

Not Your Ordinary Fish Camp " A New Level of Outfitn the Little Tennessee" by Jeff Samsel

" I saw an angel in the marble and I carved until I set him free.." – Michaelangelo

So it was with Jerry Anselmo, his Fish Camp and the abandoned mine site he bought six years ago for the main camp property. I really should say, "so it is with Jerry Anselmo..." because while the angel has taken shape, the artist continues to carve.

Jerry told my wife and I about some of his plans this spring as I stretched my mouth extra wide to manage a bite from one of his famous breakfast sandwiches. I could barely make the bite, but it was worth the effort for the blend of the flavors of four kinds of meat, egg, cheese, tomatoes, and assorted greens and spices from the organic garden off to my left.

"I want everything here to look like a garden," Jerry said, pointing toward areas where he would place flowerbeds or cut narrow trails on the 20-acre site. Many of the beds, which mix fieldstone, flowers and native shrubs, are already in place. They only need time to grow.

Larger projects are underway, too. One of the most intriguing is a riverside cabin about 10 miles downstream of the small Fish Camp property. The cabin built on stilts and stretching out over a steep rhododendron bank, looks across a set of lively shoals. Either car or canoe can be used to access the cabin, which sits at the end of a narrow private dirt road and is hidden from any other hint of civilization.

Anselmo owns and operates Great Smokey Mountain Fish Camp and Safaris on the Little Tennessee River, just north of Franklin. It's a fish camp in the sense that Jerry outfits fishermen for guided and unguided excursions on the Little Tennessee and Tuckasegee rivers. It's not just any old fish camp, though.

Before moving to North Carolina, Jerry spent many years as a chef and restaurant owner in Arkansas, Tennessee and Louisiana. That background spills over as he runs a gourmet grocery store from the same building as his fishing pro shop and canoe outpost. Fishermen, meanwhile, may get Jerry's fishing tips as he launches their boat in the morning and then enjoy his cooking in the evening, at camp, around the fire and beside the river.

The entire Fish Camp actually consists of four pieces of property along the-river, each spaced a few miles apart, and Jerry has access at scattered other points along roughly 20 miles of river. This arrangement allows him to do anything from sending folks off in a rented canoe for a day of unguided fishing to outfitting them for a multi-day trip. He favors the latter because he likes to cater trips to his customer's specific interests and to share his favorite things about the river and surrounding area. A weekend trip might include a leisurely evening paddle, a night of camping, with a gourmet dinner waiting at camp, a day devoted to fishing and paddling, a night in the riverside cabin, and a short paddle out followed by a bit of shopping in the area.

First, The Fishing

Chunky small mouths define the fishing on the Little Tennessee River, and through late summer those fish are apt to be looking up for meals. Many days, Zara, Puppies, Rebel Bighoppers and popping bugs cast on fly rods will draw huge strikes when twitched along the banks. Other days a grub or a Rebel Wee-Crawfish will attract the most attention. Whatever they come up for, small-mouth bass in the Little T average a pound and a half or so and fish in the 3-pound range are quite common. Beyond its bronze-backs, however, the river also supports plentiful rock bass, assorted sunfish and channel catfish. Walleyes, too, are sometimes included in the mix, as are big rainbow trout that swim up out of Fontana Lake and even an occasional muskie flathead catfish.

Anselmo may put anglers one of several different stretches of river depending on a host of factors. Among those are season, the level and clarity of the river, the amount of wading the anglers expect to do, the length of trip they want to take and their paddling experience. Most important, arguably, is what Anselmo has seen the fish do in recent days and weeks and under the same conditions in past years.

Beyond the Little Tennessee River, Anselmo also outfits a lot of trips on the Tuckasegee River, which is less than a half-hour's trip from his outpost. Trips on the Tuck' sometimes produce a variety of species, but trout are the main targets. He also leads a limited number of fishing trips on select stretches of smaller streams in the area by wading or by kayak.

The River

Rising north of the Blue Ridge in northeastern Georgia, The Little Tennessee River runs north westerly through most of its free-flowing portion, upstream of Fontana Lake. The river gains size quickly and is a fairly large flow by the time it passes Franklin. Landscapes range from mountainous to pastoral. Banks alternate between mountain laurel thickets, rock buffs, mixed forests and fields. The land is privately owned, but development is minimal.

The river itself alternates between long pools and gentle shoals. Close to Fontana Lake, shoals become more frequent and a bit feistier, with some solid Class II whitewater and one Class III rapid on medium or high flows. Most of the river offers very easy paddling. An excellent day float begins at the main Fish Camp and runs to Tellico Bridge. Near the midpoint of this S-mile stretch, Anselmo's "Middle Camp" property offers a perfect picnic spot.

Overnight

This summer brought two fabulous new opportunities for overnight stays with Great Smokey Mountain Fish Camp & Safaris. The cabin, which was built but not quite finished when I visited in mid-spring but should be by now, is wonderfully simple, with one room, a loft and a back porch. The bed is in the loft and the main room has a futon, so four people-- could split it. Ideally, though, it's a couple's retreat, and the only way to get its full affect is to arrive and depart by canoe.

Another cool addition, this one on the main Fish Camp property, is a permanent tent site, built on a deck overlooking the river. The tent, large- enough to stand up in, has real furniture and a bed & breakfast type decor, blending the comforts of home with the sounds of the river and the coolness of the night time air. Also on the Fish Camp property, Anselmo has several R. V. and tent campsites and one lodge room. The lodge room is large and has two double beds, making it a good choice for a family or group of friends who prefer to sleep indoors. Finally, Anselmo allows tent camping on the Middle Camp property for folks who want to do a canoe-camping outing.

Other Stuff

If a day or two on the river makes you antsy to do a bit of shopping, there are several good opportunities. Highlands and Dillsboro, each less than a half- hour from Franklin, have dozens of boutiques and craft, gift and antique Shops. Closer to home, Franklin has some very cool shops, but they are more scattered. Arguably the best, just south of town 011 U.S. 441, is Watauga Company, a huge showroom of high-quality American West art and furnishings.

Getting Started For more information on Great Smokey Mountain Fish Camp & Safaris, call (828) 369- 5295. For other area information, call Smokey Mountain Host of North Carolina at 1-800-432-4678.

