



ALMOST HEAVEN

THE UNEXPECTED CHARM OF SOUTHERN WEST VIRGINIA

“The biggest misconception about West Virginia is that there’s nothing to do here,” says Lindsey Funk, lifelong resident and Public Relations Assistant at the West Virginia Department of Tourism. After spending four action-packed days in just three of the state’s 55 counties, I can declare that myth officially busted. From heart-pumping outdoor adventures to a vibrant arts and culture scene to elevated cuisine crafted by a James Beard award-winning executive chef, there’s something here to delight nearly every type of traveler.

FOR OUTDOOR ADVENTURE, HEAD TO NEW RIVER GORGE

The New River Gorge Region, located about an hour south of the state capitol of Charleston, is a sure bet for nature lovers and adrenaline junkies. Its namesake National Park and Preserve encompasses more than 70,000 acres of dense hardwood forest and 53 miles of river, offering ample opportunity for rafting, hiking, climbing, mountain biking, and more — all set against the backdrop of a stunning natural landscape.

My visit finds me clad in a wetsuit, bumbling down a

to a crash course in how not to drown from a whitewater rafting guide with [ACE Adventure Resort](#). “If you spit in it, it’ll be over the limit” he says, describing the rain-induced high water levels of the Lower New.

Any second thoughts I have dissolve the moment we push off the rocky shore. I’m surrounded by 1,000-foot cliffs, paddling along the gently (for now) rolling water of an ancient river, under the captainship of an experienced professional whom I trust wants us to have the time of our lives as much as he wants us to not drown.

As the river gets wilder and wilder, my smile gets bigger and bigger. My boat mates and I have become a fearless team, tackling Class IV and V rapids with swelling confidence and a fair amount of swearing. We smash gleefully into churning chunks of river with names like Railroad and Greyhound, even managing to catch what the locals call “the million-dollar wave.” When our roughly 10-mile trek comes to an end, the only reason I agree to get out of the boat is to relieve my aching arms.



Rafting on the Lower New River. Credit: ACE Adventure Resort

A fierce afternoon thunderstorm puts the kibosh on my zip-lining excursion. Although slightly disappointing, this gives me the opportunity to relax in my cabin on the grounds of ACE Adventure Resort. Rustic yet chic, this two-bedroom bungalow has all the comforts of home — including a private hot tub on a covered deck facing the woods. Almost heaven, indeed.

The resort offers a variety of other lodging options, ranging from spacious log homes that can accommodate as many as 18 people to basic tent campsites and budget-friendly bunkhouses. There's a restaurant and bar on the property, as well as a general store, gear rental outlet, and even a full-blown waterpark. And because ACE can arrange all your New River Gorge adventures, you never need to leave the property if you don't want to. It's a great option for families, groups of friends, and solo travelers alike.



My cabin, #420, at ACE Adventure Resort. Credit: ACE Adventure Resort

FOR SMALL-TOWN CHARM AND MINING HISTORY, CHECK OUT FAYETTEVILLE AND BECKLEY

About 10 minutes north of ACE you'll find Fayetteville, population around 2,800. Forged by booms in the timber, coal, and railroad industries and steeped in Civil War history, the town now boasts a string of eclectic boutiques and diverse eateries.

When it's time for happy hour, I step into Rosa's Speakeasy — a delightfully quirky haunt located inside the historic Morris Harvey House Inn. It's billed as “an intimate, curated craft cocktail experience set in a period appropriate, historic Queen Anne Victorian,” and it delivers in spades. The ambiance is enchanting. Nearly every nook and cranny is festooned with antiques and old family portraits (no relation to the couple that runs the inn) and the parlor echoes with the drowsy, intoxicating melodies of a bygone era. I order a “Puttin' on My Top Hat” — a zesty mix of mezcal, Ancho Reyes, apricot, pistachio, ginger, and lime — and wander the small cluster of rooms, imagining the stories these walls could tell.



Mimicking the stoic portraits at Rosa's Speakeasy. Credit: The Zimmerman Agency

Over in nearby Beckley, the Exhibition Coal Mine is a can't-miss attraction for anyone interested in learning about West Virginia's complicated industrial past. Coal from the Mountain State played a critical role in our nation's rise to economic and military power in the 20th century. From 1927 to 1973, West Virginia produced more coal than any other state, and today, it's second only to Wyoming in coal production.

Yet all that growth and prosperity came at a devastatingly high cost. It's estimated that more than 21,000 miners have lost their lives in West Virginia coal mines since they began recording fatalities in 1883, and countless more have been injured and/or diagnosed with a debilitating respiratory disease known as Black Lung.

Tours at Exhibition take you underground for a firsthand look at the hazardous conditions workers faced every day, led by retired miners who lived to tell about it. It's an emotional and eye-opening experience I can't recommend highly enough.

FOR ART, MUSIC, AND FINE DINING, PUT CHARLESTON ON YOUR LIST

I'm not exactly sure what my expectations were for West Virginia, but I know they didn't include national sporting events, world-class restaurants, and a devotion to community development that rivals that of even the most progressive global cities.

On this gorgeously mild morning in mid-May, I'm on a walking tour of the capitol city's downtown led by Tim Brady, President and CEO of the Charleston Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. We begin on a bridge overlooking the Kanawha River, and the area is bustling with preparations for the upcoming USA Cycling Pro Road National Championships — an elite competition that generated \$4.6 million in economic impact for the city last year.



Capitol Street, downtown Charleston. Credit: Allison Savage Bates

We stroll a few blocks past independent book shops and vivid street art to City Center at Slack Plaza, a former transit mall whose recent transformation, Brady says, perfectly parallels that of the city. "This used to be the bus stop," he says, "and I won't sugarcoat it: There was crime and drug activity, the surrounding buildings were mostly vacant, and nobody wanted to walk through here, even during the day." The space underwent a multimillion-dollar renovation and reopened in 2022 as a family friendly gathering spot complete with public art installations, a splash pad for the kids, and an outdoor stage for free summer concerts. "This tells a story about Charleston that's very important and dear to my heart," says Brady. "And that is: If you put your mind to it, you can transform a place into something better for your community and more appealing to visitors."

We end our tour at Capitol Market, where dozens of carefully vetted indoor and outdoor vendors sell everything from flowers and vegetables to fish and wine.



Capitol Market in downtown Charleston. Credit: Allison Savage Bates

We end our tour at Capitol Market, where dozens of carefully vetted indoor and outdoor vendors sell everything from flowers and vegetables to fish and wine. Much of the market's wares end up in the kitchen and on the plates at local restaurants including 1010 Bridge — West Virginia's first James Beard Award-winning restaurant, led by Executive Chef Paul Smith.

BOTTOM LINE: FORGET WHAT YOU THINK YOU KNOW ABOUT WEST VIRGINIA AND JUST GO

Beyond the natural and cultural and gastronomical surprises I enjoyed in my brief time here, West Virginia has left on me an indelible mark penned by the friendly faces of proud and resilient people eager to welcome you to their little slice of Almost Heaven. It's wild, it's wonderful, and it can't wait to welcome you home on its country roads.



Clockwise from top left: Public art in City Center at Slack Plaza; Guide at Exhibition Coal Mine; Cocktails at Rosa's Speakeasy; Dessert at 1010 Bridge. Credit: Allison Savage Bates