

How Lewisburg Became the Coolest Town

By Mike
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Budget Travel, a leading travel-oriented magazine, named Lewisburg, West Virginia, the “coolest small town” in America in 2011—or, rather, their readers did. After an extensive and often-close race nearly akin to a presidential election, the votes came in, and Lewisburg beat out Astoria, Oregon, its closest competitor out of twenty towns. Nearly half a million people voted in all, making this contest one of the most comprehensive of its kind in history. So now Lewisburg can honestly and proudly proclaim itself the “coolest town.” But how did a sleepy county seat tucked away in the middle of West Virginia’s mountains get to this lofty stature in the first place?



Sunset over the West Virginia mountains (photo by Mike Walker)

[Lewisburg](#) was founded as a frontier outpost from an area scouted out by its namesake, Andrew Lewis, a military officer and surveyor in colonial Virginia. The purpose of the original settlement was to establish the presence of the British colonists in what was the entry to Indian-controlled territory and also to provide land for homesteaders, mostly small farmers who could not afford land in tidewater Virginia or were willing to stake out life in an uncharted territory for cheap or free landholdings and robust adventure. Thus Lewisburg became crucial to the history of what later became the state of West Virginia as one of the earliest footholds in the region.

There always has been a lot of history here: Lewisburg played key roles in the Civil War and neighboring Ronceverte was key to the region's industrial development. And while Presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were known to visit the area in their time, President John F. Kennedy stayed at the farm of his friend Dr. Ward Wylie near Lewisburg while planning his election strategies—a visit and friendship that was the catalyst for the deep interest Kennedy took in West Virginia as President.



The historic General Lewis Inn (photo by Mike Walker)

But despite its pride of history, as well as its status as the county seat of one of West Virginia's largest counties, Lewisburg has always been remote. It has rail connections at Ronceverte, Interstate 64 running just north of the town, and an airport with the state's longest runway. But despite all this, gaining national fame has still been a tough climb: Greenbrier and Monroe counties are very rural, and the rugged mountains of the region cause the area to be quite secluded.

The resorts of Sweet Springs, Sweet Chalybeate, and Blue Sulphur Springs historically were important draws for tourism in the region, and later the [Greenbrier Resort](#) of White Sulphur Springs, near Lewisburg, became one of the nation's foremost resorts. However, these resorts, whose main attractions were the "taking of the waters" (supposedly healing for a variety of maladies) and later golf and relaxation, never gave birth to the type of vast resort-town culture found in the ski towns of the West like Jackson Hole, Vail, or Truckee. White Sulphur Springs has some bars, restaurants, and a delicious little bakery that cater to the tourists staying at the Greenbrier, but the town seems largely unchanged and, somewhat sadly, wanting for more businesses and improvement. Lewisburg, on the other hand, stepped up to the realization that the Greenbrier doesn't just draw tourists for golf and strolls on its grounds but people who wish to explore the whole region.

Lewisburg's fortunes are closely tied to those of its sister towns, Ronceverte and Fairlea. Ronceverte in post-Civil-War days rose to be the industrial heart of the region with the railroad coming into the town and access to the Greenbrier River. Up to the middle of the twentieth century, Ronceverte was the leading city in the region, but as industrial needs changed and services such as power generation stations, wholesalers, and sawmills no longer needed to be community-based but became instead supra-regional, Ronceverte lost much of its industrial might, a victim of how economies were shifting by the end of the century. Fairlea is the site of the state fairgrounds and became built up with car dealerships and a shopping mall but never had a downtown core that was walkable—while both Ronceverte and Lewisburg did.



Crossroads in downtown Lewisburg. Interstate-64 has additionally opened up Lewisburg to travel. (Photo by Mike Walker)



Washington Street, Lewisburg's main street, on a typical day (photo by Mike Walker)

Lewisburg, on the other hand, is nearest the Interstate, sits at the intersection of routes 60 and 219, with 60 connecting it

to White Sulphur Springs and 219 being the primary north-south route for the eastern portion of West Virginia. It also had the advantage of an affluent white-collar economy as the county seat and home to the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine. However, even with these advantages, a sea-change in thinking about economics was necessary to become the “coolest town.” Tourism could not be left simply in the hands of big resorts or to time-honored attractions such as golf, but had to be a leitmotif for the entire community—yet not a theme worn into a trite tune but a means of channeling the native culture into a powerful but authentic expression of the region.

West Virginia is known for its independent mountain image—whether that image is appreciated for its courage and sense of survival or made the butt of jokes about hillbillies—but what is less-known is the diversity and scope of art forms and crafts to come out of these mountains and vales. The traditions of both bluegrass and Celtic revival music is as strong here as in Kentucky or Tennessee, and Lewisburg offers diverse venues for such music, from the formality of Carnegie Hall to the Lewis Theatre to the Irish Pub on Washington Street, which more nights than not has local music, often of a Celtic-based genre. The Trillium Collective offers performing arts with an emphasis on dance and musical performance, while the Greenbrier Valley Theatre produces classic and contemporary musicals and straight theater as well as original works with a local emphasis.

Additionally, a variety of art galleries line Washington Street in Lewisburg, bringing in a visual arts aspect also, and the diversity of the artists and their media shown here is vast but most demonstrate some level of local focus. Much like communities such as Asheville, North Carolina, and Greenville, South Carolina, Lewisburg has turned towards the arts and the regional specifics of these arts and seen them as a viable means of adding depth to both the immediate community and benefit to the community’s allure for tourism—but Lewisburg has done such as a markedly smaller town.

Having the arts was just one part of the equation: Lewisburg is in the midst of a rugged yet beautiful land of mountains, rivers, creeks, and lakes. It’s picture-perfect, yet its remoteness could be an obstacle for tourism. Instead, Lewisburg has made it a benefit, nurturing ecotourism as the movement to enjoy the pristine out-of-doors has grown in America. Kayaking, canoeing, mountain biking, hiking, camping, hunting, and fishing are all possible with the Greenbrier River, the Greenbrier River Trail, Moncove Lake State Park, and the George Washington and Thomas Jefferson National Forests nearby.

The fusion between the arts and the wilderness as attractions may not be obvious to some, but it’s possible, and no one has had better insight or application of this dynamic than Hill and Holler Bicycle Works. Hill and Holler began as a small bike shop and rental outfitter but recently moved into new quarters in what had been the Fort Savannah Motel for decades. This ample new space has allowed Hill and Holler not only to sell and rent bikes but to open a café and beer bar, provide a stage for concerts and other performances, and otherwise become a real center of the type of exploratory and creative community they and others have instigated in Lewisburg. Of the several other great live performance venues in the area none are as novel or unconventional as Hill and Holler. The space itself is beautiful: well-crafted with repurposed materials and an emphasis on the natural morphology of the surrounding forests and mountains. It’s the type of space you’d find in Jackson Hole or another great skiing/snowboarding mountain town, only here it’s in a great biking and hiking mountain town.



Lewisburg United Methodist Church (photo by Mike Walker)



Local paintings in a gallery window (photo by Mike Walker)



Hill and Holler Bicycle Works's new building and their beautiful tables for their café (photo by Mike Walker)

Restaurants and a vibrant food culture are something else Lewisburg has grown. Indeed, it may have been with food that the town really began its climb to the top of cool towns, with several pioneering restaurants developing in the 1980's and garnering national attention. One of my favorites is the Stardust Café which went into the old Clingman's Market building and kept portions of the original Clingman's signage on the windows as well as bringing in a farm-to-table approach to cuisine before such was even trendy.

Greenbrier Valley Baking Company is another example of innovation in food: this small bake shop and restaurant offers both baked confections and pizza plus a variety of other lunch meals, including a smoked trout salad, a nod to the plentiful trout in nearby mountain streams. They also carry a wide variety of beer and have become a local favorite for casual dining. Realizing the diversity of dining it has—from the more upscale Livery Tavern to Greenbrier Valley Baking's pizza or the Irish Pub's famed trio of stews—Lewisburg has an annual festival called Taste of Our Towns held in October plus a [Chocolate Festival](#) in April, offering residents and visitors a chance to sample some of these foods and creating means for a general showcase of the town. Of course, there is music at these festivals, and the art galleries often have their best shows up too. There is a real sense of cohesion—informal for the most part, but true cohesion—with how Lewisburg presents itself.



Greenbrier Valley Baking Company's inviting interior (photo by Mike Walker)

The affluence and dynamic spirit of Lewisburg extends beyond its city limits: local farmers have a ready market for their goods in Lewisburg's restaurants and the general food-centric culture, plus the regional agricultural heritage means that farming is given a pride of place here. As American wealth grew over the twentieth century and tourism became a larger business because more people traveled and economies changed—but some very swift and innovative towns like Lewisburg changed also, which is the coolest thing of all.

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Washington Street on a clear November day (photo by Mike Walker)