

A Mountain Christmas

Celebrating the Holidays at the Family-Friendly Brasstown Valley Resort and Spa in the North Georgia Mountains

[WRITTEN BY JULIE HOSTETTER]

In THE SOUTH, it's rare to enjoy the charms of a White Christmas, but there is another way to savor the flavor of the season without venturing too far from home. Head to the North Georgia Mountains, where the air is crisp, the stockings are hung with care and a country feast awaits for both your eyes and your rumbling appetite. Who knows, you may even be blessed with a few flakes of snow.

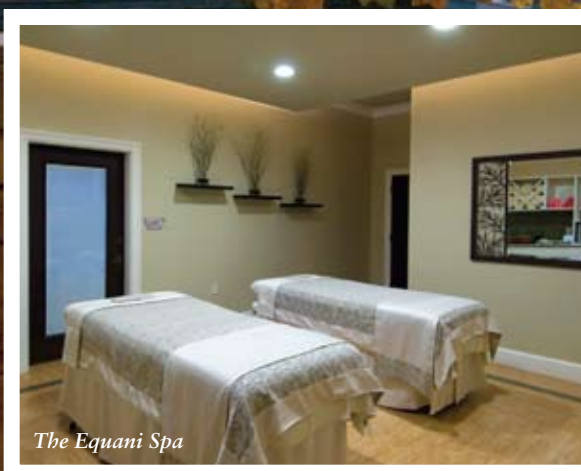
The Beauty of Brasstown

Although Brasstown Valley Resort was constructed nearly 15 years ago, it feels as though grandma and grandpa enjoyed its charm when they were courting. That could be attributed to the friendly, down-to-earth staff and the fact that many guests make a visit to this mountain resort a family tradition that's as treasured a memory as sipping hot chocolate in front of a twinkling Christmas tree.

As you drive through curvy roads, quaint towns and horse pastures to arrive at the resort nestled in the rural college town of Young Harris, you feel as though you are coming home. The lodge lobby is the heartbeat



The lodge lobby



The Equani Spa

of the resort, where guests grab a fresh apple from a bowl and play a friendly game of checkers from the light of the mammoth stone fireplace and impressive antler chandelier that hangs overhead from an oak-vaulted ceiling. Such coziness will be hard to leave, but thankfully a panoramic view of the mountains and pristine golf links encourage guests to head to the veranda for some fresh air and a moment of Zen.

The resort pays tribute to the region's rich history, including the native wildlife and noble Cherokee who once roamed these lands. Carved wooden bears are found marauding around the resort and the iconic turtle

can be seen in sculptures and in décor, harking back to The Great Turtle. Thousands of years ago, a great flood came and legend says many of the Cherokees survived by riding on the turtle's back to the safety of Brasstown Bald Mountain. That legend lives on as the turtle is still a sacred symbol for this resort that was founded on the homeland of the Cherokees.

As for where to rest your head, couples and large families have a choice of 102 guest rooms in the lodge, 32 cottage guest rooms and a deluxe spa suite. If you are looking for convenience, the guest rooms are ideally located in the main lodge, with the restaurant, heated indoor/outdoor pool and health club. The rustic



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF BRASSTOWN VALLEY RESORT & SPA



MOUNTAIN HOLIDAY CALENDAR

[COMPILED BY APRIL ARGO]

There is a bounty of holiday festivities and happy tidings to be found in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. So consider these other events to put a little rose in your cheeks and spring in your step this season.

November

TROLLEY RIDE OF LIGHTS

(Nov. 4 – Jan. 30)

Enjoy a guided trolley ride of Gatlinburg's spectacular Winter Magic lighting displays. Tours depart from the Trolley Center at Ripley's Aquarium Plaza and leave three times each night. **Gatlinburg, 865-436-0535, www.eventsgatlinburg.com**

APPALACHIAN CHRISTMAS AT BABYLAND

(Nov. 21)

The most fun hospital in Georgia is bringing out the holiday cheer with Santa, face painting, costume characters, arts, crafts and more! Prizes and contests, including a drawing for a hand-stitched Cabbage Patch Kid, will be enjoyed by all attending. The day will be topped with the Lighting of Tree at dusk. Proceeds of this bright event will benefit Shriners Hospital for Children. **BabyLand General Hospital, Cleveland, 706-865-2171, www.cabbagepatchkids.com**

MISTLETOE MARKET & SUGARPLUM TEAROOM

(Nov. 21 – 22)

Browse this year's collection of artists and craftsmen coming together in North Georgia. Get a sneak peek with a silent auction, art, photography, pottery, fabric, soaps and much more. Enjoy hors d'oeuvres and music while you shop. **ArtWorks Artisan Centre, Hiawassee, 706-896-0932, www.mtnregartscraftsguild.org**

APPALACHIAN THANKSGIVING

(Nov. 26)

Make reservations for a buffet-style Thanksgiving dinner at Amicalola State Park and Lodge. Displays and Appalachian cultural demonstrations will be presented for all who attend. **Amicalola State Park and Lodge, Dawsonville, 706-344-1505, www.gastateparks.org/info/amicalola**

OLD FASHIONED CHRISTMAS

(Nov. 27)

Join in the month-long celebration as the festivities begin with the Lighting of the Square and a home-town parade bringing Santa to town. Holiday events continue throughout December with caroling, entertainment, wine sampling, live theater, Christmas events and much more. **Dahlonega, 706-864-3711, www.dahlonega.org**

FESTIVAL OF TREES

(Nov. 27 – Dec. 12)

Come enjoy the beauty of the season at Unicoi as you view dazzling decorated trees throughout the park. **Unicoi State Park, Helen, 1-800-573-9659 x305, www.gastateparks.org/Unicoi**

December

A HOLLY JOLLY CHRISTMAS CAROL

(Dec. 3 – 20)

Make a trip to the charming Holly Theatre in Dahlonega to bask in the holiday spirit with an original production on the main stage. **Holly Theatre, Dahlonega, 706-864-3759, www.hollytheater.com**

TOCCOA CHRISTMAS FEST

(Dec. 5)

Celebrate the holiday season in Historic Downtown Toccoa. See the lights, talk to Santa, and take a free carriage ride on this festive night. Enjoy the Judean Marketplace, live nativity, Festival of Trees and live reindeer. **Toccoa, 706-272-3269, www.cityoftoccoa.com**

MOUNTAIN TOP CHRISTMAS TOUR OF HOMES

(Dec. 4 – 6)

Start your holidays in the North Georgia Mountains with a Christmas tour of eight beautiful homes. Enjoy an Art Walk and refreshment stops and get inspired to decorate your own home for the holiday season. **Young Harris, 706-896-4966, www.mountaintopga.com**

CHRISTMAS OPEN HOUSE AT AMICALOLA

(Dec. 5)

Create a warm Christmas memory with musical performances, gingerbread house making, and winter hayrides. Finish off the day of magic with a visit with Santa and time by a warm fire. **Amicalola State Park and Lodge, Dawsonville, 706-344-1505, www.gastateparks.org/info/amicalola**

CHRISTMAS OPEN HOUSE IN DAHLONEGA

(Dec. 6)

Historic Dahlonega is bringing you an old fashion Christmas event with tons of holiday decorations. Browse through the Gold Museum and enjoy cider and cookies. **Dahlonega Gold Museum, 706-864-2257, www.gastateparks.org/info/dahlonega**

GOURMET DINNER AT WOLF MOUNTAIN VINEYARDS AND WINERY

(Dec. 12)

Celebrate the holidays with a six-course culinary masterpiece created by Executive Chef Tommy Chantharath. Each course will be paired with one of Wolf Mountain's award-winning wines as the winemaker discusses the different characteristics. **Wolf Mountain Vineyards, Dahlonega, 706-867-9862, www.wolfmountainvineyards.com**

rooms with handcrafted twig furniture can also come complete with fireplaces and sweeping patio views.

But if traveling in a large group, the eight private cottages offer 32 rooms (four in each cottage) that feature large covered wooden decks, mountain furnishings, and many with wood burning fireplaces, ideal for making s'mores. To perfect your stay, consider reserving the parlor, which provides a wonderful sitting area for your guests to chat while enjoying the crackling wood fireplace, kitchen and a dining room table ideal for playing board games with the family.

Now, if you're looking for a bit of romance or just want to be pampered, then it's off to the resort's new Equani Spa, a luxurious oasis of relaxation just across the street.

Snuggle in at the Spa

Inspired by the native Cherokee, the Equani Spa harmonizes its interior design and spa services to not only restore the body and spirit but also reflect the history of the region. Spa guests can discover Native American history through the spa's illustrative design, treatment rituals and activities. Joyce Dugan, former chief of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, toured the spa and said, "Native people

throughout this country have often been dishonored through misrepresentation of our cultural/traditional beliefs and customs, so it was with great relief and pleasure for me to visit the Equani Spa and witness for myself the tasteful and elegant representations of the Cherokee culture."

You can admire this elegance as you

run your fingertips over the hand-carved wooden doors of wildlife and Native American figures that greet each spa room. Or head to the deck looking over the Blue Ridge Mountains complete with a hot water plunge pool and participate in the Hot House ritual, meditate with the mountains, navigate the Labyrinth or experience the healing principles of the Fire Pit.





The spa suite's Jacuzzi tub and deluxe shower



The Equani Spa's bedroom suite

There are also unique ritual treatments that seek to create a harmony between body and spirit by drawing from the Native American culture. One such two-hour treatment is the Way of the Circle Ritual, which combines the relaxation of a massage with an invigorating mud masque. You enter the room and commence by stepping out into an enclosed patio replete with a chaise and tub that overlooks the lush green setting. The therapist quietly burns sage as you fan the smoke over your body and breathe deeply to inhale its rich aroma. This is inspired by the Cherokee smudging ceremony, where elders believed a person must cleanse themselves of bad feelings before healing can begin. Then the massage starts as the therapist rubs oil and mud in circular patterns starting with your right foot and proceeds up your right side to your left, as if completing a circle around your body. Now covered in this rich masque, you are wrapped in a cocoon of warm towels and rest in comfort while oil is applied to your hair for a scalp and face massage.

For utter relaxation, consider booking the Equani Suite after a full day of pampering. The secluded suite found on the second floor features a vaulted pine ceiling, stacked stone gas fireplace,

private deck and a fabulous Jacuzzi tub to continue your relaxation in total bliss.

Even if you don't stay at the resort, you are free to make spa appointments for individual treatments or you may purchase a guest pass for \$25 each for access to the steam, sauna, plunge pool and outdoor deck, as well as self-guided tours of the Labyrinth and Fire Pit. And as an added bonus, the spa is even open on Christmas day!

A Relaxing Holiday

Celebrating Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Eve at Brasstown Valley Resort is very popular with Atlantans, and often sells out, so be sure to plan ahead. Perhaps most popular are the fabulous Thanksgiving and Christmas buffets that entertain as many as 500 guests, so reservations are a must. Here you can feast on smoked salmon, roasted New Zealand leg of lamb, honey brown sugar glazed ham, vanilla bean sweet potatoes with marshmallow sauce, and don't even get me started on the dessert table.

The entire resort is aglow with holiday cheer and is trimmed to the treetops with 15 creatively themed Christmas trees, an expansive gingerbread house display and a lobby so full of holiday warmth that guests linger longer in front of the warm, roaring fire. During the holiday season, the resort features several free arts and crafts festivals. The upcoming Falls Arts and Crafts Festival on Nov. 27 and 28 will be bursting at the seams with talented vendors and will be the perfect opportunity to check some names off your shopping list.

And there is plenty to keep your social calendar full while at the resort, whether enjoying horseback riding, fishing, hayrides with s'mores, cookie decorating, or planning a trip to the lovely Crane Creek Vineyards (pack a picnic if the weather is nice) or the engaging Rollins Planetarium at Young Harris College, which will present Season of Light to delight audiences.

You may also want to pack your bell-bottoms and mood rings because Brass-town's New Year's Eve gala will be a blast from the past with "Studio 2010," which will turn the resort into a '70s disco-themed nightclub. After you boogie the night away then retire to your room for a nightcap of Champagne and chocolates, don't forget about the "Almost Famous" Bloody Mary Bar to ease you into the New Year the morning after.

Whatever time of year you plan to visit, one thing is for sure, you'll always feel like part of the family at Brasstown. **PN**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Equani Spa

706-379-2336

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