

Unplug from winter at Georgia's most under-the-radar hike inn

By April Hunt



Georgia State Parks

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The path to unplugging from Atlanta this winter lies at the top of Amicalola Falls.

There, a five-mile trail wends its way to the Len Foote Hike Inn - Georgia's only backcountry lodge. Accessible only by foot, the Hike Inn welcomes hikers with rustic and comfortable rooms, fresh meals and views of the southern Appalachian Mountains.

TripAdvisor awarded the Hike Inn with a 2013 Certificate of Excellence for a reason. The solar-powered oasis includes 20 rooms, each with a bunk bed and bedding that cuts down on your pack, and bathhouse stocked with soap, shampoo and even hair dryers.

Beyond the radiant heat panels, the lodge also has three wood stoves – in the dining area, commons and lobby – that are especially gratifying in the winter chill. An overnight stay includes a home-cooked dinner and breakfast, made by an on-site crew.



Len Foote Hike Inn Courtesy of Lesli Peterson

Inn Executive Director Eric Graves said after moving to the lodge from the South Carolina coast, he was pleasantly surprised to find winter is his favorite season there.

"I love the clear winter views of the mountains during the day and seeing the lights in the valleys at night," Graves said. "The heat provided by the wood stoves brings everyone together, and I have always enjoyed the conversations with guests around the stoves."

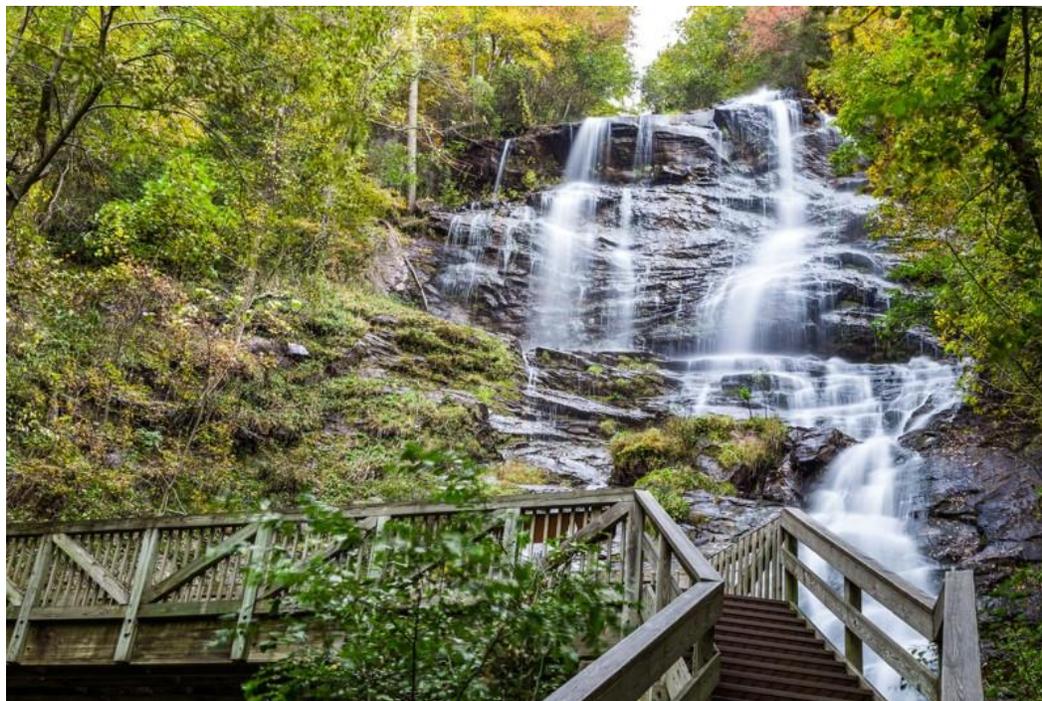
The trail is its own draw, named one of Backpacker magazine's "Best American Hikes" for its easy-to-moderate switchback route through oaks in the Chattahoochee National Forest.

The vistas along the ridges are especially clear in the bare woods of winter, while the valleys offer clear views of tree strands and creeks along the way.

"I love seeing the bare-bone hardwood tree branches towering into the sky and the first brilliant orange-red line in the eastern sky," Corinne Peace, a manager of the Inn's education programs, said of the winter views. "And I love the winter storms: fluffy flakes falling, the crunch of snow on the trail and the magical crystal light of frozen ice coated on every limb, clanking and chiming in the wind."

There are only two rules for a stay to delight your senses:

1.) Hikers must check in at the Amicalola Falls State Park Visitor Center by 2 p.m. to ensure a leisurely 3-hour hike to the Hike Inn's front porch before nightfall.



Eric Champlin

2.) And – in keeping with the unplugged theme – no cell phones or electronic gadgets are allowed. Instead, the lodge rewards its guests the chance to meet and connect in the stocked game room.

Staff members provide a tour of the lodge every afternoon, explaining the conservation efforts that include composting toilets and worms gorging on meal scraps. The tour also includes a stop at Star Base, the celestial calendar that channels the sun through a block of granite.

The getaway ends with either a hike back down to Amicalola Falls, or the adventure can continue on the approach to the Appalachian Trail at Springer Mountain.

Rooms start at \$117 per person or \$170 per room (double occupancy). Guests must also pay a \$5 state park entrance fee.

Reservations are required. To check on rooms and availability, call 1-800-581-8032 or visit www.hike-inn.com.