



Top Adventure Towns 2020



Readers Pick This Year's Best Outdoor Hubs

Although 2020 was not the year we thought it would be, it offered many of us the opportunity to slow down and fully explore the mountains, waterways, and parks in our Blue Ridge backyards.

With that in mind, we asked our readers to select the region's best adventure hubs in our 10th annual **Top Adventure Towns** contest, which featured 100 towns across the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast competing for the title of best outdoor burg. Week by week, readers narrowed down the choices to pick their top tiny town (population less than 3,000), small-town (population 3,001-16,000), mid-sized town (population 16,001-75,000), and large town (population 75,001+).

This year's winners boast miles of nearby trails, summits, and serene waters, and hold communities passionately prioritizing access to the outdoors.

Top Tiny Town: Floyd, Va.(*pop. 428*)

Tucked away in southwest Virginia, Floyd combines the authentic feel of a quaint country town with a vibrant cultural scene in the Blue Ridge Mountains. "I feel like Floyd is a hidden gem," said Floyd local Brittany Bonner. "It's known for bluegrass music, art, and wineries, but there really is so much to do here as far as the outdoors." To share the area's adventure opportunities, Bonner and her husband opened [Buffalo Mountain Adventures](#), which offers caving and climbing trips and driving tours of the area. "A lot of people come to Floyd, and they know there are options, but there's nobody to really guide them," she said.

Daniel Sowers had a similar idea, but he focused on the **Little River**, his longtime favorite for floating and fishing. Sowers had a few extra boats, so at first he would invite friends to spend the day out on the water with him. After helping people find put-in spots and set up shuttles, he began to see a potential business opportunity opening up. "Back then, it wasn't a river scene but it was starting to get bigger," Sowers said.

With an increasing interest in the river from both locals and visitors, Sowers started [On the Water in Floyd](#) in 2008. Now, from fly fishing on nearby streams to cycling the rolling backroads, he's seeing more visitors come to Floyd for the outdoor opportunities. "During the summer of the first year, we helped 100 people," he said. "That was a big year. Now, we run 115 people a day [on a busy weekend]."

Top Adventures

Fly through the trees at **Buffalo Mountain Ziplines**, one of the tallest and longest tree canopy tours in the area, and drive 40 miles of the Blue Ridge Parkway, including a stop at **Mabry Mill**. For hikers visiting the area, Bonner recommends [Buffalo Mountain Natural Area](#) and **Rock Castle Gorge** for panoramic views of southwest Virginia.

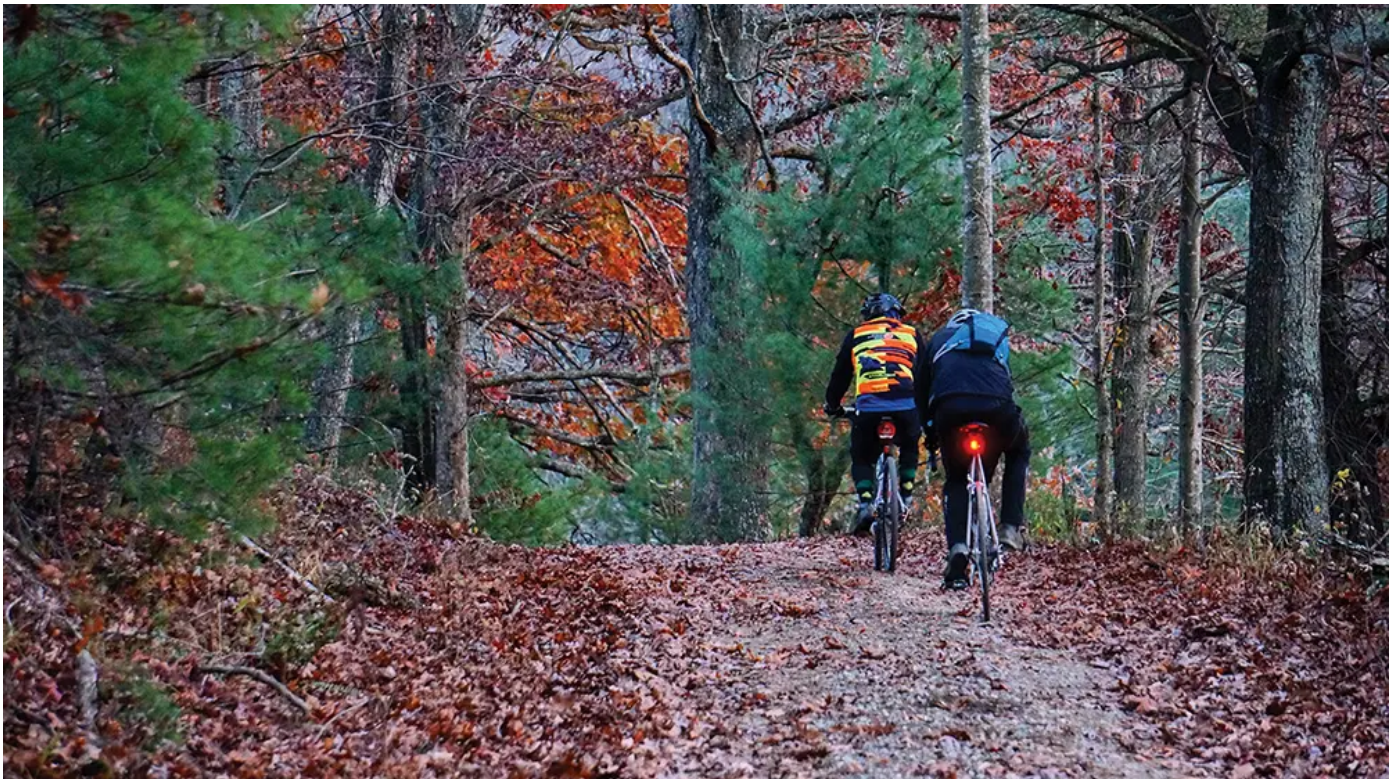
*Finalists***Helen, Ga. (pop. 524)**

The **Chattahoochee River** runs right through Helen, Ga., providing endless opportunities for water play in the tiny mountain town. Raft, kayak, or tube sections of this scenic river, or ride Georgia's first mountain coaster. Venture out farther to **Unicoi State Park** and the **Chattahoochee National Forest** for miles of mountain biking singletrack, hiking trails lined with waterfalls, and secluded spots for trout fishing. **Anna Ruby Falls**, a pair of towering, double waterfalls, are a must-see while you're in the area.

Hot Springs, Va. (pop. 750)

When he moved to Hot Springs for his job at the **Omni Homestead Resort**, John Hess quickly fell in love with the natural beauty of the area. "There are many, many mapped trails around that are not highly traveled," he said. "I love that remote feeling when you go out and you don't hear any traffic. It seems that everywhere you turn, there's a gorgeous view right around the corner."

For hiking, Hess recommends the **Cascade Gorge Trail** for views of several waterfalls and unusual plant life. Mountain bikers should try **Deer Lick Trail** for stunning views of the valley and challenging terrain or **Fore Mountain** for a thrilling 45-minute ride downhill.



Floyd, Va., offers a variety of backroad biking experiences, including Tour de Dirt in the fall. Photo by Tony Greateorex

Top Small Town: Bedford, Va. (pop. 6,597)

After traveling on the [Blue Ridge Parkway](#) as a kid, Micah Pick decided he wanted to live in a small town in the Blue Ridge one day. As a college student in Virginia, he would explore the area looking for places to hike. “I drove through Bedford and I said, ‘wow, this place is perfect.’ So I bought a house in town and I’ve been here for eight years,” Pick said. From his front door, he can hike **Sharp Top Mountain** and be back home in two hours.

Pick’s three children are also hooked on the outdoor opportunities Bedford presents. “Every day of the summer and every Saturday during the school year they say to me, ‘Dad, what’s going to be our adventure today?’ This year, my seven year old hiked up Sharp Top for the first time. It was like a rite of passage, and she was so proud of herself,” Pick said.

Beyond the trails and prime location in the mountains, Bedford has become a top destination in Virginia for disc golf. In 2008, a local group approached the parks and recreation department about building a course at **Falling Creek Park**, which offered long, open fairways, whereas most courses in Virginia are largely wooded. “A lot of people [started] traveling to Bedford just to play this course because it was so different,” said Kenny Palmer, operations coordinator for the parks and recreation department. “It’s a cheap activity, so it’s something most people can get outside and do.” Since the opening of the first course, opportunities to play have multiplied. With the help of pro disc golfer Paul McBeth, who resides in Bedford, there are now four courses in the area with plans to build an additional championship level course in the coming months.

Top Adventures

Bike the hand-built trails at **Falling Creek Bike Park**, including the dirt jumps, hike the **Peaks of Otter** off the Blue Ridge Parkway, and get on the water at **Smith Mountain Lake**. If you have a full day, Pick recommends the **Terrapin Mountain** hike for a challenging loop within **Jefferson National Forest**. When he’s with his kids, the **Claytor Nature Center** is a great stop to walk the trail system by streams, woodlands, wetlands, and wildlife at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Finalists

Brevard, N.C. (pop. 7,600)

Featuring more than 250 waterfalls, Brevard, N.C., and the surrounding county boasts the highest concentration of waterfalls on the East Coast, from ledge-style falls to tumbling cascades. Demacy Monte-Parker, a yoga teacher at [Brevard Yoga Center](#) and [Namaste in Nature](#), leads a hike and yoga session to **Hooker Falls** in **Dupont State Forest**. “We get the world from a different perspective because most of the time when we’re outside we’re not laying on our back and looking up,” she said. “I love allowing yourself to tune into the sounds around you and grounding down to the earth.”

With all of the water in the area, there are countless opportunities to cast a line or paddle. If you prefer to stay on land, the granite plutons provide an abundance of slick rock singletrack mountain biking trails and challenging climbing routes.

Hendersonville, N.C. (pop. 15,166)

When Matt and Leslie Evans saw property for sale on the **French Broad River**, they decided it would be the perfect place to open a paddling outfitter in Hendersonville, N.C. At the time, it was a relatively unused section of the river in comparison to stretches near Asheville and Brevard. That began to turn around in 2016 when the Evanses opened **Lazy Otter Outfitters** and the state started putting in public boat ramps. “We went from having almost no easy river access to having wonderful river access with multiple points,” Matt Evans said. “Even on a busy day, you can feel like you have Henderson County’s stretch of the river all to yourself.” The proposed **Ecusta Trail**, a 19-mile rail trail, is an exciting recreation opportunity in the works to connect parks, communities, and **Pisgah National Forest**.



The Saunders-Monticello Trail in Charlottesville, Va., is a great way for the whole family to get outside. Photo by Sanjay Suchak

Top Medium Town: Charlottesville, Va. (pop. 48,019)

Charlottesville’s location in the foothills of the Blue Ridge offers easy access to some of the region’s classic scenic gems. Just a half hour’s drive west you can reach the southern terminus of **Shenandoah National Park** and northern entrance of the Blue Ridge Parkway. But when Gabe and Sonya Silver decided to move back to Charlottesville, they wanted to help others tap into the adventure opportunities right in town. So six years ago, they opened **Rivanna River Company**, a paddling outfitter on the edge of the **Rivanna River**, right near downtown. “In terms of paddling, mountain biking, trail running, I don’t know that Charlottesville is on the top of everyone’s radar,” Gabe Silver said. “But all of that stuff is available in abundance around here.”

An ever-growing network of trails encircles the city with a mixture of paved greenways and hand-built singletrack. Multiple parks along the Rivanna offer a variety of places to put in and take out a canoe or kayak. “When you paddle out of town on the Rivanna, you can see bald eagle, catch smallmouth bass, and enjoy some rapids,” Silver said. “It’s all right here.”

In a college town known for its wineries, breweries, and history, the outdoor recreation possibilities are attracting a growing number of visitors and locals. “Interest in the river had been on the rise even before we started,” Silver said. “Having an outfitter in town really put the river on the map as something to do. This year with COVID and quarantine, the lid has come off it. We saw pretty much double the use of the river than ever before this year.”

Erin James and Seth Herman have noticed the increase, too. Since the couple opened **High Tor Gear Exchange**, they’ve worked with close to 1,500 consignors to resell outdoor apparel and gear. With two kids under the age of four, they said it’s a great town for outdoor families, noting a favorite activity is to pack a picnic and ride the **Rivanna Trail to Darden Towe Park**. “We could go somewhere different every weekend for a really long time,” James said. “It feels doable. There are a lot of ways to get outside that are within reach.”

Top Adventures

Pick some apples and watch the sunset from **Carter Mountain**, ride the rooty network of singletrack at **Walnut Creek Park**, and explore the beautiful scenery around **Ragged Mountain** and **Ivy Creek** natural areas.

Finalists

Woodstock, Ga. (pop. 32,234)

A chef and avid mountain biker, Justin Balmes has always been drawn to towns with a bustling food and outdoor scene. Woodstock provided the perfect blend of the two. “The green space of Woodstock is just gorgeous with phenomenal trails,” he said. “I can’t say enough good things about them.” **Blankets Creek** and **Rope Mill** feature miles of fast, flowy singletrack for mountain bikers of all abilities. Balmes’ favorite trails in town are **Van Michael**, **Turbine**, and **Raceway**. You can also walk miles of paved greenway along **Noonday Creek** or paddle to the parks and creeks off **Allatoona Lake**.

Boone, N.C. (pop. 17,100)

Melissa Weddell moved to Boone for a job with **Appalachian State University’s** Recreation Management program. The past president of the **Boone Area Cyclists** said the eight miles of trail, four skills areas, and pump track at **Rocky Knob Mountain Bike Park** has become a go-to hangout spot for the community. “In the past 10 years, it’s changed our total dynamic,” Weddell said. “We’ve all worked together in the community to create different types of outdoor experiences based on comfort level.”

Other favorites include the rocky climbs, ladders, and challenging hiking terrain at **Grandfather Mountain**, plus some classic East Coast climbing at nearby **Ship Rock**. In the winter, locals head to nearby resorts like **Appalachian Ski Mountain** and **Beech Mountain Resort** to hit the High Country slopes.



The hike to Roaring Run Falls, just outside of Roanoke, Va., features a trout stream, natural waterslide, and rock walls. Photo by Sam Dean Photography—Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge

Top Large Town: Roanoke, Va. (pop. 96,000)

In the 24 years since starting as the **Roanoke Valley Greenways** coordinator, Liz Belcher has worked with a variety of government and nonprofit partners to build more than 30 miles of greenway across the valley. “What really makes Roanoke special in terms of being an adventure town is that no matter where you live, you can drive 15 minutes and get to a trail,” she said. “Or ride your bike for 15 minutes and get to a greenway. There are just so many close-to-home opportunities. We are really blessed with public lands.” The paved greenways link downtown and neighborhoods to popular recreation spots like **Mill Mountain Park** and **Carvins Cove**.

Although paved trails take a lot of time and money to implement, local residents have come to expect the greenways as everyday amenities. “It has just become part of their life,” Belcher said. “It’s like if you never lived without public libraries, you can’t imagine not having your library to go get books. People can no longer imagine not having the greenways. It has allowed the region to build a system that connects not just what the local government owns but the National Forest and Appalachian Trail.”

Having grown up in Roanoke, Holly Hart was shocked when she moved back in 2015 by the amount of recreation infrastructure development that had gone on during the few years she lived out west. “Roanoke is perfectly nestled in the

valley of a chain of mountains, like it's surrounding us with a hug," she said. "We live in a beautiful valley and are fortunate enough to run into a mountain or a river most any direction you go."

Hart and her husband own **Blue Mountain Adventures**, a public/private partnership with Explore Park to offer camping, shuttles, and gear for beginner and experienced adventurers. "[I] love where I live, which I guess is what has inspired me to be so committed to my small business project here," Hart said. "It's an opportunity to create, build, and be a part of something that I believe brings good to our community and promotes the outdoors for all."

Top Adventures

Float or paddle the James and Roanoke rivers, hike the [Appalachian Trail](#) to **Virginia's Triple Crown**, and mountain bike at **Carvins Cove**.

Finalists

Chattanooga, Tenn. (pop. 180,000)

From hiking and climbing to whitewater rafting and hang gliding, Chattanooga is surrounded by waterways and forests to explore. Choose from a variety of adventures on the **Tennessee River**, from standup paddleboarding through downtown to kayaking through the towering cliffs of the gorge. Pack in a full day at **Lookout Mountain**, including a trip to the tallest and deepest underground waterfall open to the public, views of seven states, and one of the world's steepest passenger railways. Fifteen minutes from downtown, **Raccoon Mountain** features 30 miles of intermediate and advanced singletrack filled with technical obstacles.

Asheville, N.C. (pop. 92,000)

In the mountains of western North Carolina, Asheville sits surrounded by outdoor recreation opportunities. Drive the Blue Ridge Parkway to a variety of overlooks and hikes, including **Craggy Pinnacle** and **Mount Mitchell State Park**. Take a trip on the **French Broad River Paddle Trail** past the **Biltmore Estate**, through town, and out to national forest land with several camping spots along the way. Run or bike the trails at **Bent Creek Experimental Forest** along flowing streams, laurel-rhododendron thickets, and hardwood forests.

Special thanks to [River Expeditions](#) for sponsoring the 2020 Top Adventure Towns contest. Please check local guidelines and regulations before making plans to get outside. Check locations to make sure access is open to the public. Remember to practice social distancing guidelines, wear a mask, and respect others' health when outside.

Cover Photo: Hike Sharp Top for stunning views of Bedford, Va. Photo by Lee Sandstead

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