

BOONE, N.C. – Andi Gelsthorpe Peters was at her wit's end.

She and her fiancée, Rob, had searched high and low all over the North Carolina/Tennessee area for an outdoor wedding venue.

The couple, in their mid-thirties, had each been to dozens of weddings. They didn't want to drag family from other states only to spend a few hours with them. They didn't want everyone to drive back and forth from hotels to a rehearsal dinner to the wedding site back to a reception. They wanted to create a sense of community and spend time with everyone for a weekend.

But they couldn't find the perfect place. Some venues were close, but too expensive or had strict rules.

"Someone wanted \$10,000," she said. "I thought we weren't going to be able to do this."

A friend suggested Sugar Hollow Retreat.

"We had passed the signs for it on 321, but we'd never been up there," she said.

She and Rob drove up the road to take a peek at the 300-acre getaway in the Cherokee National Forest.

"When we saw it – the beauty of the 360-degree mountain view – we were sold," she said. "I thought, 'We want all our family and friends to stay here.'"

And when she heard she could have the entire place for much less than \$10,000, her mouth dropped open.

"We were on," she said. "I asked Jim, the innkeeper, to write us down on the calendar!"

Sure enough, Andi and Rob exchanged their vows at Sugar Hollow Retreat on Aug. 8, 2009.

More than 150 guests attended the wedding, held in a small valley with mountain views. Friends and family stayed at each of the four guesthouses, the Lodge, and conference center, all with multiple bedrooms, bathrooms and fully stocked kitchens. Andi said the guests enjoyed cooking meals together all weekend.

The flexibility to drop things off ahead of time was a big help, Andi said. Guests could also camp anywhere, set up their tents or pull in their RVs.

"There was plenty of room," she said. "It was wide open. No one had to [leave the property] if they didn't want to."

Guests rode golf carts around the campus roads, allowing them to get from other

guesthouses to the Lodge. One night, a local band played at the retreat's outdoor amphitheater for the rehearsal party. With gorgeous views of the surrounding mountains, the amphitheater provided a perfect place for a star-filled night of entertainment.

To the couple's surprise, during the reception a climber set up a slackline and walked across it for all to enjoy. Lanterns lit up the event. The caterers had no trouble with an extra driveway and space behind the Lodge for kitchen access.

Andi said she couldn't believe how flexible it all was, and most of all, they could stay up all night if they wanted to. Other places required them to finish by midnight, she said.

"When the band said they were done, that's when the party ended," she said. "With Sugar Hollow, the place is yours."

Andi said the main word she would use to describe their experience was "genuine."

"People came from all across the country and all across our lives," she said. "We wanted to create a sense of community and spend time with our family. That is what Sugar Hollow meant to us."

"We could not ask for more."