



How to go on vacation without going away

Northeast Georgia has several venues perfect for staycations

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Hall County residents seeking a vacation spot don't have to look to hard. Lake Lanier is the perfect locale for those seeking to indulge in the new trend of staycations, which is remaining close to home for a seasonal break. The lake offers places for swimming, sailing, boating and fishing.

Getting away can be a great break from everyday life. However, planning a vacation to an overseas destination or far from your everyday stomping ground takes time, patience and money.

Sometimes it seems like you need an extra day to pack and travel there. Then, when you return, you may feel the need to take a day off to recuperate.

So rather than travel to a far off venue, staycations are an alternative to families and individuals wishing not to deal with the hassle of a road trip or plane ride.

A staycation is a vacation spent at home or nearby. Staycations can last a week like a tradition vacation or be a simple weekend getaway like many couples may do for the upcoming Valentine's Day.

Garrett Townsend, director of public affairs for AAA Georgia, said staycations were popular when gas prices were high and jobs and wages were down.

"When gas prices are low, (people) feel comfortable in traveling distances," he said, pointing out average gas prices were low in 2016. "When the opposite is true, people are more likely to stay closer to home."

For Hall County residents, vacation hot spots are to the north and south. Some residents may head to Atlanta and visit the Georgia Aquarium, the World of Coke and a few other places.

"The College Football Hall of Fame has gained in popularity as well as the Civil Rights Museum," Townsend said. "And Stone Mountain continues to be a popular destination."

To the north, the mountains and tourist spots such as the Alpine village of Helen, the site of the first U.S. gold rush in Dahlonega, wineries peppering properties throughout Lumpkin County and historic squares in Cleveland and Clarkesville may lure vacationers. And, of course, others may prefer to stay in Hall County and relax on Lake Lanier.

But instead of booking a hotel for the staycation, vacationers may opt for staying in a house, just not their own.

“I think that if people stay in their own homes, they may tend to work or clean or tend to their own home needs,” said Aimee Martens, who rents her Gainesville home on Airbnb. “Getting away near or far gives people an opportunity to really get away with a new environment and new activities.”

Airbnb is a Web-based marketplace that offers consumers lodging options ranging from a shared room to a house.

Martens said she’s hosted local people as well as people visiting from other states in her home, providing them lakeside lodging for up to eight people and access to her private pool.

A few weeks ago, for example, Martens hosted a group of women who were best friends in high school. Some live locally while others flew in for the weekend. She’s also seen her share of people from downtown Atlanta looking for a quiet getaway.

“I am anticipating that the summer will bring on a lot more staycations to enjoy the lake activities and the pool,” she said.

Typically summer stays need to be booked three- to six- months in advance, Martens said. She added last-minute bookings are rare, but can be amazing if the property is available. Martens explained booking a stay in the fall, winter and spring seasons two weeks in advance will net the best deals.

Martens noted she’s had requests for February bookings from people looking to celebrate Valentine’s day in a new and exciting way.

Sharon Bacek, owner of Lily Creek Lodge in Dahlonega, also offers a personalized experience for guests looking for a break from reality.

“Bed and breakfasts offered personalized service and generally are with people who really know the area and the neat little off-the-beaten-path things to do,” Bacek said.

The lodge is in a centralized location for a “folk” vacation, she said. Guests can make the bed and breakfast a home base, explore Dahlonega in the evenings and explore the mountains during the day.

“We’re in the woods and so convenient to Dahlonega — only 4 miles,” Bacek said, pointing out it is 13 miles to Dawsonville and the outlet mall and close to Lake Lanier.

The lodge has 13 guests rooms and can accommodate 26 to 28 guests total.

“The atmosphere of the lodge takes people out of their everyday norms,” Bacek said. “They can sit out on the decks and visit with each other and read a book or go to the pool.”

She also recommends guests visit the Holly Theater in Dahlonega for live entertainment.

“It’s a fun place to experience live performances or theater,” she said. “They do a nice job.”

Other Northeast Georgia staycation options include lodging and camping at area parks such as Smithgall Woods State Park and Unicoi State Park in Helen, Amicalola Falls State Park in Dawsonville, Vogel State Park in Blairsville, Tallulah Gorge State Park in Tallulah Falls, Tugaloo State Park in Lavonia and even Don Carter State Park in Gainesville.

“Winter is typically our slower season, so it’s going to be a quieter experience,” said Kim Hatcher, public affairs coordinator for Georgia State Parks. “You may have a good part of the park to yourself.”

Tugaloo State Park, known for boating and fishing, has a year-round yurt.

A yurt is a cross between a tent and cabin. They often have a permanent frame covered with canvas.

Fort Yargo State Park in Winder also has a yurt village.

Reservations for yurts are accepted 13 months in advance. Hatcher warns summer is a popular season for the Fort Yargo yurts and encourages guests to book as early as possible. Cost is \$85 per night plus a \$5 parking fee.

Victoria Bryant Park in Royston has a campground and many trails, also open year-round.

Once there, vacationers may hit the trails and see features normally hidden by leaves and other seasonal vegetation.

“When hiking in the winter, you can appreciate unusual shapes of trees,” Hatcher said.

Building a campfire is more enjoyable with cooler temperatures, she said.

The parks offer programming throughout the year, too. For more information, visit gastateparks.org.

In Gainesville, staycationers may enjoy the major attraction of Lake Lanier. Residents may enjoy the beach and trails at Don Carter State Park or the resort offerings of a golf course, horseback riding and canopy tours at Lanier Islands.