

Explore beautiful

GRAHAM COUNTY
by Lockie Hunter

Start: Bryson City **End:** Lake Santeetlah **Miles:** 42 **The Route:** Stray from U.S. 74 for a loop along N.C. 28 to U.S. 129 in Graham County, where the vibe is cultured, yet rugged. Bordered by Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the drive is enveloped by Nantahala National Forest. Along the way, you can check out local art, stellar views, challenging biking trails, and cast a line at Lake Santeetlah, all in fall's splendor.

STOP ONE

Stecoah Artisan Trail

The first stop on this self-drive tour is Mud Leaf Pottery on U.S. 28, about 10 minutes west of Bryson City. The trail flows through its namesake valley and offers opportunities to visit the studios of Graham County potters, glass blowers, and wood turners. Look for the signs on the road designating participants, or pick up a map at Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center (stop three). One of the highlights is Yellow Branch Farm and Pottery where you'll find hand-thrown stoneware and farmstead cheeses, including the much-loved basil. www.yellowbranch.com; www.stecoahvalleycenter.com/artisans.html

STOP TWO

Tsali Recreation Area

Rated one of the top 10 places to ride in the United States, Tsali is a mecca for mountain bikers and holds 39 miles of trails that also welcome horses. The four challenging loops wind through rugged landscapes made even more scenic by Mother Nature in fall. The 11-mile Right Loop offers connector trails to shorten the trek, while the

11.9 mile Left Loop includes creek crossings. Both routes and the Mouse Branch Loop (9 miles), which follows old logging roads, trace peninsulas for great views of Fontana Lake. Expect wildlife sightings. If you're exhausted after the ride, pick a campsite next to the trailhead. You can't beat hot showers, bathrooms, and a place to sleep for \$15 a night. www.main.nc.us/graham/hiking/tsali.html

Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center

Housed in a 1926 stone schoolhouse in the community of Stecoah, the center strives to preserve Appalachian culture. A gallery showcases the works of more than 100 local artisans. You'll find everything from hand-knit scarves to original oil paintings. Plan your trip accordingly and you can catch a class in a traditional Appalachian art forms such as wool rug braiding and farm basketmaking. Stop by for the Harvest Festival and Antique Tractor show October 14-16. Balsam Range plays Saturday night. www.stecoahvalleycenter.com

STOP THREE

Fontana Dam and Shuckstack Fire Tower

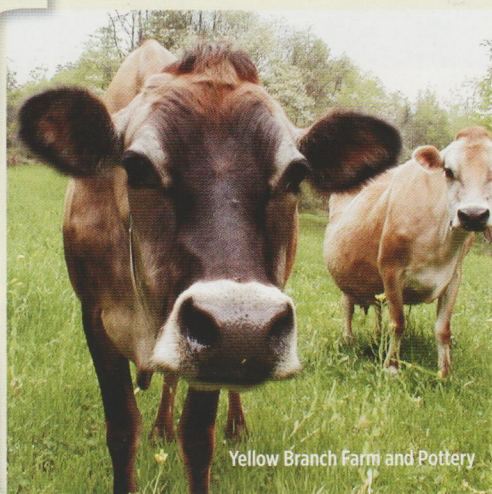
Stretching 2,365 feet across the Little Tennessee River, 480-foot Fontana Dam is the largest dam east of the Mississippi. Glistening Fontana Lake boasts 240 miles of nearly undeveloped shoreline, which makes it a pristine spot for canoeing, kayaking, and fishing. Many say it's one of the top smallmouth bass fishing lakes in the country. To set out for a challenging hike, park at the dam and walk 3.6 miles along the Appalachian Trail to Shuckstack Fire Tower for unsurpassed views of the foliage at an elevation of 4,020 feet. The spur trail to the tower is marked by a T-shaped white blaze. www.tva.gov/sites/fontana.htm

STOP FOUR

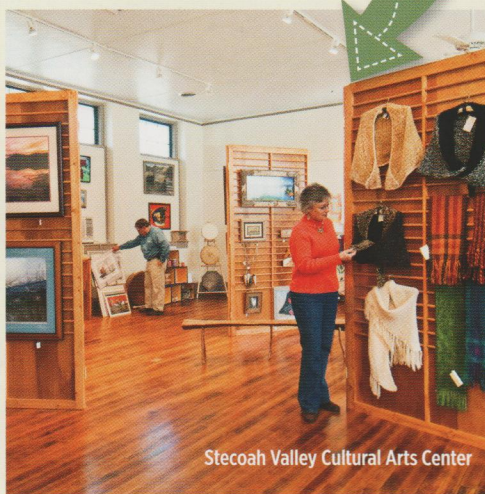
The Mountview Bistro at Fontana Village Resort

Nestled in Nantahala National Forest, this bistro offers alfresco American cuisine made with local fare. Pair tender steak with a fresh salad topped with house-made croutons. Savor wine in the

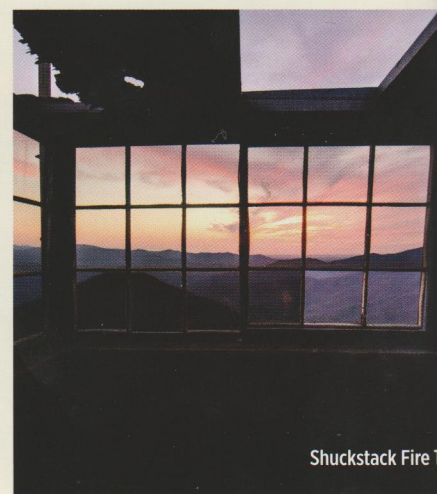
STOP FIVE



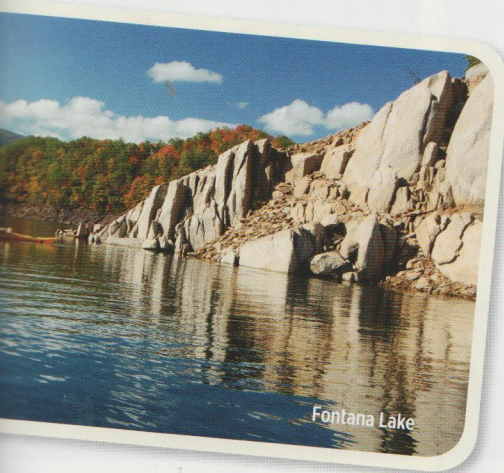
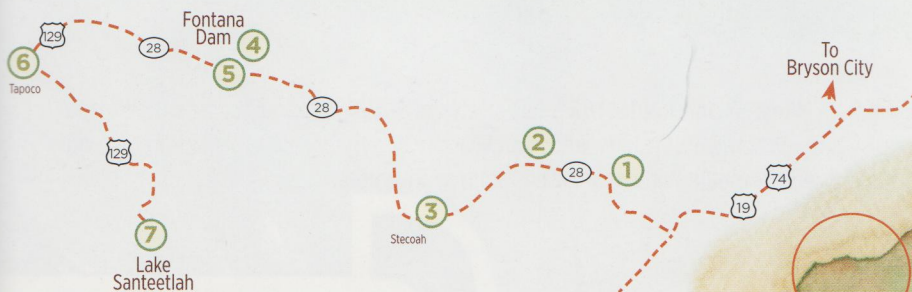
Yellow Branch Farm and Pottery



Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center



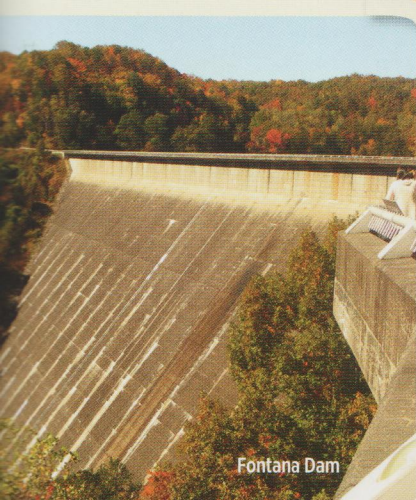
Shuckstack Fire Tower



cool air on the veranda. That's Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the distance. After lunch, Fontana Marina will outfit you with a canoe or kayak rental for a paddle on the lake. (Prices start at \$25 for two hours.) www.fontanavillage.com

Tapoco Lodge

Positioned on 120 acres on the banks of the Cheoah River, this adults-only, all-inclusive

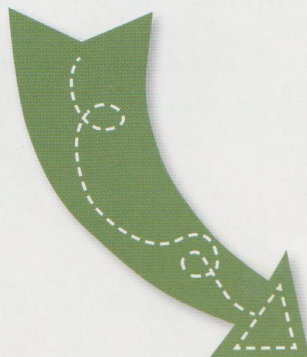


retreat provides panache for the adventurous traveler. With fly fishing guides on call and five miles of hiking trails, the lodge's rustic sophistication is ideal for the outdoor enthusiast who also likes to be pampered. Choose from suites, cabins, and riverfront or mountain view rooms. For a casual lunch, pick a table on the riverside patio at Slickrock Grille. Enjoy kayaking and rafting before returning to the lodge for a superb five-course dinner complemented by an extensive wine list at Jasper's Restaurant. (Singles from \$134) www.tapocolodge.com



Santeetlah Marina

Thirteen miles south of Tapoco Lodge on U.S. 129, Santeetlah Marina provides essentials such as pontoon rentals, bait, and fishing licenses. The state-record largemouth bass and walleye catches were made here recently, and the lake is brimming with bass, trout, and other native fish. With your catch in the cooler, head back through Robbinsville to Bryson City under a canopy of colorful deciduous trees. www.santeetlahmarina.com



LOTS TO DO

Head to Fontana Village Resort for Fall Hike Week, October 16-19. Explore Great Smoky Mountains National Park with a guide and discover the spectacle of a full moon rising during a trip to Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. www.fontanavillage.com

The leaves may be fading and falling, but there's still plenty of beauty to see during Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center's biannual drive-about of studios and galleries, November 25 & 26, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day. www.stecoahvalleycenter.com

WHAT A CATCH

Bass, including largemouth, smallmouth, striped, and white, are plentiful at Santeetlah and Fontana lakes. These terrific fighters are prized by sport fisherman and will often become airborne. Both lakes also boast walleye, trout, bream, and crappie. www.fishingnotes.com