardwood floors. “It’s the adventure without the hassle,” Javier said.

Wildsprings’ development was in the early stages as Javier and I explored the staked and labeled property. It’s apparent the beauty of the area will be enhanced by accentuating natural features, much like polishing a rare gem, rather than shuffling fill dirt from one lot to the next. A naturally terraced area next to a stream bank laced with trees, dubbed “The Dell,” where the temperature was noticeably cooler, will provide a community picnic area. An old barn in the meadow, its wood weathered gray from years of exposure, will transform into the community recreation center that hosts “white sheet” movie night on the weekends.

While making our way from underneath the canopy of a hillside forest to another meadow where tall grass rippled in waves under a cool breeze, Javier reminisced about Camp Pinnacle, an 80-year-old camp in Hendersonville, where he and his brother, Victor, spent portions of their summers learning to rock climb, hike, kayak, and even tell ghost stories. Raised in Florida, Javier described the effect Camp Pinnacle had on his life. “That camp exposed me to the outdoors in ways I’d never have experienced in Miami,” Javier recalls, his voice reverent as we traveled toward one of the 20 natural springs that bubble up in the area. “I feel at home here.”

On weekends, Javier puts his Camp Pinnacle skills to use by exploring the mountain forests above the development, noting overgrown logging roads that will make excellent hiking trails when the community’s members take residence. As we neared the end of our tour, a wild turkey, ruffled by our presence, took flight 15 feet from us and sailed across the meadow to quieter pastures. I made a mental note to tell the boys, wishing they’d been there to see it.

Saturday ended with evening conversation by a blazing fire in the lodge's stone fireplace. We spoke of pristine mountains, peaceful lakes, and wild turkeys. Huddled around the hearth, we roasted marshmallows to cap off a perfect day. Well, almost perfect. We still hadn't hooked that elusive fish. We agreed to try again before leaving the next morning.

The whole time we'd fished, I'd urged John to have patience, to leave the bait and bobber in the water undisturbed. By

Sunday morning, since only a few hours remained, I thought, "Hey, why not let him do what he wants? At least he'll have more fun." So John fidgeted with the bait in the water, plopping it in near the shore retaining wall, then reeling it out immediately, before starting over. In my infinite wisdom, I sighed at his folly. But he was having fun.

I was busy with Cort's pole when a shrill voice yelled, "Fiiiiiiiiisssshhhh!" Looking up, I saw John, eyes wide, with the end of his pole bending toward the water. I couldn't risk this gift from the waters of Lake Santeetlah getting off the hook, so I helped John land his catch — a bass about nine inches. At that moment, John wouldn't have needed a boat to get across the lake. Skipping across the water to the other side would have worked just fine. After snapping a few quick photos, we set the little guy free. John, displaying that innocent grin that seems reserved for the young, watched the fish glide away in the green water.

The weekend was now complete, but it didn't make it any easier to leave, especially for a 7-year-old. Pulling out of the driveway, John looked back, watching the lodge recede in the rear window. As it disappeared behind the turn, he proclaimed, "That was the best weekend ever." It appears John is planted now in the Rosados' camp, too.

The Rosados have something special with the Great Camps concept. Not only do they grasp the importance nature plays in strengthening families — when we allow it to — they also realize that paradise is rarely ever created by man; it must instead be accentuated and made accessible. To paraphrase an old saying, "paradise" may be in the eye of the beholder, but if the Great Camps of the Smokies are not on the paradise list of that beholder, there's a good chance he never eyed Santeetlah Lakeside. □



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