

# **Analysis, Mountain Laurel/Chalet Company Web Sites**

**Client: Mountain Laurel Chalets**

**Site: mtnlaurelchalets.com**

## **Overall Look, Navigation and Content**

I like the overall look and layout, for the most part.

I like the rotating photos, although there are some better photos deeper in the site that ought to be included. Overall, more photos need to be found for the entire site. I do not like the scrolling text over the photos – it takes way, way too long. I would use still text on the photos themselves.

I do not like the video on the home page. If part of the draw to the chalets is the couple that owns them, then I'd keep something like that on there. If not, I'd discard it. They are not professional actors nor are they salespeople, and the video itself is poorly done. What would be better would be a professionally produced video that walks you through one of the chalets, showing the views and amenities, and including the couple – like a Travel Channel show. But as a new visitor to the site, they are not selling me on the place.

As far as the difference between “cabin” and “chalet”, I think “chalet” implies something a little nicer than a cabin. Looking at what they're offering, I'd say these are definitely “nicer.” So I would keep the name chalet. But in my SEO, I would also use “cabin.”

The menu on left is fine, overall.

On the “Cabin Search” page, it says “Just want to look at our homes? Then click on the ‘Index of Homes’ button below and a list of chalets will appear that you can choose from.” There is no “Index of Homes” button.

Don’t like the fact that I’m taken “off site” for the “Cabin Search.” There ought to be a way to incorporate it into the framework of the site.

Since “Property Map” is a PDF, it should open in a separate window. Again, you’ve taken me off the site, at least technically, since I no longer have access to the navigation. Not good. A visitor should not have to use back buttons except as a last resort – never as a main navigation.

“Check Availability” does open in its own window, which is good – but it is just a duplicate of “Cabin Search.”

YouTube Videos is a good concept, but the music is way too loud, the videos are way too slow, and they are not professional enough. I could have physically walked through every cabin by the time the videos played. People don’t have that much time. They should be short takes from different places in each house, and include highlights, views and amenities – not every nook and cranny.

Love the still photos at the top of some of the pages, but there are not enough of them. There is way too much duplication of photos. And why were some of the better shots not used in the scrolling photos at the top of the home page?

Need better photos on the “Clubhouses” (“clubhouse” should be one word, not two) page – they’re too dark and are therefore uninviting.

Photo at the top of “Our History” is worthless – should be made clickable so that it opens a PDF version that is actually readable. Same for map further down page.

Not sure what the purpose for the “Scrapbook Clipart” page is – the artwork isn’t even clickable.

Same photo on “National Park” and “FAQs” – ought to be different.

“Events Calendar” is done strangely. I’d do away with the scroll bar.

On the pages that use Gary Woods Photography: his logo is way too big and is therefore distracting and very unprofessional looking. His name could be kept the same size, but without the black box around it.

“Romance Ideas” and “Reunions” use the same photo and so look like the same page at first – the photo doesn’t really fit “Reunions.”

“Proximity Map” button is unclickable on “Reunions” page – possibly on others as well.

“Proximity Map” is clickable on Home page, but only duplicates itself when clicked! It ought to be a PDF version of the map – nice map – that can be zoomed into. Size of map on page is not readable.

“Special Discounts” – same photo a third time. Needs to be different.

Not sure the purpose behind the “Real Estate” links. Wouldn’t that be their competition – buying as opposed to making a reservation to rent? Seems like a conflict to me, but I’m no real estate man.

As far as the menu of icons at the bottom of the page – I like them, but the “golf ball and tee” brings up a page that no longer exists. I don’t get the “tickets” icon at all, which only leads to <http://mtnlaurelchalets.reservegatlinburg.com/> Seems like it ought to go to area attractions, since the other icons seem to be off-site locations.

## SEO Strategy

**Google Analytics – 214,023 unique visitors over the past year.** That seems like a good number to me. ***Two-thirds of that is from search engines – good percentage.***

As far as content, the "Index of Homes" page – not even on the site – was visited 131,906 times (unique views) with an average visit of just over 3 minutes. Most of the rest of the top 10 pages were visited for less than 30 seconds. ***The “Contact Us” page – again, same photo that we’ve seen three other times – was accessed 5,484 times.*** If they actually did dial the number shown – which is the ONLY means of contact given, then I would consider that conversion. This is not a good contact page. People need to be given an email address and a way to ask a question; and if you want to capture their information so that you can send them ads or have sales people call them, then you need a form with an incentive to fill it out. Rental Policies also got over 5,000 visitors.

I hate to say it, but most of the pages that were accessed in any great numbers and for any great length of time seem to be off-site, such as this one -

[http://www.chaletvillageownersclub.com/gatlinburg\\_specials.html](http://www.chaletvillageownersclub.com/gatlinburg_specials.html)

Here’s one that was clicked a lot (almost 15,000), but doesn’t even exist -

[http://www.mtnlaurelchalets.com/downloads/TWOCOLORMAP\\_9-14-11.pdf](http://www.mtnlaurelchalets.com/downloads/TWOCOLORMAP_9-14-11.pdf) This is the “See a Map of the County” link at the bottom of the left menu, right above “Sign up for our Email Newsletter.”

Other pages that seemed to get a “decent” number of clicks (between 1,000 to 3,000) are “Reunions,” Mountain Laurel Chalet's channel on YouTube, “Events Calendar” and “National Park.”

***“Maps and Directions” got around 600 visitors, which I’m guessing were those who actually made reservations, and so might be considered a conversion number, and therefore worth serious attention.***

**Keywords** – Keywords include “mountain laurel chalets” (32,856 visitors used this as a search phrase – the web site ranked #2 for this phrase on Google), “gatlinburg cabin rentals” (14,655), “gatlinburg cabins” (14,137 - #9 on Google), “cabins in gatlinburg tn” (10,562 - #9 on Google), “gatlinburg chalets” (10,486 - #8 on Google) and “mt laurel chalets” (7,354 – not on Google; #6 on Bing and Yahoo). They seemed to average 4 to 6 minutes per visitor using one of the top 100 keywords – not a long time for someone thinking about renting a chalet. The longest time I saw for the top 100 keywords was around 9 minutes average.

**Sitemap & Links** - There are 48 pages on the Mountain Laurel Chalets web site, but there is not structure to the site – all 48 pages are located at the root level. Technically there are no broken links, although you will see from my report above that there are some pages missing.

## **Researcher / Reader’s Perspective**

Honestly, the copy didn’t interest me. On this kind of site, the pictures are going to do the selling. In that regard, 1) the pictures on the individual pages are nice, but there is way too much duplication. Additional photos are needed. 2) The pictures of the individual chalets seem adequate, although I did not spend a lot of time looking at them. I had trouble getting them to load. I would consider a better way to show the

photos. 3) The videos are too long, too slow, with too loud music, no narration (which they need) and too amateurish. They definitely need better lighting and editing, of which there seems to be none. Overall, I would say the site needs a lot of work. It seems like a chalet that was built without using a blueprint. As I said initially, the overall look is attractive; but it hasn't been followed through with a lot of thought.

## **Customer / Buyer's Perspective**

I am impressed with the size and scope of the property, as well as the outside appearance of the chalets. There are a lot of links on here to information about the area. The couple that owns the property seems to be genuinely interested in it – they are not the typical conglomerate that buys a property and then turns it over to someone else to run. That's attractive.

## **Comparison of The Chalet Company - thechaletcompany.com/**

I don't understand the purpose for this company nor this site. It's the exact same company, with the exact same property map, but with a different name and a different web site – even with different photos. This is VERY confusing and I don't understand what advantage there could possibly be for doing this. If the owners want to use the domain name thechaletcompany.com, they can certainly do so without forming another company. There is no Google Analytics for this site, so I don't know how effective it's been. The look of the site is low-end – so, again, no reason for its existence – unless this site preceded the other and they just haven't taken it down yet. But I would. I would not have two totally different sites – and certainly not two totally different companies - both serving the exact same purpose. I would create a landing page for this name – as I have suggested for the micro sites below – with different content.

## Legacy Micro Sites

1) skimmountaincabins.com - 8,119 unique visitors over past year – points to

<http://weblink.instantsoftware.com/search/0210>

[http://mountainlaurelchalets.com/chalet\\_index.html](http://mountainlaurelchalets.com/chalet_index.html)

<http://weblink.instantsoftware.com/specials/0210>

What's amazing is that there is an email address on here - [info@mtnlaurelchalets.com](mailto:info@mtnlaurelchalets.com)

There is NOT an email address on the mtnlaurelchalets.com web site. Seems like a duplication, but because of the number of visitors, I might keep it. Also, the name is a good search term. I would work on this site and make it a landing page dedicated to Ski Mountain Cabins – not a duplicate of the Mountain Laurel Chalet site in miniature.

2) gatlinburgchaletdiscounts.com – 7,089 unique visitors over past year – points to same places as above. Same site as above, just different background color. Search engines do not like duplicate sites. This is more than a landing page. So, other than the fact that the name is a good search term, I'm not sure what the purpose for this site is. Definitely not SEO friendly. Again, decent numbers; so what I would do is tweak the site to make it more of a landing page, specifically dedicated to Gatlinburg Chalet Discounts – not a duplicate of the above site.

3) gatlinburgfamilychalets.com – 3,612 unique visitors over past year. A little more effort has gone into this site, with the end result being little more than the above. I would keep the address but beef up the site and make it a bit more different than its brothers above.

4) gatlinburg-retreats.com - 976 unique visitors over past year. This one could have some potential if some effort were put into it. Not the greatest name – I don't like hyphenated names unless there is a reason for the hyphens – but the SEO could make it more targeted.

5) mountainlaureltravel.com – No Google Analytics on this one. Not sure why it's included. Doesn't point to any of Mountain Laurel sites.

6) mtnlaurelretreats.com - No Google Analytics on this one. Duplication of two of Mountain Laurel Chalets pages – Retreats and Reunions – plus duplication of navigation – so basically this is the same site under a different address, which is not the best SEO strategy. Better to make it a landing page devoted to Retreats and Reunions that POINTS to the Mountain Laurel Chalets site.

The rest of these are a similar story, where they've taken a page or pages and duplicated them, using the same navigational system as the main site. I'd say the ones with some kind of keyword value could be kept and turned into legitimate landing pages; but those that are not – e.g., mtnlaurelviews.com, mtnlaurelretreats.com and gatlinburgcabincoupons.com could be dropped.

mtnlaurelviews.com - has its own page

chaletsofgatlinburg.com - was a competitor site that became open that they purchased - pointed into site

gatlinburgcabincoupons.com - ?

mountainlaurelrealestate.com - their real estate presence-little real activity in this area

mountainlaurelchalets.com - has it's own page

## Other Questions

4) Should the two sites, mtnlaurelchalets.com and thechaletcompany.com, be merged or are they fulfilling different functions? **Merge, as I mentioned above.**

5) Is the online reservation system hindering our ability to monitor the effectiveness of the web site and other online marketing efforts? **I saw no evidence of that.**



6) How do these sites perform on mobile devices? **The site has not been adapted to mobile yet, so it is slow loading and basically unusable on an iPhone.**

## Summation

Based on the Google Analytics numbers above, in the past year, **214,023 unique visitors came to the site, 5,484 of them accessed the “Contact Us” page, and 600 accessed “Maps and Directions.”** That means about 2.5% of the people who visited the site tried to make contact, either to ask questions or make reservations. Of that number, 9%, or .00225% of the total number of visitors, downloaded maps and directions, indicating they were serious lookers or had made reservations. I think a lot of people visiting the site are looking for information about the Gatlinburg area, and the site contains a lot of links to other sites with that information. So I think some filtering needs to be done in order to separate “information seekers” from “chalet seekers.” If Mountain Laurel Chalets generated their own information, they could use it to couch their sales message in order to direct visitors to contact them, either to make a reservation or to ask questions. As it is, I think, those who decide to contact them are pretty much hit-and-miss.

I said before that copy on the site does not seem important. That’s the way it seems, not the way it ought to be. Better copy would probably mean better search engine ranking, as well as more targeted visitors. It should also mean better selling, if the copy is done right. But pictures will always dominate the sales message for something like this, which is why I believe more and better photos – well coordinated with the copy - and much better videos, more professionally done, are vital. I’m not saying replace all the videos tomorrow; but at least have a really good main video on the home page that is so good people will want to hang around and check out the rest of the site.

More intentionality on this site is needed. Too much of it seems thrown together. There are only 48 pages, but it seems like there is a lot of content. Maybe it is because it is so

poorly organized and because there are so many links to extraneous sites – too many links, unless you want your visitors to spend most of their time on other web sites. And the duplication – not just of photos, but of entire pages - makes things confusing and probably drives the search engines bonkers.

This is an impressive company. It needs an impressive web site.

Thanks for this opportunity,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Waitzel". The letters are cursive and connected, with a prominent 'W' and 'S'.

**Waitzel Smith**

**Creative Sharks**

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