

TRAVEL + LEISURE

The Power of Travel

IN THE WORDS OF

TRACEE ELLIS ROSS



THE WILD EAST

Think the Mountain West has a lock on out-there adventures?
Lia Picard saddles up in North Carolina.

▲ Cataloochee Ranch co-owner Annie Colquitt takes in the view.

“I’M A COWGIRL NOW,” I proudly told myself while riding horseback one hazy blue afternoon in the Great Smoky Mountains. True, I didn’t exactly look the part, in my oversize button-down and cobalt-blue sneakers, but my dapple-gray horse, Dan, didn’t seem to mind. Surrounded by rhododendrons,

we ambled gently down the trail at **Cataloochee Ranch** (*doubles from \$400*). I couldn’t help feeling that I’d set out on a great adventure, even though we were less than an hour’s drive from downtown Asheville, North Carolina.

These days, the Southeast is having a bit of a ranch-vacation renaissance.

▶ A Lodge queen room at Windy Hill.



While such rural estates have long existed in this part of the country, they've only recently started to resemble the luxe getaways so popular in places like Montana and Wyoming. "It's a different flavor than out West," says Annie Colquitt, who owns and runs Cataloochee Ranch with her husband, David. "I'm not saying it's better, just that it's different."



◀ Farm-to-table dining at Cataloochee.

In fact, Colquitt was inspired to buy Cataloochee Ranch, which was first built in the 1930s, by her own trips to Colorado. "My hope is that it's someplace people want to come with their kids," she tells me. "We want it to be the kind of place where grandparents can bring everyone and spread out."

After taking over the ranch in 2020, the Colquitts, who also own the Swag, a hotel in nearby Waynesville, went to work transforming the 685-acre property from rustic to mountain chic. The ranch's 12 cabins and six suites now have headboards made from farm gates and colorful pieces by artists who work in the surrounding valley. And in the restaurant, Switchback, chef Jeb Aldrich prepares dishes using ingredients like mountain trout and berries grown on site.

In Georgia, the intimate four-cabin **Quercus** (from \$1,350 per person, all-inclusive) is another example of the trend. "It's an extension of our own home," says co-owner Chiara Visconti di Modrone, who infused the minimalist lodgings with Italian heirlooms like pewter tableware and marble busts. Though it hosts only a handful of guests at a time, the ranch spans 4,000 acres, set amid rolling hills an hour west of Atlanta. Activities include riding,



▲ A guest room at Cataloochee.

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fishing, and exploring by bike. Meals are served in a converted barn; the menu, designed by chef Ryan Smith of Atlanta’s Staplehouse, leans heavily on ingredients grown or raised on the ranch.

Estate-grown food is also a focus at **Windy Hill Farm & Preserve** (*doubles from \$499, all-inclusive*), in Loudon, Tennessee, just outside Knoxville. While the 650-acre property along the Tennessee River doesn’t offer horseback riding, it does raise hogs and chickens—and there’s a biodynamic

garden that supplies the restaurant, Wilder. The farm’s general manager, Steven Brewington, is part of the third generation working the property, which offers guided quail hunts as well as hiking, biking, fishing, and paddling. “Most of our guests come to experience the outdoors of East Tennessee,” Brewington says.

In 2021, Windy Hill got a serious upgrade. It has nine guest cabins, an eight-room lodge, and a five-bedroom farmhouse. “People definitely enjoy getting back to their room in the evenings,” Brewington observes, “and having a nice bed.”

▼ The restaurant Wilder, at Windy Hill Farm & Preserve.



FROM TOP: CHELSEA LANE PHOTOGRAPHY/COURTESY OF CATALOOCHEE RANCH; TAYLOR MARTIN PHOTOGRAPHY/COURTESY OF WINDY HILL FARM & PRESERVE