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2016

TOP

Adventure Towns

A BRIGHTER FUTURE

AS SMALL-TOWN-APPALACHIA STRUGGLES TO FIND A NEW IDENTITY, THESE FOUR SMALL TOWNS ARE LOOKING TO OUTDOOR RECREATION FOR THE ANSWER.

by JESS DADDIO

NORTON, VIRGINIA

ESTABLISHED: 1894
POPULATION: 3,958

Meet Shayne Fields at the Sugar Maple trailhead in Flag Rock Recreation Area. Save for Fields'

red Ford Explorer, the parking lot is empty. He shakes my hand, cracks a corny joke. Instantly, I feel like I've known him my whole life. That's the way it is in southwest Virginia. Hospitality is more than just a dogma of Appalachia—it's bred into the very marrow.

Fields is trail coordinator for Norton, and he has big plans: among the 30+ miles of singletrack he intends to build, there will be a pump track and an intermediate skills course, gravity trails and rock features.

Situated in the westernmost part of Virginia in Wise County, it's hard not to see the city's potential as a recreation destination. Above Norton sits Flag Rock Recreation Area, a 1,000-acre parcel of municipal land. Higher still above the city is High Knob Recreation Area, home to a fire tower and impressive boulderfield littered with stunning highball boulders begging for first ascents. Just 15 minutes out of Norton is the Guest River Gorge, yet another bouldering,

climbing, and paddling gem that, with the exception of Fields and a handful of area climbers, has largely gone untouched.

"Norton's had the idea [to support outdoor recreation] since the early '90s I think, but sometimes you need an instrument to point in the right direction," Fields says.

For better or for worse, that instrument became not so much a person as it did an event—the decline of coal. Driving around Norton, it's impossible to miss signs of the city's once-lucrative industry. US-58 passes beneath a now-defunct coal conveyor belt before entering city limits. Gargantuan coal haulers idle in parking lots. The coal tipple along the Guest is quiet. This area once hauled close to one million annual tons of coal from the hills and hollows of Appalachia.

"It was like the money was flowing out of everywhere," Fields, now 52, says. "This area felt like a boom town."

And it was. But when Fields

returned to his hometown back in 2003, coal was on its way out and the city's residents were left reeling in its wake and asking—what next?

Fields, a longtime climber and active member of the local Lonesome Pine Cycling Club, wasn't sure he had the answer, but he knew if there was one thing besides coal that Norton had an abundance of, it was recreation.

"Normally you go before a city with a proposal and all they have are worries and concerns, but [Norton's] perspective is always, 'How can we make this work?' There's this community understanding that if we want to survive, if we want to grow, it's gotta come from us."

That's Brad Mathiesen, a 28-year old transplant to Wise County and the Director of Campus Ministry at UVA-Wise. Mathiesen is also the co-founder of the Southwest Virginia Climbers Coalition and, like Fields, he knows Norton has what it takes to become the next best adventure destination. In the two

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BRAD MATHISEN TOPS OUT DURING A LATE SUMMER CLIMBING SESSION IN THE GUEST RIVER GORGE.

photo by JESS DADDIO

years Mathiesen has lived in Norton, he's put up close to 100 new routes between Flag Rock and the Guest, and he says that's hardly scratching the surface of the area's potential.

Still, there's no denying that Norton has a long way to come before hipster climbers overrun the city. For starters, says Mathiesen, the city needs jobs that would appeal to recent college graduates and replace at least some of the void left by the coal mines. Toss in a few more restaurants, maybe a coffee shop with some WiFi, and Norton could really shine—the highway and hospitality infrastructure is already a mainstay here.

"I think the town is really starting to recognize and say, 'Hey, let's embrace this [outdoor] identity. It's not something we have to work for or pay for. It's something that's been given to us, so instead of ignoring it, let's try to build our city around it.'"

In addition to completing Fields' trail network in Flag Rock Recreation

Area, the city is currently working on plans for a Norton Riverwalk, a two-mile multi-use path that would connect downtown Norton with the community of Ramsey and clean up an abandoned coal tipple along the Guest. Mathiesen is also collaborating with the city to develop an officially sanctioned bouldering field on High Knob.

HOW TO PLAY: Hike the High Knob fire tower for 360-degree views of the Jefferson National Forest with the newly established High Knob Outdoor Club. Cruise the trails at Flag Rock Recreation Area by bike or foot. Explore the class IV-V Guest River Gorge by boat or stay high and dry on the Guest River Gorge Trail.

WHERE TO STAY: Journey's End at Camp Bethel for a bed and breakfast experience (rates vary). Pitch a tent closer to town at Flag Rock Recreation Area for \$20 per night.

WHEN TO GO: Summer for the hiking (High Knob is always 10 degrees cooler than Norton), fall for the climbing.

SPENCER, WEST VIRGINIA

ESTABLISHED: 1858
POPULATION: 2,248

High above Spencer sits a placard with a black and white image of the town from the 1900s. Today, there's a Wal-Mart and a bridge that crosses Spring Creek, but in general, 2016 Spencer looks pretty much exactly like its 1900s version.

"It's downhome, country charm, Spencer, Mayberry, USA. After 63 years, it's still a pleasure and a lot of fun to live here," says Spencer-born-and-raised Jeff Fetty.

In the early '90s, mountain biking took off in West Virginia. Fetty, who raced throughout the state, knew that Spencer was prime for the picking—situated an hour north of Charleston, the city had 3,000 acres of undeveloped land, undulating terrain, and most importantly, the support of the local government. So, with a number of volunteers, Fetty helped create the trails at Charles Fork Lake. In '94, he organized the city's first mountain bike race, the Tour de Lake, at which 103 racers showed up. The next year, exactly 206

racers competed. The word was out. Spencer was on the map.

"The groundwork that we laid 25 years ago, it's really starting to pay off," says Fetty.

Last year, Friends of Charles Fork Lake Vice President Philip Smith received a \$40,000 grant from the West Virginia Department of Highways to build the trails at Ben's Run. Smith, whose family has lived in Roane County for six generations, is Spencer's biggest advocate, especially when it comes to expanding outdoor recreation in town.

"One of the reasons that most people don't think of Roane County or Spencer when they think about public lands is because we don't have a state forest, we don't have a state park, we don't have a national park," he says. "Most people don't really think about municipal properties, but out of this entire state, I would challenge you to find a city, especially a city the size of Spencer that has better municipal lands."

It's this, says Cycle-Smart Coach Jacob Fetty, Jeff Fetty's son and a native of Spencer, that should make the city flourish. After years of traveling around the world, Jacob