

# almost heaven WEST VIRGINIA

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## 'MON FOREST TOWN' ECONOMIES EVOLVE TO MEET TRAVELERS' NEEDS

Since 1920, the Monongahela National Forest, or "Mon Forest" as the locals call it, covers about a million acres of National Forest system lands in the north central highlands of West Virginia. This ecologically diverse land has elevations ranging from less than 1,000 feet to a whopping 4,863 feet above sea level. Many small towns and communities bordering the "MNF" have transitioned from coal and timber industries to new ones, including tourism, capitalizing on their great natural resources with more than a million visitors annually. Breathtaking vistas, peaceful country roads, gently flowing streams and wildlife are all part of the attraction.

One of the better-known recreation areas of the Mon Forest is Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks Na-

tional Recreation Area, the first natural resource area in the Forest Service. Those who love the road trip aspect of travel appreciate the National Scenic Byway status. In total, there are eight wilderness areas in the Mon offering hiking, backpacking and mountain biking, fishing, climbing, hunting, rafting and kayaking. The outdoor recreation economy generates \$887 billion in spending, supporting 7.6 million jobs and \$125 billion in tax revenue.

The USDA Forest Service has worked alongside the communities in and around the Monongahela National Forest to support efforts that not only foster a vibrant recreation economy, but also protect the history, land ethic and stewardship while working with those who live and work in

the Mon Forest Towns encouraging volunteerism, partnership, and customer relations. Many of

these communities suffering the loss of coal and other industries really need tourism to not just



West Virginia University

The towns surrounding the Monongahela National Forest.

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- \* 50 years of memories
- \* Focused on the customer
- \* Near Blackwater Falls, Dolly Sods and Senecas Rocks

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create much-needed jobs, but also to fund other community needs. Thankfully, the Forest Service can help the community properly capitalize on the natural resources. West Virginia University Extension Service has also joined the cause with their educational, research and technical assistance. The USDA's rural development provides support to the Monongahela National Forest recreation economies initiative with technical assistance, grants, loans and educating forest service rangers on funding, and technical assistance and resources are available to help with these partnerships.

Since 2017, West Virginia University's Transdisciplinary Public Interest Design's "Design for Good" has stepped in with a three-part program. The vision is to build and maintain an economy that thrives off sustainable recreation, tourism, healthy landscapes and active land

management while preserving each town's character.

According to the website, they pursue this vision together with their partners through three key objectives: provide a gateway for escape, exploration, and adventure in diverse landscapes; build sustainable recreation opportunities through community engagement; and foster a recreation economy with direct and indirect benefits for the local community.

Ten towns surround the area. They are Thomas, Davis, Parsons, Elkins, Petersburg, Franklin, Cowen, Richwood, Marlinton, White Sulphur Springs. They are in Tucker, Randolph, Grant, Pendleton, Webster, Nicholas, Pocahontas and Greenbrier Counties. You may want to make it a week-long road trip loop and experience each of these forest gems, not just for the scenery and wildlife, but also the flavor and friendliness of each of these small towns.



City of Petersburg

Petersburg, West Virginia, is a blend of history and nostalgia. The train still runs through the town.

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