You can't go wrong at these fabulous Carolinas festivals

By John Bordsen
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Fall in the Carolinas is great for weekend escapes: Room rates dip faster than temperatures along the coast; Western North Carolina and upcountry South Carolina are magnets for leaf-peepers.

Thing is, a spate of bum weather can ruin those trips, and finding the best spots for leaves varies from day-to-day and mile-by-mile.

But autumn is awesome for festivals — the weather is less torrid than in summer and North Carolina and South Carolina stage an incredible variety of festivals. Here are seven.

» Oct. 12-14: Hickory
Event: Oktoberfest

In a nutshell: The three-day downtown event has five stages with music ranging from rock to polka. The main stage is in the fest's enormous beer garden. Vendors sell everything from bratwurst to barbecue. Also here: amusement rides in the kids' area. Olde Hickory Brewery is a block or so away, and The Old German Schnitzel Haus, down on U.S. 321 Business, is considered one of the very best German restaurants in America (reservations: 828-325-0800).

Details: www.hickoryoktoberfest.com.

» Oct. 18-21: Black Mountain
Event: LEAF Festival

See FESTIVALS, Page 4D

FESTIVALS

Continued from Page 1D

In a nutshell: The Lake Eden Arts Festival is perhaps the premiere cultural outreach event in North Carolina and is held on the grounds of the late/ historic Black Mountain College (instructors included Albert Einstein and Buckminster Fuller). The nonprofit festival held every spring and fall on park-like grounds, blends arts, awareness and education. The 57 live performances this fall range from Mickey Hart (ex of the Grateful Dead) and his band to the Dirty Dozen Brass Band to the Chirgilchin group (featuring north-of-Mongolia throat singing). Juried artists will display their work; a "healing arts" area features massages and workshops. Per-day tickets (including all shows) are $45; $35 for ages 10-17; multiday packages available.

Details: www.theLEAF.org.

» Oct. 20: Georgetown, S.C.
Event: 22nd annual Wooden Boat Show

In a nutshell: This free-admission show, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. along the waterfront and four blocks of Front Street, features boat exhibits, a boatbuilding competition, children's model boatbuilding and lots boats on display. Last year there were 125 anchored at the dock. There will be maritime art and crafts and nautical food (shrimp Creole, seafood chowder) at this fundraiser for the South Carolina Maritime Museum.

Details: www.woodenboatshow.com

» Oct. 19-21: Statesville
Event: 40th anniversary Carolina Balloon Fest

In a nutshell: Oct. 19 and 21 feature a mass ascension of hot air balloons at 4:30 p.m. Oct. 20 brings a fly-in and competition at 8 a.m. and fly-out/competition at 4:30 p.m. followed by a balloon-glow display at dusk. You can go up 100 feet in a tethered ballon ride ($10; $5 for 12 and younger) and even take a ballon ride (usually 45 to 60 minutes in duration; $225) around dawn or dusk. There are three to five bands performing each day, and Oct. 20-21 also include daylong samplings of N.C.-made wines and beers (cash bar). Opening day (a Friday) festival admission is free; $12 ($6 for ages 6-12) the other days. Note: Balloon activities are contingent on weather.

Details: www.carolinaballoonfest.com.

» Oct. 27: Lexington, N.C.
Event: 29th annual Barbecue Festival

In a nutshell: Lexington, N.C., has a valid claim to being the barbecue capital of the world, and this all-day pig-out is the centerpiece of its Barbecue Month. An eight-block stretch of Main Street is set aside for tents and pedestrians. More than 400 exhibitors sell crafts, fudge, sauce, etc. More than 15,000 pounds of barbecue – all made Lexington-style (tomato-based sauce) – is sold.

Details: www.barbecuefestival.com

» Mid-October: Columbia and Raleigh
Event: State fairs.

The rivalry between the Carolinas surfaces every October when the siblings stage their state fairs — at the same time, with similar admissions, midways, ag displays and competitions and grandstand shows (heavy on country music).

The North Carolina State Fair is Oct. 11-21 in Raleigh; adult admission: $6/advance, $8/gate; $10-$20 for headliner concerts in the fairgrounds' Dalton Arena. Details: www.ncstatefair.org.

The South Carolina State Fair is Oct. 10-21 in Columbia; adult admission is $7/advance, $10/gate; $15-$20 for headliner concerts in the fairgrounds' Pepsi Grandstand. Details: www.scstatefair.org.