



DESTINATION
★ NC ★
McDowell

OLD FORT • MARION • LAKE JAMES • LINVILLE FALLS • LITTLE SWITZERLAND



McDowell County Tourism Authority
91 South Catawba Avenue
Old Fort, NC 28762
828-668-4282

Executive Director
Shannon Odum

**Marketing &
Communications Manager**
Omi Salavea

Senior Operations Officer
Johnsie Parker

Published by
DESTINATION
CREATIVE GROUP

5710 W. Gate City Blvd., Ste. 237
Greensboro, NC 27407
DestinationCreativeGroup.com

President
Steve Mitchem
steve@destinationcreativegroup.com

Editor
Robin Sutton Anders

Design Director
Lisa Summerell

Copy Editor
Anna Brannin

Writers
Lara Ivanitch
Laura Lee
Jimmy Ryals

Photographers
Adam Duff
Kent Ellington
Stephan Pruitt

Cover Photo
Adam Duff

McDowell County Tourism Authority and DCG have made every effort to ensure the accuracy of information presented in the book, but assume no responsibility for errors, changes or omissions. Copyright 2026 McDowell County Tourism Authority. Printed in USA. All rights reserved.



Welcome

We welcome you to McDowell County, N.C., where striking mountain scenery and nationally recognized outdoor experiences shape everyday life. Nearly 200 miles of hiking and biking trails wind through the county, alongside waterfalls, lakes and the quiet beauty of the Catawba River. Small towns with deep roots and creative energy reflect a way of life shaped by Southern Appalachian traditions, local pride and a strong sense of community.

Tucked between Asheville and the Linville Gorge in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, McDowell County offers moments of awe at every turn, whether along the Blue Ridge Parkway or in its welcoming mountain towns. With a full calendar of festivals celebrating everything from literature to livermush, you're invited to celebrate the history, heritage and beauty of McDowell.

CONTENTS

OUR TOWNS

- 02 McDowell
County Map
- 04 Old Fort:
Basecamp
- 06 Marion:
Main Street
- 08 Little Switzerland:
The Outpost

TRAILS

- 10 Top Hiking Trails
- 14 The Ride of
Your Life:
Mountain Biking
- 16 Grand Canyon of the
East: Linville Falls
and Gorge
- 16 McDowell
Heritage Trail
- 18 Get Away and Give
Back: Voluntourism

THINGS TO DO

- 20 On the River
- 23 Wild and Well
- 24 Making Waves:
Lake James
- 26 Gold Diggers:
NC Minerals
Museum,
Lucky Strike,
Emerald Village,
Thermal City
Gold Mine
- 27 Roads Less Traveled:
Scenic Drives
- 28 From the Ground Up:
Agritourism
- 30 Linville Caverns
- 31 Day Trippin':
Biltmore, Spruce
Pine, Chimney
Rock State Park,
Grandfather
Mountain, Mount
Mitchell State Park,
Roan Mountain

FOOD AND DRINK

- 32 Sweet Escape
- 34 What's On Tap?

ARTS & CRAFTS

- 36 Front Porch to
Main Stage
- 38 Gallery Roundup
- 40 Living History
- 41 Try Your Hand

ACCOMMODATIONS

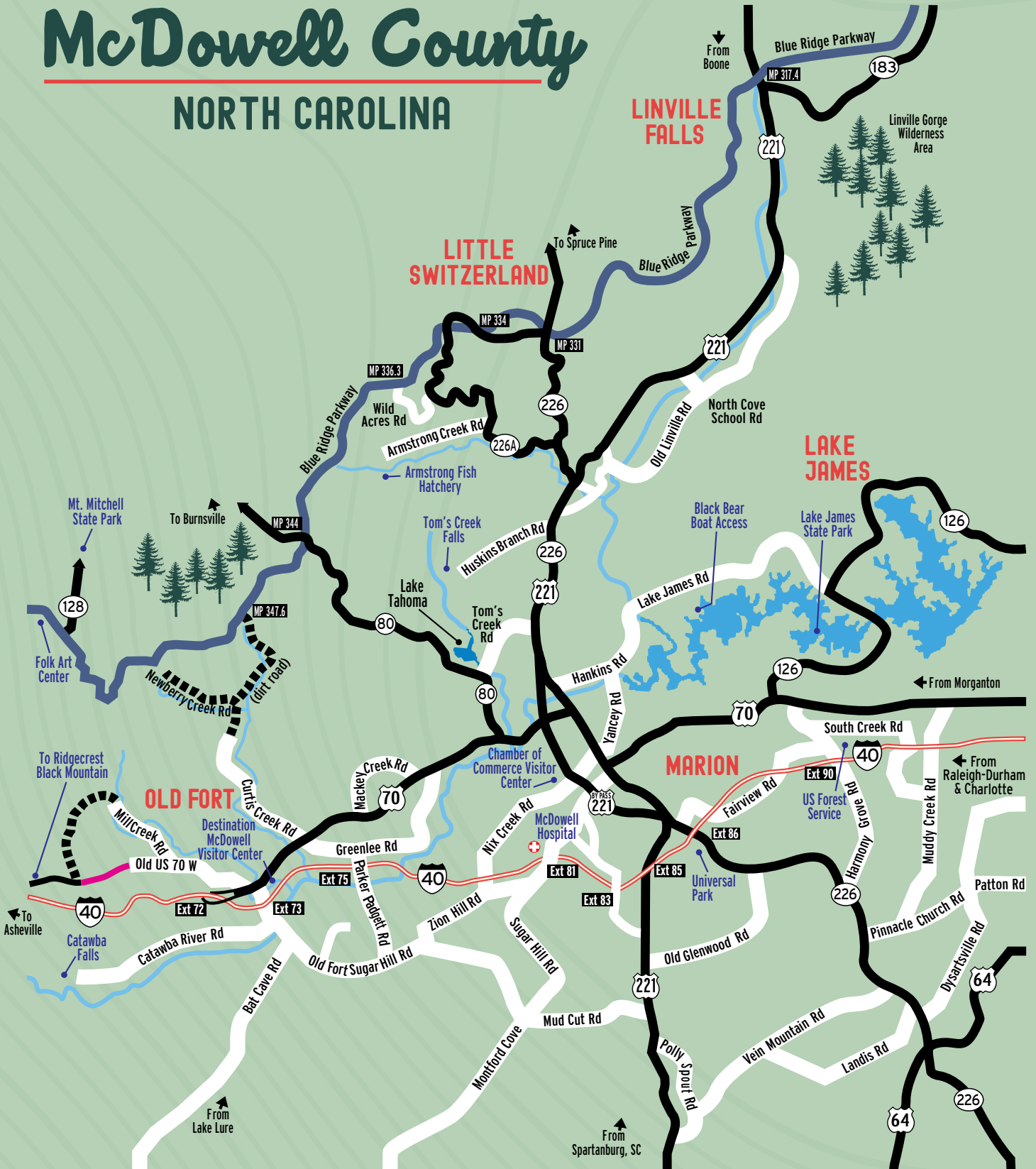
- 42 Cabins and Homes
- 44 Inns and Lodges
- 46 Camping and
Glamping

EVENTS

- 48 McDowell
Happenings

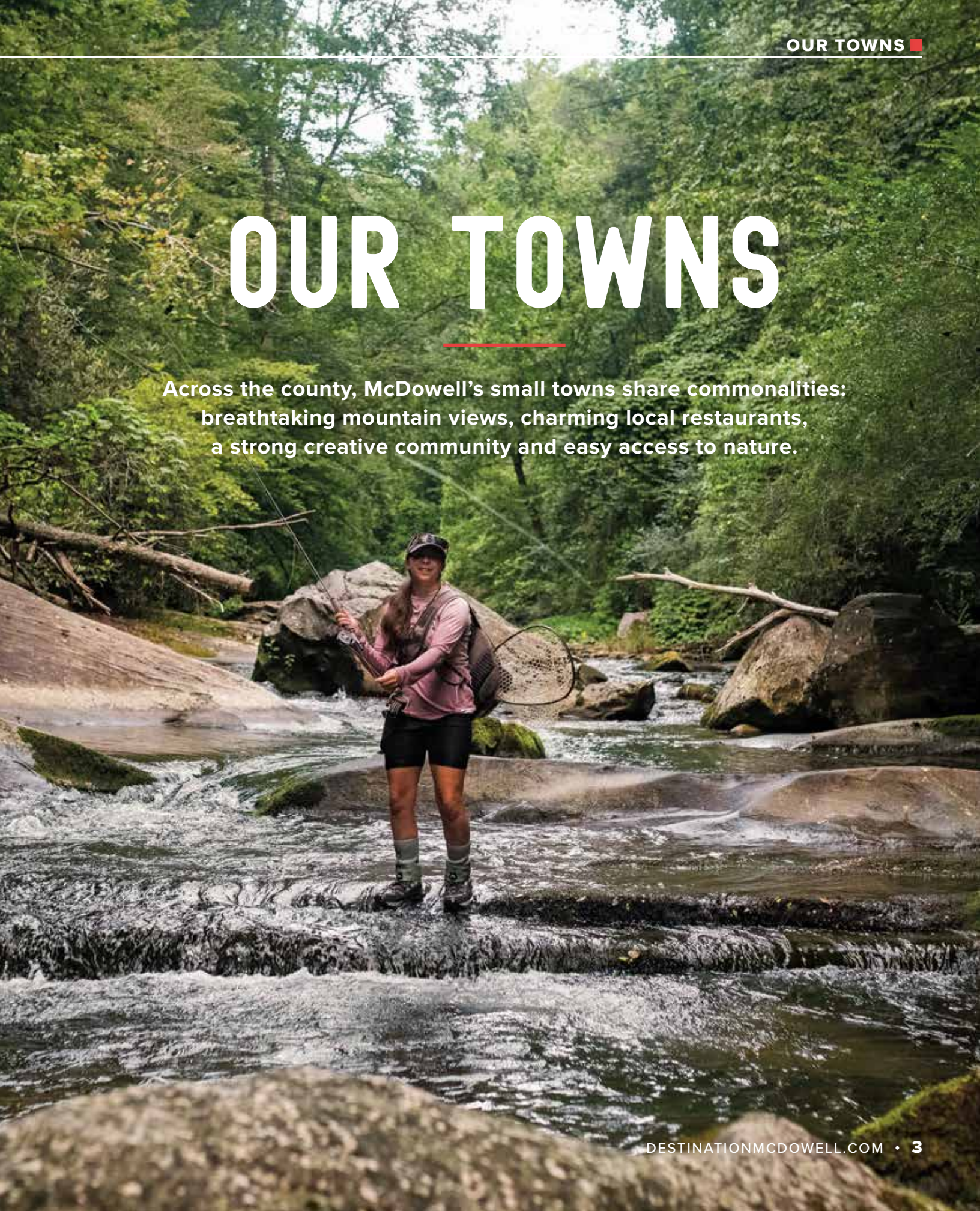
McDowell County

NORTH CAROLINA



OUR TOWNS

Across the county, McDowell's small towns share commonalities: breathtaking mountain views, charming local restaurants, a strong creative community and easy access to nature.





OLD FORT Basecamp

Catawba Falls

THE CHARMING TOWN OF OLD FORT is the gateway to the North Carolina mountains. Just seven miles, as the crow flies – and 5,000 aerial feet – stand between the middle of Main Street and the top of Mt. Mitchell. Hike, bike, one-wheel or explore on horseback over 50 miles of nature trails. Alternately, kick back and enjoy the views at picturesque downtown restaurants, cafés and local shops.

EAT AND DRINK

Black Beary's Café

Get a classic diner experience in the heart of downtown Old Fort. Top your meal off with one of their much-loved shakes.

facebook.com/blackbearyscafe

Modern Alchemist

Creativity is the specialty here. House-made spirits and THC-infused mocktails pair with Latin-inspired street foods.

modernalchemist.com

GoGo's Cinnamon Rolls

Taste of the South magazine named GoGo's one of its top 50 destinations in 2024. The oatmeal cream pie is a must. gogosoven.com

Seeker Coffee

A showcase for regional coffee roasters and local musicians, Seeker is one of the coziest spots in the county.

seekercoffeenc.com

b side Bakery & Books

Locally milled flour becomes luscious loaves and baguettes. A menu favorite pairs a slice of sourdough with Three Sister's Pimento Cheese.

27 Main

Each handcrafted pizza and sandwich is served in a relaxed setting with a cool vibe. **828-668-7676**

Hillman Beer

This craft brewery serves equally refreshing lagers and creek-side views. hillmanbeer.com/old-fort-taproom

EXPLORE

Mountain Gateway Museum

Experience history in a building that's a piece of that history. The museum is housed in a 1937 building built as a New Deal project. mgmnc.org

Old Fort Art Walk

Old Fort comes alive with live music and color in this seasonal, open-air market celebrating art and community. arrowheadart.org

Camp Grier

In the off-season, this 650-acre traditional summer camp offers group rentals, trail access, horseback riding, and outdoor events and races. campgrier.org

Foothills Watershed

Bike trails, wade along river banks, or just sit back with a cold beverage at this 117-acre hangout and bike park. foothillswatershed.com

SHOP

The Common Pine

Find eccentric gifts, vintage home décor and a wide variety of succulents among this downtown boutique's "delightfully rude goods." thecommonpine.com

The Davis Country Store & Cafe

Recalling the Davis family's farm roots, this half-store, half-café spotlights local food, crafts, and a menu of breakfast and lunch favorites. facebook.com/thedaviscountrystore

Arrowhead Gallery

Home to the Arrowhead Artists and Artisans League, this gallery displays local works and offers a range of classes. arrowheadart.org

Nanu Gallery

Inspired by the spirit of comic Robin Williams, Nanu features works by artists from western North Carolina in quarterly exhibitions. nanugallery.com

Waterways

Check out the latest kayak and paddle gear before heading out on the river. waterwaysusa.com

Old Fort Bike Shop

Owned by 30-year bike industry veteran Chad Schoenauer, this shop features bikes for all ages, whether you're hitting the road, trail or gravel. oldfortbikeshop.com



Downtown Old Fort



The Common Pine



“I feel really lucky to be part of the new history and growth in such a neat little town of amazing people with cool dreams.”

BAILEY SPASOVSKI,
OWNER OF THE COMMON PINE

MARION

Main Street

MOUNTAIN SPLENDOR meets small-town charm in Marion, the heart of McDowell County. Main Street comes alive when locals and visitors mingle at festivals and downtown markets. Outdoor adventure awaits year-round — along with a warm welcome from the local restaurants, breweries and shops that make visitors feel like locals.

Downtown Marion with Mt. Ida in the background



EAT AND DRINK

Ingenious Coffee Roaster

By the bag and by the cup, Ingenious has been selling house-roasted coffee on Main Street for more than a decade. ingeniouscoffeeroasters.com

Thai Bliss

Authentic Thai food is courtesy of Thanakorn and Rata Somritinda, who moved their much-loved restaurant from Black Mountain to Marion in 2024. **828-559-0259**

Smoke a 'Lil Smoke

Crafted with wood, smoke and love, the meat stars here: pulled pork, smoked sausage or even a smoked bologna sandwich. **828-559-0495**

Crabby Abby's

A dog-friendly local favorite, Crabby Abby's specializes in sustainably sourced seafood, hand-cut steaks and cleverly concocted cocktails. crabbyabbys.com

Bruce's Fabulous Foods

For nearly a quarter of a century, Bruce's has dished hearty lunch counter fare and shipped their signature cheesecakes (170 varieties!) all over the country. brucesfabulousfoods.com



PLAY

Marion Hot Wheelz

Housed in a former factory, this roller skating rink and arcade is where this small town speeds up. marionhotwheelz.com

Jumpin' Around

In this indoor fun house, let kids burn off energy as they bounce and explore the colorful variety of inflatable characters, obstacle courses and creative designs built for nonstop adventure. jumpinaroundllc.com

SHOP

Flavors on Main

This eclectic general store blends gourmet olive oils, spices and teas with outdoor gear and fly-fishing supplies, plus fun Bigfoot merchandise. flavorsonmain.com

Bigfoot Books & Brews

Perfect for reading, sipping and conversation, this cozy downtown bookstore café pairs local brews with books. bigfootbooksnc.com

Vintage Market Marion

This spacious two-floor vintage and antique marketplace showcases eclectic furniture, décor and more from a range of vendors. facebook.com/vintagemarketmarion



Smoke a 'Lil Smoke



Flavors on Main

The Pickle Barrel

This charming boutique offers a thoughtfully curated selection of apparel and accessories. Alongside stylish wardrobe staples, shoppers discover inspiring home décor and unique gifts — all in a warm and welcoming setting. **828-559-0673**

Phoenix on Main

Find an eclectic mix of antique treasures and vintage clothing. From pre-loved accessories to one-of-a-kind finds, each piece carries its own story and timeless appeal. facebook.com/phoenixonmain

Marion Cigar Shop

Find a premium selection of cigars for enthusiasts and collectors. While browsing their full range of offerings, savor their selections in the cozy smoking lounge. marioncigarshop.com

Roaming Buffalo Outpost

This wide selection of western clothing and boots suits every style and occasion. While you're here, explore locally sourced, farm-raised meats, including beef, bison and pork. roamingbuffalootopost.com

LITTLE SWITZERLAND

The Outpost

The view from
Switzerland Inn

WITH ARCHITECTURE inspired by its Alpine namesake, Little Switzerland's stunning landscape evokes the charm of a Swiss getaway — complete with the added bonus of Carolina barbecue. Pristine parkway views offer outdoor delights with minimal man-made interference over the past century, while a cozy collection of inns, restaurants, galleries and attractions keeps visitors returning year after year.



Little Switzerland Books and Beans



Blue Ridge Parkway

EAT AND DRINK

Switzerland Cafe

Here, barbecue beckons. Pork put them on the NC BBQ Trail, but they smoke delicious trout, salmon and chicken, too. switzerlandcafe.com

Little Switzerland Orchard, Cidery, Winery & Brewery

This mountaintop oasis pairs local wine and brews with breathtaking views — and 14 campsites for overnight stays. [facebook.com/littleswitzerlandorchardandwineryllc](https://www.facebook.com/littleswitzerlandorchardandwineryllc)

Fowl Play Pub

Mixologists at the Switzerland Inn's neighborhood bar make a point to remember names, faces and drink orders. switzerlandinn.com/little-switzerland-dining/fowl-play-pub-tap-room

EXPLORE

Museum of North Carolina Minerals

Interactive exhibits showcase the Blue Ridge Mountains' multitude of geological treasures, as well as the importance of local mining. nps.gov/blri/planyourvisit/museum-of-north-carolina-minerals-mp-331.htm

Blue Ridge Parkway

Slow and scenic, the 469-mile drive is the nation's longest linear park. Be sure

to check Hurricane Helene-related closures before planning your trip. blueridgeparkway.org

Emerald Village

Seek gold and jewels, visit the historic Discovery Mill, or take a UV Black Light Tour of a mine at this collection of attractions. emeraldvillage.com

Gem Mountain

Sift for precious stones or learn to make jewelry at this family-friendly favorite that's been in business for nearly 40 years. gemmountain.com

SHOP

Little Switzerland Books and Beans

A local fixture for 40 years, the store boasts two floors of new and used books, coffee, pastries and a working fireplace. lbooksandbeans.com

Artisan League of Little Switzerland

The League formed in 2012 to spotlight local creators. Their work runs the artistic gamut and is on display at Little Switzerland Books and Beans. lbooksandbeans.com

Switzerland General Store

Find local food, drinks and souvenirs in a funky atmosphere. Drop by on a Wednesday for the weekly casserole from Switzerland Cafe. switzerlandcafe.com

“It’s quiet, clean and beautiful here. We’re tight-knit, but we’re welcoming, too.”

MOIRA HUTCHINGS
MANAGER, LITTLE SWITZERLAND
BOOKS AND BEANS

LINVILLE FALLS COMMUNITY

Linville Falls

These breathtaking, three-tiered falls, along with Linville Gorge, are among the most popular stops on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

North Cove Leisure Club

Sprawling across 157 acres of rolling hills, North Cove features one of the world's top 20 disc golf courses, according to UDisc.com.

Famous Louise's

Rock House Restaurant

This family friendly spot serves hearty, home-cooked meals in a welcoming and casual dining room. Enjoy breakfast favorites; satisfying dishes like ribs, steaks and seafood; and fresh-baked pies. 828-765-2702

Banks Creek Barn

Just a mile from the falls, this one-of-a-kind rustic destination combines a fishing hole, art gallery, smokehouse and taproom in one charming setting. bankscreekbarn.com

TOP HIKING TRAILS

McDowell County is a hiker's dream, with bucket list trips through Pisgah National Forest, rewarding trails to mountaintops and waterfalls, and peaceful strolls along scenic creeks and shorelines.

BY LAURA LEE

TRAIL AMENITIES



Waterfall



Picnic Area

Wheelchair
Accessible

BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY

CRABTREE FALLS

Admire rhododendron, oak and hickory trees, as well as a 60-foot waterfall. Begin at the camp store near Little Switzerland at milepost 339.5.

Intermediate | 3-mile loop |  |  | blueridgeparkway.org

BLUE RIDGE PINNACLE TRAIL

This short but steep trail offers big rewards with stunning views from a mile-high perch. Begin at the swing-bar gate at milepost 354.8.

Intermediate | 3-mile loop | destinationmcdowell.com/attractions/blue-ridge-pinnacle/



Catawba Falls Trail

LAKE JAMES

LAKE JAMES STATE PARK

Lake James offers 150 miles of shoreline for outdoor recreation, including hiking on the popular Mill's Creek Trail and Paddy's Creek Trail. Parking available at the Visitors Center.

Easy | Various lengths |  |  | ncparks.gov

FONTA FLORA STATE TRAIL, LAKE JAMES SECTION

When completed, the Fonta Flora State Trail will stretch 100 miles from Morganton to Asheville. Today you can explore the 7-mile scenic stretch through Lake James State Park with a small parking area at 5575 NC Highway 126.

7 miles | trails.nc.gov



Fonta Flora
State Trail

Tom's Creek Falls



MARION

TOM'S CREEK FALLS

Between Marion and Little Switzerland, this gentle trail runs through Pisgah National Forest to an 80-foot cascading waterfall.

Easy | 1 mile round trip |  | destinationmcdowell.com/attractions/toms-creek-falls

PEAVINE TRAIL

Explore the old Norfolk Southern Railway track as part of Marion's rails-to-trails-program. Park on State St. across from the trailhead.

Easy | 3 miles out and back | mcdowelltrails.org

MOUNTAINS TO SEA TRAIL, SECTION 4



This famed trail crosses the entire state from Kuwohi to the Outer Banks. Section 4 runs from Black Mountain Campground to the Beacon Heights Overlook, through the Pisgah National Forest and the Linville Gorge, with dramatic views and stunning waterfalls along the way.

Strenuous | 40+ miles one way | mountainstoseatrail.org

OLD FORT AREA

CATAWBA FALLS TRAIL

Arrive early to park at the trailhead and start this peaceful 1.5-mile walk to the lower falls. Stop there, or climb the 580 stairs for three scenic overlooks of the upper and lower falls, before following the Ridge Trail back.

Easy to difficult | 3.5-mile loop |  |  | fs.usda.gov

HICKORY BRANCH

This Pisgah National Forest hike offers a little bit of everything: steep inclines, peaceful creek settings, mountain views and a beautiful 20-foot waterfall. Parking available at Curtis Creek Campground.

Intermediate to difficult | 3 miles out and back |  | destinationmcdowell.com

MEADOWS LOOP

Enjoy Curtis Creek, Pisgah National Forest and lush meadows planted with wildflowers from this ADA-accessible trail and boardwalk.

Easy | 1-mile loop |  | destinationmcdowell.com/attractions/meadow-loop-trail



Photo courtesy of Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail

Mountains to Sea Trail,
Section 4



Meadows Loop

POINT LOOKOUT TRAIL

This paved greenway traverses deep into Pisgah and grants a gorgeous view of Royal Gorge. Park along Mill Creek Road.

Intermediate | 7.2 miles out and back | destinationmcdowell.com/attractions/point-lookout-trail

SNOOK'S NOSE TRAIL

Take this steep rocky path to earn 360-degree views. From the large outcrop resembling a nose, you'll see Iron Mountain and the Newberry Creek watershed below. Hike on to Green Knob Overlook to extend the trip. Parking available at Curtis Creek Campground.

Difficult | 4 miles out and back | fs.usda.gov

WANT MORE INFO?

Additional trail information can be found at McDowell Trails Association. mcdowelltrails.org

THE RIDE OF YOUR LIFE

Explore the area's wildly beautiful mountain biking trails.

BY LAURA LEE

Outside magazine recently named Old Fort among the top 23 places to visit in the world, putting our majestic mountain biking town in the same company as Alaska and New Zealand. Public and private sectors continue to invest in the construction of new trails through the region. One notable project is the Old Fort Trails Project, featuring 42 miles of new trails that connect the town of Old Fort, through the Pisgah National Forest, to Mount Mitchell — the highest peak east of the Mississippi River.

“We offer an incredible playground for mountain bikers of all skill levels, from flowy 40-minute loops to full-day, epic cross-country rides where you can descend 4,000 vertical feet or more,” says Jeremy Poore, avid mountain biker and owner of Mountain Top Shuttles.

YOU GOTTA GET UP TO GET DOWN!

Mountain Top Shuttles picks up cyclists from downtown Old Fort and drops off at multiple mountain trailheads and the Blue Ridge Parkway. mountaintopshuttles.com



BEGINNERS

Gateway Trails

The stacked loop network allows families and beginner/intermediate riders to choose their own adventure, with a variety of trails all leading back to the Gateway Trailhead on Curtis Creek Road.

Lake James State Park

Warm up on the green-rated Tindo trail before checking out Timba and Wimba Loops, featuring fun, flowy trails and gentle elevation changes.

INTERMEDIATE/ADVANCED

Heartbreak Ridge

Conquer the longest downhill mountain biking trail on the East Coast — an exhilarating 12-mile descent dropping 4,300 vertical feet from the Blue Ridge Parkway to Old Highway 70 near downtown Old Fort.


Kitsuma Peak

This 5-mile black-diamond trail winds through the rugged backcountry of Mount Mitchell. Avid mountain bikers have come for decades for the narrow single-track, challenging switchbacks and adrenaline-filled three-mile descent.

Bernard Mountain

Running parallel to the more technical Kitsuma Peak, this three-mile, blue-rated trail offers flowy turns over steep terrain, pristine wilderness and stunning views.

Old Fort
Gateway



“There are so many cool and varied trail systems around our county that different people find compelling for different reasons, whether you’re a trail runner, a mountain biker or a backpacker.”

JEREMY POORE, AVID MOUNTAIN BIKER AND LOCAL

GRAND CANYON OF THE EAST

Don't miss the jaw-dropping views of Linville Falls and the Linville Gorge, known as the Grand Canyon of the Southern Appalachians.

BY LAURA LEE

Linville Gorge

STAMP YOUR WAY

GET A LAY OF THE LAND ON THE MCDOWELL HERITAGE TRAIL

Our digital scavenger hunt hits all the highlights. Visit 12 of the 20 stops to win a prize! Scan this QR code to get started, or visit loyalbrew.com/passports.



CATAWBA VALE MURAL



MOUNTAIN GATEWAY MUSEUM



ARROWHEAD MONUMENT



Start your adventure at the Linville Falls parking area off Old NC 105 where you can choose several routes. Each season offers something special, from vibrant wildflowers in spring and summer, to brilliant fall color, to the quiet beauty of evergreen hemlocks in winter.

ERWINS VIEW TRAIL

This moderate hike features four impressive overlooks. The first, just a half mile from the visitor center, offers a striking view of Linville River's upper falls. Continue climbing to Chimney View, named for the chimney-like rock outcroppings. At Gorge View Overlook, see the Linville River cutting its way through the Linville Gorge Wilderness Area. The trail ends at Erwins View Overlook, where a sweeping panoramic view of the Linville Gorge awaits.

Moderate | 1 to 1.6 miles round trip

LINVILLE GORGE TRAIL

Just a fifth of a mile from the visitor center, hikers can choose from two routes. The slightly shorter trek to the Plunge Basin Overlook offers views of the lower falls and chimney rock

formations. The longer Linville Gorge Trail winds down through rock cliffs to the base of the falls and the swirling pool below. Swimming is not permitted.

Strenuous | 1 to 1.4 miles round trip

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Keep an eye out for these iconic natural landmarks.

WINDOW ROCK

A small natural arch in the rock frames a spectacular view of the surrounding mountains and gorge wall.

TABLE ROCK

Cherokee legend says the Great Spirit used this giant rock plateau as a dining table.

HAWKSBILL MOUNTAIN

The outcropping resembles a hawk's bill and happens to make a great picnic spot.

SHORTOFF MOUNTAIN

A devastating flood in 1916 eroded the mountain's face of the mountain; from the top, you can see Lake James.

DEVIL'S CELLAR

A steep narrow gully offers a chillingly dramatic view of the depths of the gorge.

GO WITH A GUIDE

When you're setting out to explore new terrain — whether it's your first paddle downriver or a hike to a high-elevation overlook — an experienced guide lets you focus on the view instead of the logistics. From permits and gear to safety and route planning, they handle the details so you can be fully present in the moment.

The Outdoor Business Alliance of Western North Carolina created the "Go with a Guide" program to connect visitors with trusted local outfitters across the region. Each guiding company offers deep local knowledge and seasoned expertise to tucked-away trails you might never find on your own. Find your adventure partner at outdoorbusinessalliance.org.





GET AWAY AND GIVE BACK

Mountain trails made McDowell County a destination.
Visitors make those trails better.

BY JIMMY RYALS

The hiking, biking and equestrian trails that make western North Carolina unique don't just happen. It takes work to blaze and maintain those paths. In McDowell County, visitors do a significant share of that work.

This voluntourism movement began in earnest in 2021. That's when leaders of **Camp Grier** approached the United States Forest Service about partnering on the construction of new trails in the Pisgah National Forest. While Camp Grier began as a Presbyterian summer camp in the mid-1950s, it's expanded over the last decade into an all-seasons hub for outdoor adventure.

Camp Grier executive director Jason McDougald's pitch hinged on the camp and the town of Old Fort's ability to rally volunteers to help clear new trails and maintain existing ones. And they've shown up in force, devoting more than 4,000 hours in 2024 to the **G5 Trail Collective**, the group created by Camp Grier and the forest service.

Many of those hours were from people visiting Old Fort or surrounding towns. They come to give back to those communities and the Blue Ridge Mountains, McDougald says. McDowell County repays them with a one-of-a-kind mountain experience.

"People come and do some work, but they also get to



The G5 Trail Collective is a volunteer group created by Camp Grier and the forest service.



hang out with really fun people,” says McDougald. “You ride bikes and run, and we feed you good food. It’s a real weekend experience.”

Another important part of that infrastructure is the **Trail School at McDowell Technical Community College**. In partnership with the Forest Service and U.S. Department of Agriculture, the school teaches trail design, stone work, chainsaw safety and other essential trail management schools. Courses typically take two to three days, and some end with useful professional certifications. People from all over the country take classes there, and some stay to apply their new skills on local trails.



“ People come and do some work, but they also get to hang out with really fun people. You ride bikes and run, and we feed you good food. It’s a real weekend experience. ”

JASON MCDUGALD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CAMP GRIER

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Late October is a great time to join the wave of volunteer visitors in McDowell. That’s when **G5 Trail Collective** holds its annual **Fall Trail Weekend**. More than 150 people gather at Camp Grier to camp out, clear trails, and commune with fellow nature lovers over food, contests, horseback rides and foot races. g5trailcollective.org

ON THE RIVER

Discover McDowell County's waterways through fly-fishing, kayaking, canoeing and river snorkeling in the scenic Blue Ridge foothills.

BY LARA IVANITCH



Where the Catawba and Broad rivers are born — and where countless creeks and tributaries lace their way through the landscape — water defines life in McDowell County. From quiet fly-fishing stretches to adrenaline-spiking paddling runs, this Blue Ridge playground offers something for everyone who feels most alive on the water. “We have a lot of public water, with Pisgah National Forest as the buffer,” says Jake Smith, owner of **Connecting the Dots Fishing Guides**. “That makes it incredibly accessible for just about anybody, at any budget, to get out there and experience the wilderness.”

Kayakers, paddleboarders and canoers can access the Catawba River at Greenlee Park, then travel the river as it flows east to Lake James. Along the way, a ramp at Phillips Landing, where 221 Business North meets the river in Marion, makes a convenient stopping point. Or, paddlers can continue to Black Bear Boat Ramp on Lake James. If you need to rent a kayak or would like to tube the river instead, head to Catawba River Outdoors. The outfitters also provide transportation upriver for trips ending at the outfitter.

The **Blue Ridge Snorkel Trail** offers another way to explore the water. You’ll just need a snorkel, mask and sturdy shoes suitable for the river. Duck your head in the water as you float, swim or crawl along the riverbed to see life teeming below the surface. Along the **Joseph McDowell Historical Catawba Greenway**, you’ll find multiple places to step safely into the water, where you could see fish like fieryback shiners darting between the rocks and mussel shells like those of the eastern elliptio.

McDowell County’s reputation for exceptional fishing runs deep. “We have thousands of trout streams with brook trout, rainbow trout and brown trout,” says Smith. “We have wild fish and we have stocked fish, so there’s plenty of fish year-round.”

That abundance is especially evident on Curtis Creek. “Curtis Creek is the closest blue ribbon trout stream to Charlotte,” Smith says. Blue-ribbon streams are premier fishing destinations. The designation signals a rare combination of clean, cold water, a healthy habitat and thriving trout numbers — making it a standout destination for anglers seeking a truly high-quality fishing experience.

And as a designated Mountain Heritage Trout City, Old Fort provides public access to a .7-mile stretch of Mill Creek that flows through town. This section of the delayed-harvest trout stream lies between Main Street and the U.S. Highway 40 bridge. “The state actually grows and raises their

“We have thousands of trout streams with brook trout, rainbow trout and brown trout. We have wild fish and we have stocked fish, so there’s plenty of fish year-round.”

JAKE SMITH, OWNER OF CONNECTING THE DOTS FISHING GUIDES

**Paddling on the
Joseph McDowell Historical
Catawba Greenway**



own fish, and they put them in there for sporting purposes,” explains Smith.

With delayed harvest, the NC Wildlife Resource Commission stocks the waters in March, April, May, October and November, and beginning in October, only catch-and-release fishing using single hooks and artificial bait is allowed until early June.

For those new to flyfishing, Cameron Austin, owner of **High Fins Expedition**, recommends wider creeks like Mill Creek and nearby Curtis Creek. “Your larger rivers have deeper pools and better habitat. Plus they’re wide open so you don’t have to worry about your back cast getting hung in a limb or anything like that — you’ve got plenty of area to work with.”

Curtis Creek has easy roadside access along its delayed harvest section, but farther upstream near Curtis Creek Campground, the waters grow wilder and more conducive to native trout.

Newberry Creek, another of McDowell County’s standout fisheries, provides the challenge seasoned anglers seek. Narrow and canopied, its tight quarters require precision while its easily spooked native fish call for stealthy maneuvers.



Rainbow trout

To maintain its healthy population of southern Appalachian brook trout, the stream only allows catch and release with artificial lures. “It’s the first catch-and-release fishery in the state of North Carolina. So they’re the first river to be really proactive on preserving their native brook trout and their wild rainbows and browns,” Smith says. “They didn’t want to see them disappear and dissipate.”

WILD AND WELL

In these mountain escapes, nature sets the pace for restoration.

BY OMI SALAVEA

From wellness retreats to weekend yoga hikes, wake up your soul in the heart of the Pisgah National Forest.

Atop the upper falls of the Catawba Falls Trail, Ceaira Cartony of **Namaste in Nature** leads a small group of yoga practitioners through breathing exercises while surrounded by the gentle rain of water moving through national forest wilderness.

Despite a soggy morning along the streets of downtown, **Old Fort Yoga** opens their doors to drop-in yoga, during which participants can stretch and pose with a charming view of historic downtown. Afternoons are spent preparing for Kundalini or Soundbathing events hosted by local practitioners.

Sweeping landscapes of the Blue Ridge Parkway and vista views of Little Switzerland create the perfect backdrop for **Wildacres Retreat**, one of the largest retreats in the county. Housing up to 65 individuals in dual-occupancy rooms, Wildacres has been the backdrop for silent retreats, metaphysical getaways, and other wellness communities.

YOGA IN MCDOWELL

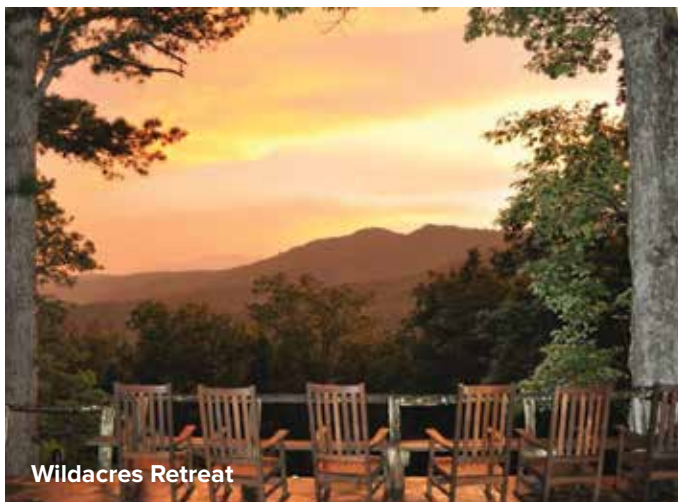
Namaste in Nature
namasteinnature.com

Old Fort Yoga
oldfortyoga.com

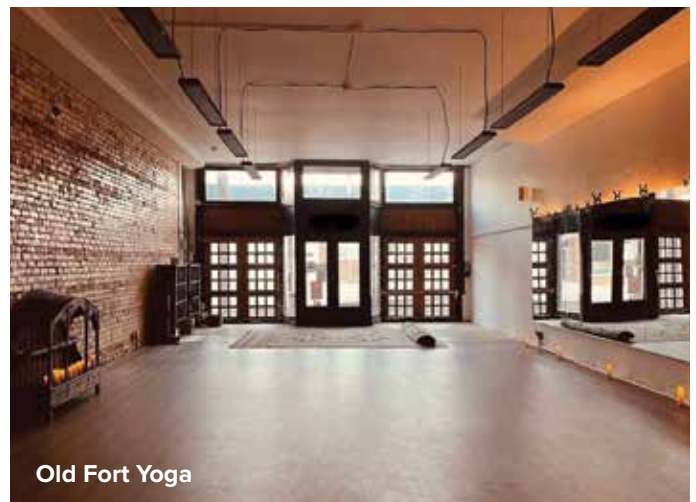
Wildacres Retreat
wildacres.org



Namaste in Nature



Wildacres Retreat



Old Fort Yoga

MAKING WAVES

A day at Lake James includes golf, swimming and boating.

BY LARA IVANITCH

Travel any direction from Lake James, and you'll find mountains: Linville Mountains to the north, Black Mountains to the west, South Mountains to the southeast. Set among these peaks, the refreshing lake adds water sports, boating, flats fishing and more to the Appalachian landscape. It's easy to spend a day, a weekend, or longer with the bounty of activities you'll find here.

The lake, created in the early 1900s as the first of 11 along the Catawba River, makes a great oasis on sunny summer days. Visit the Paddy's Creek Area at **Lake James State Park** to splash and swim at its sandy beach May through September. Head to the bathhouse for a change and ice cream from the concession stand.



Paddy's Creek Area

In addition to swimming, Paddy's Creek has 14 miles of shared-use mountain bike trails; five hiking trails, including the Overmountain Victory and Flora Fonta State trails; and a drive-in campground.

Across the lake, the park's Catawba River access contains four additional trails. "Two overlooks can be found off trails at the Catawba River Access: the Lake Channel Overlook and the Sandy Cliff Overlook. Both offer lake and mountain views, which are beautiful year-round," says Nora Coffey, park superintendent.

For a lakeside meal or afternoon cocktail, try **Bear Creek Marina**, a bar and grill where you'll likely hear live music.

Canal Bridge, Black Bear and Hidden Cove boat ramps make getting out on the water simple for boating enthusiasts. There's also Lake James Marina beside the N.C. Highway 126 bridge, offering live bait and inflatable rentals. Professional fishing guide Jake Smith advises casting a line while you're out on the water. "Lake James is a world-class, small-mouth fishery. Small-mouth bass are native to our watershed."

If you'd rather leave the navigation to someone else, let **Lake James Sunset Cruises** take the wheel. While you cruise, look for glimpses of otters, turtles, eagles and herons.

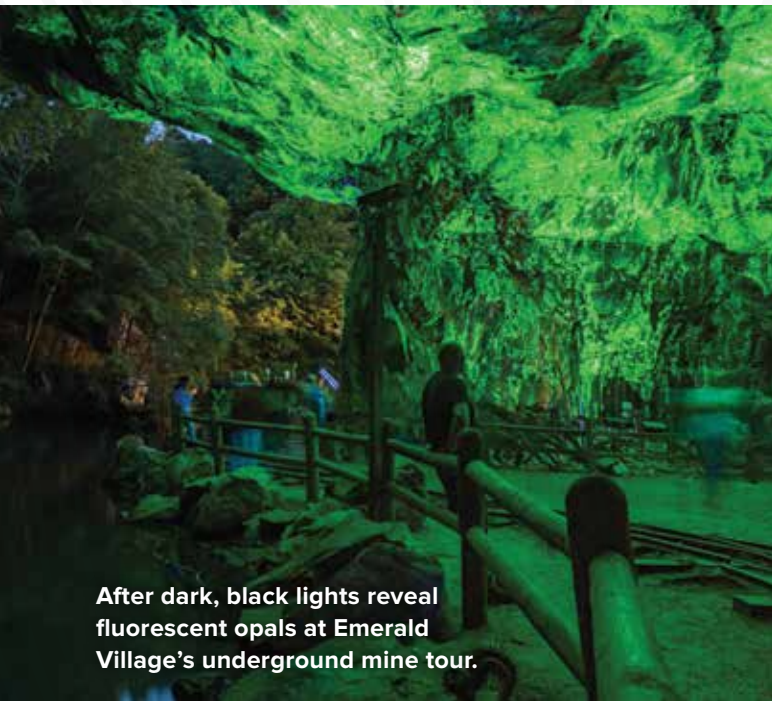
Golfers love the **Marion Lake Club**, a semi-private course with bent grass greens. Almost every hole on the back nine grants lake-front views.



GOLD DIGGERS

Relics of the gold rush invite modern explorers to pan streams, tour historic mines and catch the spark of adventure.

BY LAURA LEE



After dark, black lights reveal fluorescent opals at Emerald Village's underground mine tour.

In McDowell County, history glimmers beneath your feet. From old mining towns to hidden creek beds, the region's gold-rush past still sparks adventure today. Pan for treasure, explore historic mines and uncover stories that shine as brightly as the nuggets themselves.

LUCKY STRIKE GOLD & GEM MINE

Home of the Official N.C. Gold Festival, here you can spend a day panning, sluicing and crevicing for gold on the South Broad River. Purchase a bucket of ore and head over to the flume, where water washes away sediment and reveals hidden gems. *Open year-round; 251 Lucky Strike Drive, Marion; luckystrikegoldandgem.com*

EMERALD VILLAGE

North Carolina is home to America's first gold rush and the world's largest emeralds. Pan for gold or dig for emeralds at the Crabtree Emerald Mine, once a major supplier for Tiffany in New York. Visit Discovery Mill for historic mining exhibits or check out the North Carolina Mining Museum. *Open April to November; 331 McKinney Mine Road, Little Switzerland; emeraldvillage.com*

THE MUSEUM OF NORTH CAROLINA MINERALS

This stop on the Blue Ridge Parkway is as fun as it is educational. Learn about ancient geological processes, and see more than 300 gems and minerals on display, from aquamarine and garnet to rose quartz, topaz and lithium. *Open April to November; Blue Ridge Parkway, Milepost 331; 828-765-2761*

THERMAL CITY GOLD MINE

On the grounds of one of the region's earliest gold deposits, you can pan for gold and learn mining techniques from experienced prospectors. *Open mid-March to mid-November; 5240 US 221 Hwy N, Union Mills; facebook.com/thermalcitygold*



North Carolina is home to the four major gemstones: emeralds, rubies, sapphires and diamonds.

ROADS LESS TRAVELED

The mountains come alive on these scenic drives.

BY JIMMY RYALS

Blue Ridge Parkway

No offense, hikers and cyclists, but a car may be the best way to pack in the maximum miles of McDowell County beauty. In North Carolina's mountains, even routine drives become a total delight.

The centerpiece is, of course, the **Blue Ridge Parkway**. Widely considered one of the most beautiful drives in America, the parkway dances along the McDowell County line for roughly 30 miles. Twelve breathtaking overlooks and five tunnels lie along this stretch.

For Parkway-like views, drive the **Diamondback**. It's a 38-mile, diamond-shaped path that begins in Little Switzerland, and then loops along NC Highway 226A, US Highway 221, Toms Creek Road and NC Highway 80. Bikers love the Diamondback's S-curves and steep climbs, but they're no less thrilling on four wheels. (Note: Check drivenc.gov for current road conditions and closures.)

For a more relaxed route, drive from **Marion to Lake James State Park**. Bypass the direct route for Hankins

Road and Lake James Road. For the last 10 miles, you'll have the sprawling lakeside views out one window and the Pisgah National Forest through the other.

There are several stops and side quests on your path, too. Consider pulling off at the Black Bear Campground and Park and dropping a fishing line into the lake. It's teeming with catfish, crappie, walleye and several types of bass.

Finally, take a primitive ride on **Old NC Highway 105 to the Linville Gorge Wilderness Area**. Built in the railbed of the old Tweetsie Railroad, the unpaved road reveals spectacular views of the Linville Gorge and Table Rock Mountain. You'll need a vehicle with high clearance and four-wheel drive. And plenty of time, so you can drive slow and savor every mile.



Diamondback



FROM THE GROUND UP

Slow down and dig in, as agritourism blends working farms, local food and mountain charm.

BY LARA IVANITCH



Orchard at Altapass

On the deck behind the General Store of the **Orchard at Altapass**, the aroma of apple pie fills the crisp air. Beyond, the surrounding mountains rise, creating a hazy blue backdrop for the sloping land, lined with rows of apple trees. Guides lead families to spots where they can fill their baskets with juicy heirloom apples.

Farming may not be the first thing that comes to mind when you think of western North Carolina, but agritourism provides another way to see the stunning scenery, experience a different facet of the region and learn about an essential industry.

“This is probably the only orchard of any kind that many folks are going to go to,” explains Sam McKinney, mission and sustainability manager for the Altapass Foundation. “And when we take folks out to pick, we educate them about agriculture, heirloom apples, and how we grow and graft them.”

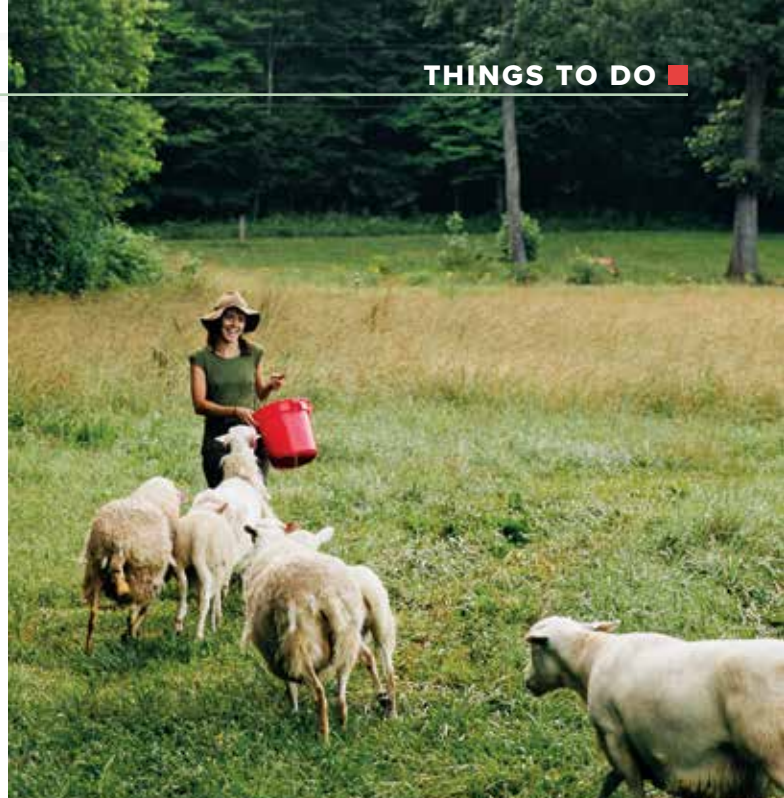
For a taste of agriculture combined with local art, visit **Grove Hill Pottery and Farm**. Owner Leslie Bradsher offers tours by appointment of the generations-old family property, which was originally known as the Greenlee Homeplace. She frequently visited her grandparents at the farm as a child. Today, she feels a responsibility to continue the NC Century Farm. “You don’t own it, you’re a steward,” she says.

Bradsher has three Nigerian dwarf goats, a donkey and a 32-year-old palomino, and she creates pottery on the farm. Tours include Bradsher’s studio, which contains her electric, gas and raku kilns, visiting the animals and seeing her finished pottery, which is available for purchase.

Wild East Farm, located south of Marion, offers sustainable agriculture education throughout the year. “So, we’re actually teaching people about the different farm systems so they can implement them themselves on a home scale or a commercial scale,” says Lyric East, who co-owns the farm with her husband, Noah. In addition to pastured poultry, their workshops focus on techniques they use on the farm. These include “no-till” gardening, which is growing without tillage or tractors, and the silvopasture system, which means integrating trees with grazing livestock on the same land.

In September, **Lee’s One Fortune Farm**, a small multi-family farm, participates in the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) farm tour. At this time, the farm showcases its harvest in dishes that guests can sample. Those interested in visiting the farm other times of the year can schedule a tour in advance with Chue Lee.

“All our products are of Asian varieties, and we do grow our own specialty rice, heirlooms kept in the Hmong culture, here in western North Carolina,” Lee explains. “The Hmong people are heavily linked to agriculture, and our families consist of first-generation immigrants that work these fields.”



Nestled between the foothills of Nebo and untouched forests, **Idle Acres Farm** raises heritage turkeys, grows sweet blueberries and hosts visitors at their unique working-farm vacation homes. Tim Burke, a dedicated NC Farmers of the Foothills grower, offers hands-on lessons in raising turkeys and growing local produce, educating with the kind of insight that can only be obtained through years of experience.

CAVERNS

**Discover the wonders at Linville Caverns,
a hidden world beneath Humpback Mountain formed
hundreds of millions of years ago.**

BY LAURA LEE

While geologists have identified hundreds of caves in North Carolina, Linville Caverns is the only show cave open to the public. Wind through ancient passageways and marvel at incredible stalactites and stalagmites, limestone formations that grow just one cubic inch every 125 years. Living timelines that illustrate thousands of years, their varying sizes and shapes resemble everything from bowling pins to a wedding party.

During the tour, the guide briefly extinguishes the light for guests to experience the spine-tingling feeling of absolute darkness.

One of the cave's great mysteries is a seemingly bottomless pool of unknown depth, home to rare blind trout. The fish actually led to the cave's discovery in 1822, when naturalist Henry Colton saw what appeared to be fish swimming into solid rock. Bats, salamanders and insects have also made their home in the cave, where the constant temperature is a chilly 50 degrees.

Adding to the intrigue, local legend claims both Confederate and Union soldiers used the cave as a hideout and a refuge from the fighting above.

19929 US 221 North, Marion;
linvillecaverns.com



PLAN YOUR TRIP

Visitors of all ages can explore the cave while learning an informative science lesson during a 30-minute guided tour. A paved walkway makes the first part of the tour handicap accessible.

**“It looked like the arch of some grand old cathedral,
yet it was too sublime, too perfect in all
its beautiful proportions, to be anything of human.”**

HENRY COLTON, ON DISCOVERING THE CAVE IN 1822

DAY TRIPPIN'

With McDowell County as your home base,
some of North Carolina's most famed attractions are all within reach.

BY LAURA LEE

BILTMORE

Travel Time: 25 minutes

Step inside America's largest home, the spectacular Gilded Age estate of the Vanderbilts. Visit the two-story library, indoor pool, bowling alley and servants' quarters. Admire thousands of treasures, from Monet masterpieces to a game table once belonging to Napoleon. Carve out a day for strolling through the Olmsted gardens, hiking the many trails or sampling complimentary wine in Antler Hill Village. biltmore.com

SPRUCE PINE

Travel Time: 45 minutes

This artsy riverside town is home to some of the most skilled craftspeople in the country. Shop vibrant textiles, blown glass, handcrafted jewelry and other museum-quality works at Toe River Arts or the Market on Oak. A Mountain Heritage Trout City, Spruce Pine parks and outfitters provide access to the Toe River, where you can throw a line, rent a tube or paddle the canoe trail. discoversprucepinenc.com

CHIMNEY ROCK STATE PARK

Travel Time: 1 hour

This iconic state park offers panoramic views of Lake Lure and the surrounding mountains from atop striking rock formations. Hike to Hickory Branch Falls; discover critters in the Animal Discovery Den; and enjoy lunch or guided tours as you explore more than 8,000 acres. chimneyrockpark.com

GRANDFATHER MOUNTAIN

Travel Time: 1 hour, 15 minutes

Early pioneers saw the face of an old man in one of the cliffs, giving the mountain its name. Today, visitors can cross the Mile High Swinging Bridge, America's highest suspension footbridge; learn about the history, wildlife and geology of the mountain at the Wilson Center for Nature Discovery; and get up close to black bears, bald eagles, river otters and elk in protective environmental habitats.

Blue Ridge Parkway, Milepost 305; grandfather.com

MOUNT MITCHELL STATE PARK

Travel Time: 1 hour, 15 minutes

Park near the observation deck and stand atop the highest peak east of the Mississippi River. From 6,684 feet high, you'll get a 360-degree view of the Black Mountains, including six of the tallest peaks in the east. Avid hikers will also find a range of challenging trails. ***Blue Ridge Parkway, Milepost 355; ncparks.gov***

ROAN MOUNTAIN

Travel Time: 1 hour, 30 minutes

This five-mile scenic ridgetop crosses the North Carolina-Tennessee line. The Roan Mountain Recreation Area in Bakersville includes a paved trail through their famous rhododendron gardens and to Roan High Bluff overlook. The Carver's Gap entrance provides hiking access on the Appalachian Trail to Roan High Knob. ***fs.usda.gov***

**Mile High Swinging Bridge,
America's highest
suspension footbridge**

*Approximate driving time from Destination
McDowell Visitors Center in Old Fort.

SWEET ESCAPE

For homemade sweets and treats, make a point to visit these bakeries and ice cream shops.

BY LAURA LEE

CHANCE OF SPRINKLES

While their special occasion cakes come with plenty of wow factor, this bake shop also elevates any ordinary day. Try their coma brownie or a sugar cookie latte, or for something healthy, order a homemade protein bar or smoothie. Be sure to bring the little ones by on Wednesdays at noon — their festive story hour is icing on the cake! chanceofsprinklesbakeshop.com

GOGO'S

There's no better way to greet the day than sinking your teeth into a warm cinnamon roll from GoGo's in Old Fort.

Wendy Lewis began making cinnamon rolls during the pandemic to share with neighbors and friends and decided to launch her own business, named for her grandmother. Choose from favorites like Maple Bacon, Apple Pie, Caramel Pecan or The Original with made-from-scratch cream cheese icing. gogosoven.com

DOTS DARIO

This legendary roadside stand has been a beloved summer tradition since 1970. Choose from two dozen flavors of soft-serve ice cream in dazzling flavors like tipsy peach, low-sugar pecan and

dark chocolate raspberry truffle. Get a selfie in front of the iconic sign, one of the region's most photographed landmarks. [facebook.com/dotsdairio](https://www.facebook.com/dotsdairio)

MR. BOB'S DO-NUTS

When Bob Masiello and his wife moved to Marion to be closer to their grandchildren, they decided to open their own doughnut shop. In 2015, his unassuming spot rose to fame by winning first place in *Food Network Magazine's* ugliest dessert contest. Mr. Bob's Apple Uglies are still a big draw today, made with fresh doughnut holes, apple sauce and cinnamon.





GoGo's in
Old Fort



Mr. Bob's Do-Nuts
in Marion



Artesana
Ice Cream
in Marion

Try the original glazed or a signature stuffed doughnut like the Maple Crunch, Peanut Butter Cream or Chocolate Espresso. mrbobsdonutsmarion.com

SUGAR & WHISK

Owner Lisa Messer pours her heart and soul into her Marion small business, where the chocolate chip cookies,

ooey gooey bars and pound cakes are hard to beat. Warm up with a homemade hot chocolate, apple cider, hot tea or coffee. sugarandwhiskbakery.com

ARTESANA ICE CREAM

At this downtown Marion gem, artisan ice cream is made with locally sourced milk, honey, fresh fruit and other

natural ingredients. The original recipe came from owner Augustin Precoma's grandfather, a doctor determined to create a tastier, healthier dessert. Today, Artesana features more than 35 flavors of homemade ice cream and sorbet. Customers will also find non-dairy, vegan, sugar-free and gluten-free desserts. [instagram.com/artesanaicecream](https://www.instagram.com/artesanaicecream)



“When you support a small business, you get a good variety, homemade products, friendly conversation and people who care about what they're doing day in and day out.”

LISA MESSER, SUGAR & WHISK OWNER

WHAT'S ON TAP?

From idyllic farms to charming downtown storefronts, the High Spirits Trail highlights these locally owned breweries, wineries and distilleries.

BY LAURA LEE

MICA TOWN BREWING

The area's first brewery honors Appalachian mining heritage. With two locations in Marion's Social District and Nebo, the brewery offers stouts, ciders, seasonal cocktails and more along with game nights and food trucks. micatownbrewing.com

COPPER CREEK DISTILLERY

There's no better place to try North Carolina mountain moonshine than the county's first legal distillery since Prohibition — in a log cabin, no less! coppercreekshine.com

LITTLE SWITZERLAND ORCHARD

This winery, cidery and brewery is a mountain-top oasis with friendly service and a variety of spirits. [828-337-4354](tel:828-337-4354)

REFINERY 13

You'll love the vibe of this Main Street Marion hang-out, offering a menu of regional craft beers along with flatbreads, paninis, tacos and more. facebook.com/refinery13taproom

TAYLORS BREWING CO.

This family-owned spot has been a go-to in Marion for over five years. Try a gourmet sandwich and wash it down with one of 15 beers on tap. [828-559-0778](tel:828-559-0778)

KEEPER'S CUT MEADERY

After discovering he had a gluten allergy, one of the owners started making mead with local honey. The buzzing Marion tasting room features meads paired with chocolates and charcuterie. keeperscut.com

MODERN ALCHEMIST

Inside a refurbished factory, this hip Old Fort distillery offers house-made spirits, THC-infused mocktails and a Cali-Mex inspired menu. modernalchemist.com

HILLMAN BEER

Their Asheville brewery was so popular, the Hillman brothers opened an Old Fort outpost on the banks of Mill Creek. The Old Fort Original lager pairs perfectly with a soft pretzel. hillmanbeer.com

EUDA WINE

Just off of Main Street in Old Fort, this family-run winery promotes eudaimonia: the condition of living well. Try their craft wine, in-house ciders or artisanal pizza. eudawine.com



Mica Town Brewing

WHALEY FARM BREWERY

You'll taste the difference in this farm-to-pint beer, brewed with homegrown and locally sourced herbs, flowers, spices and fruits. Nestled on the banks of Mill Creek in Old Fort, the small-batch brewery often hosts food trucks and craft markets.

whaleyfarmbrewery.com

SILVER FORK WINERY

This rustic and elegant Dysartsville tasting room features Bordeaux-style wines. Share a flight while admiring the vineyards and South Mountains beyond. silverforkwinery.com

FONTA FLORA BREWERY

Once the Whippoorwill dairy farm, this brewery near Lake James State Park is worth the trip. Enjoy one of their signature beers, farm-fresh salads or homemade pizzas while relaxing on the pasture with mountain views.

fontaflora.com

LINVILLE FALLS WINERY

The owner's love for harvesting Christmas trees led to planting a vineyard on the rolling hills of his farm near Linville Falls. Try a crisp Riesling or a brandy barrel-aged Cabernet Sauvignon. Special offerings include yoga, food trucks and live music.

linvillefallswinery.com



Linville Falls Winery



Euda Wine in Old Fort



Hillman Beer in Old Fort

Square Dances
at Geneva Hall



FRONT PORCH TO MAIN STAGE

Find the soul of McDowell's bluegrass roots.

BY LARA IVANITCH

Jordan Laney of McDowell Folk Alliance grew up with a fiddling father and a guitar-playing brother. Today, she naturally gravitates towards bluegrass, the soundtrack of her childhood. “I just love how rooted it is in the area,” Laney says, adding that she appreciates many genres of music that have emerged from the mountains.

Laney has found that although the musical history in the county is rich and varied, much of it remains undocumented and little known.

“Folks can live in McDowell their entire lives and not realize that the Morris Brothers who wrote Salty Dog Blues are from Old Fort, or that it was a premier stop for most bands traveling from Charlotte to Asheville.” She also points out that Woody Guthrie wrote a song about a tragic textile strike at Marion Manufacturing.

Laney encourages everyone to seek out live performances that are part of this music tradition. At **Foothills at Watershed**, where she does much of the booking for live music, indoor and outdoor spaces lend

themselves to music year-round. “It’s not genre specific as much as it is local performers, so we’ve had rock, jazz, bluegrass, a flute and guitar duo — all sorts of local performers.”

Marion Tailgate Market also hosts live music May through October. Each Saturday morning, shoppers peruse the offerings of local farmers in the shade of the pavilion to tunes played by local musicians. Past performers have included the Middle School String Band, Richie Valentine, Connie Hurst, the Marion Ukulele Society, and Patty M.

In Marion, you’ll find live music most nights at **Spillway Bridge & Co.**, and keep your eye on **The Box Factory’s** schedule for regular shows.

If you enjoy dancing along to live music, Laney recommends square dancing at **Geneva Hall** in Little Switzerland. Each summer in the months of July and August, musicians bring their fiddles and dancers don their dancing shoes for a lively Saturday evening.

The **Orchard at Altapass** has a full slate of traditional music throughout the summer.

Jordan
Laney



Foothills at Watershed



Performers
on stage at
the Spillway
Bridge & Co.



GALLERY ROUNDUP

From cozy corners to crisp white walls,
find local art waiting around every creative corner.

BY LARA IVANITCH

When artist Katie McWeeney found a too-large, but otherwise perfect, studio in Old Fort, she decided to turn the extra space into a gallery. “I really saw a need to elevate some of the local artists in a different way,” she says. Although the town had retail galleries, it lacked a gallery for fine art — a place to have an opening or the first solo show for a young artist.

That changed when she opened **NANU Gallery** in 2024, with 400 square feet of white space, her pottery studio and room for workshops like Ikebana, Japanese floral arranging.

McWeeney is one of the growing number of artists in McDowell County. Many were drawn to the natural beauty, but all benefit from the support of its community of creatives. Galleries around the county display and sell works of art that celebrate the area and these local artists.

At the top of the steps in the quirky **Little Switzerland Books and Beans**, visitors step into an unexpected delight — a small art gallery. Woven baskets and jewelry, wood carvings and paintings line its walls and shelves, creations of **Artisan League of Little Switzerland** members, all part- or full-time residents of the town. On average, 25 artists comprise the league, and gallery offerings vary depending on membership.

As the gallery of the **Arrowhead Artists and Artisan League**, the collection of pottery, paintings, woodcarving, woven baskets, jewelry and more at Arrowhead Gallery in downtown Old Fort represents the talents of its member artists and artisans. In the large gallery, you’ll see works like vibrant scarves by textile artist Betty Ann Winter and colorful feather paintings by Gail Gill.

The **McDowell Arts Council Association (MACA)** primarily focuses on highlighting McDowell County talent. Its exhibitions often result from collaborations with organizations like local schools and McDowell Tech.

MACA’s gallery also displays works of art from its permanent collection. Anna Branam, assistant director of MACA, says that these pieces were created by artists with

ties to the county. “They’re from prominent people who made an impact, like Eugene Thomason, who developed a very distinctive style called the Hankin style. It’s basically McDowell County’s impressionist style.”





Katie McWeeney, founder of
NANU Gallery



McDowell Arts Council
Association (MACA)

ARTS ADVOCATE

“I’ve always been inspired by heritage artists. When I was small, I remember crawling around or napping under my great aunt’s quilt frame. Watching basket weavers, broom makers, and woodturners on school trips and at craft shows amazed me. Now I’m able to help provide a space for these artisans to show and sell their work.”

SUSAN PYATT-BAKER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
MCDOWELL ARTS COUNCIL ASSOCIATION



Historic Carson House

LIVING HISTORY

North Carolina's story unfolds at two unique mountain museums.

BY JIMMY RYALS

McDowell County sits along the Continental Divide, where gently rolling foothills rise to become imposing mountains. It holds a similarly significant place in North Carolina history. And visitors can experience that history firsthand at a pair of local museums.

Old Fort's **Mountain Gateway Museum** gives visitors the long view, surveying mountain life from the 18th century to the 20th. Permanent exhibits cover the history of herbal remedies in Blue Ridge communities, the gold rush that drew droves of prospectors to western North Carolina in the early and mid-1800s, and the painstaking construction of the railroad that connected east and west in the 1870s.

It's history visitors can feel, via exhibits that feature artifacts like 19th-century toys and tools. The museum also hosts a regular rotation of events and temporary exhibits

that zoom in on particular periods and happenings.

The **Historic Carson House** in Pleasant Gardens, meanwhile, tells the area's story by diving deep into the experiences of one historic home. John Carson, an Irish immigrant and delegate to the convention during which North Carolina ratified the U.S. Constitution, built the plantation home in 1793. Over the next 100 years, it entertained luminaries like President Andrew Jackson and Davy Crockett. The house was the seat of county government and the site of a Civil War skirmish with Union cavalry.

Restored in the 1960s, the house now hosts period-accurate recreations of moments in area history from April to December. And as of spring 2026, it's home to a new interpretive center and genealogical research room where visitors can dig deeper into the house's history and their own.

LOCAL SCULPTOR

“My creative work directly reflects the landscape around me — from pebbles or gemstones that rolled down the river over the course of a millennium, to the ‘recently’ discarded glass bottle that washed up after Hurricane Helene. I use the imprints of mushrooms and items I forage in my sculpture work and often incorporate pieces of nature from my waterfall hikes into the jewelry I make.”

OMI SALAVEA,
OLD FORT ARTIST
AND SCULPTOR



TRY YOUR HAND

Here, you can make your own keepsake.

BY LARA IVANITCH

Walk into **Appalachian Remedies** in Marion, and you’re surrounded by creativity: framed stained glass pieces; handwoven shawls, scarves, handbags; hand-carved walking sticks. But perhaps the most striking thing you’ll see is the looms. They’re all wood and string, with wide footprints, and they’re there for you to use. Don’t be intimidated: owner Carmen Piccolo and her husband, Randy, will guide you as you weave your own rag rug. You get to choose the colors and pattern from the strips of upcycled fabrics in an array of colors, and best of all, you leave with a throw rug you made yourself.

In downtown Old Fort, **Arrowhead Gallery & Studios** is more than an art gallery; it’s a creative headquarters where visitors can make their own artwork alongside local artisans. The nonprofit gallery hosts a year-round schedule of classes and workshops in pottery, stained glass, and drawing, and welcomes beginners and experienced makers to learn and experiment. In addition to pottery, Arrowhead Gallery & Studios offers stained glass and glass fusion, as well as jewelry, fiber arts and children’s classes.

Pottery enthusiasts can jump into ongoing ceramics classes or shorter, one- and two-day project-focused workshops that introduce hand-building and wheel techniques in the gallery’s clay studio. Participants shape, fire and glaze their pieces, leaving with a finished work and a deeper appreciation for the craft.

WHERE TO STAY

McDowell County provides a stunning setting for every type of getaway, no matter your style or budget. From woody retreats and rustic cabins to luxury lake houses, the area's diverse lodging options were designed to bring you closer to nature.

BY LARA IVANITCH AND LAURA LEE

CABINS AND HOMES

INDIGO NATURE RETREAT

Located in the heart of Pisgah National forest, this picturesque property is set on five acres. Cozy up in a tiny cabin with the soothing sounds of Newberry Creek. Kids will love making s'mores and sleeping in the loft, while adults will appreciate the stylish furnishings and serene surroundings. The entire property is also available for group retreats and family reunions.

 |  | indigoretreat.com

LINVILLE FALLS LODGE AND COTTAGES

A family getaway since 1915, this rustic property is a favorite among guests. Book the six-bedroom Manor House, rent your own small cottage or stay inside the lodge. After a day exploring the Linville Gorge Wilderness area, unplug and relax on your own front porch or at the community firepit.

 | linvillefallsldge.com


APPALACHIAN DREAM CABIN

Tucked into six private wooded acres, this three-level log cabin marries rustic mountain charm with modern comforts. Just five minutes from downtown Marion, the home offers long-range mountain views. Great for groups up to eight, the layout features one bedroom on each of the three levels.

 |  |  |  | appalachiandreamcabin.com

COPPER RIDGE AT GRIER VILLAGE

Thoughtfully designed to welcome families, friends, groups, and retreats. Five modern, five-bedroom mountain homes for individual stays or group rentals. A covered pavilion with an outdoor kitchen provides the perfect setting for shared meals, special events, and gathering with new friends.

 | grier-village.org



Indigo
Nature
Retreat

**LODGING
AMMENITIES**



Wooded
setting



Scenic
views



Accommodates
larger groups



Kid friendly

FOX AND HEN DEN

This storybook A-frame home is close to Little Switzerland and offers beautiful mountain views. From your cozy launchpad, explore the Pisgah National Forest.

 | destinationmcdowell.com/attractions/fox-hen-den

LAKE JAMES RENTALS

Enjoy morning coffee on your private deck with spectacular views of Lake James and the surrounding mountains. Perfect for large families or groups, five-bedroom luxury cabins come with amenities like modern kitchens, billiards and 70-inch flatscreens to private docks, sandy beaches and paddleboards available to rent. Located at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains, between the towns of Marion and Morganton, Lake James features 150 miles of shoreline.

 |  | lakejamesrentals.com

HARBORSIDE HAVEN

This pet-friendly cabin at the Arbor at Lake James has everything you'd want or need, with natural woodwork, built-in bunk beds and spacious outdoor areas. Airbnb guests consistently leave high reviews, noting the well-stocked kitchen, wraparound porch, and extra amenities like a ping-pong table and kayaks.

 | greybeardrentals.com/asheville-vacation-rentals/harborside-haven

INNS AND LODGES

SWITZERLAND INN

Perched snugly between Asheville and Boone, Switzerland Inn pairs alpine charm with thoughtful comforts: multiple on-site restaurants, cozy lounges, curated shops, manicured lawns, and complimentary pickleball courts, as well as an outdoor pool and hot tub. Unwind with mountain views that echo the Swiss Alps — all along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

 | switzerlandinn.com

TABLETOP INN

At this board game themed bed and breakfast, rooms come with a stocked game room, game inspired décor, a closet full of art supplies and panoramic mountain views. Its owners are also happy to teach and join games with their guests. Special places like Tabletop Inn can add to the memories you make in McDowell County.

 | tabletopinn.com



Harborside Haven

SKYLINE VILLAGE INN

Perched off the Parkway in Little Switzerland, this historic mountain lodge steeped in local moonshine lore offers 16 comfortable rooms with private patios or balconies and breathtaking views of the Catawba Valley. Take advantage of the onsite restaurant and bar.

 | skylinevillageinn.com

BIG LYNN LODGE

Also near Little Switzerland, Big Lynn Lodge's accommodations include billiard and card rooms, a library and a lounge with a fireplace. Guests can also take in views of the Catawba River Valley from red rocking chairs on the balcony outside their rooms.

 | biglynnlodge.com

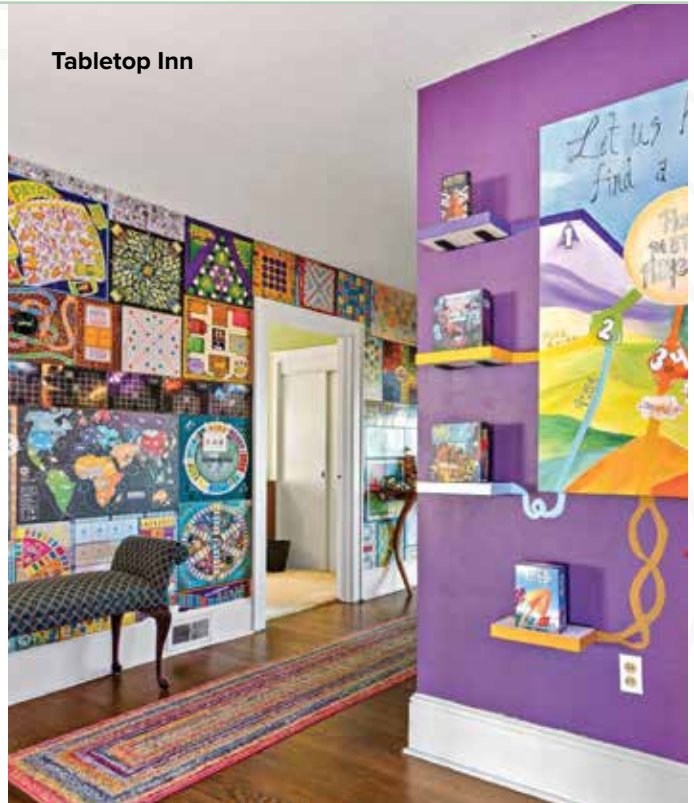
HOTELS IN MCDOWELL COUNTY

Comfort Inn Marion	Hampton Inn, Marion	Holiday Inn Express, Marion
828-652-4888	828-652-5100	828-527-0035

Big Lynn Lodge



Tabletop Inn



Switzerland Inn



CAMPING AND GLAMPING



WUNDERLAND RESORT

Inside sturdy, tent-like glamping pods at Wunderland Resort, a queen-size bed with luxury linens makes connecting with nature feel dreamy. Other options — from tent campsites to a villa with a loft — allow everyone to find their preferred level of camping. Nestled in the Pisgah Forest, all pods center around the community fire pit and a sauna overlooking a spring-fed pond.

 | wunderlandresort.com

SERENE PASTURES RETREAT

Another upscale option, Serene Pastures Retreat offers a safari-style tent spacious enough for four guests. Travelers can simply enjoy the scenic countryside setting or take advantage of a treehouse art space tucked in the woods. It's the perfect spot to tune the word out and enjoy drawing, writing and other creative pursuits.

 |  | [Serene Pastures Retreat via Airbnb](#) | Boutique Glamping on Farm - Full Bathroom Inside! - Yurts for Rent in Marion, North Carolina, United States


GOLD RIVER

With 15 camping options of various types, Gold River has focused on creating a communal experience. The riverside grounds include shared fire pits, a community picnic area, gathering porches and an open-air pavilion overlooking Second Broad River. Guests can choose from tiny homes, cabins or sturdy canvas tents for a cozy stay.

 | goldrivercamp.com

SPACIOUS SKIES CAMPGROUND AT HIDDEN CREEK

Looking for a more traditional campground? McDowell County has those too. The amenities at the kid-friendly Spacious Skies Campground at Hidden Creek include a swimming pool, waterslide, a jumping pillow and playground. You can also jump on the canoes or paddle bikes on the lake.

 | spaciousskiescampgrounds.com/hidden-creek

SPACIOUS SKIES CAMPGROUND AT BEAR DEN

A playground for nature lovers, this campground is nestled in the heart of Pisgah National Forest. Cast a line or cool off in a private fishing and swimming lake, explore miles of wooded hiking trails that lead to waterfalls or frolic on the playground.

 | spaciousskiescampgrounds.com/bear-den



SOULSHINE GLAMPING

Reclined on a king-size bed in a geodesic dome at Soulshine Glamping, you'll feel like you're part of the landscape beyond the windows that curve from floor to the dome's peak. On the raised deck surrounding the dome, cook dinner on the grill and sip wine by the gas firepit table, then stargaze from the private hot tub. It's ideal for a romantic getaway.

 | vrbo.com/4637365

RV AND TENT CAMPING IN MCDOWELL COUNTY

Black Bear Campground
blackbearcampgroundandpark.com

Buck Creek RV Park
buckcreekrvparknc.com

Catawba Falls Campground
catawbafalls.com

Linville Falls Campground
linvillefalls.com



Serene Pastures Retreat



Spacious Skies
Campground at
Bear Den



Soulshine Glamping

MCDOWELL HAPPEN

GENERAL EVENTS

SPRING

APRIL ANNUAL HERB FESTIVAL
paintersgreenhouse.com

APRIL MOUNTAIN THUNDER CAR SHOW
destinationmcdowell.com/events

APRIL MCDOWELL LITERARY FESTIVAL
facebook.com/mcdowellliteraryfestival

APRIL LAKE JAMES DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL
lakejamesdragonboat.org

SUMMER

JUNE TRAILS & TRAINS FESTIVAL
oldfortfest.com

JUNE 22ND ANNUAL NC GOLD FESTIVAL
luckystrikegoldandgem.com

JUNE 18TH ANNUAL LIVERMUSH FESTIVAL
marionlivermushfestival.com

JUNE JUNETEENTH FREEDOM FESTIVAL
westmarion.org

JULY PIONEER DAY FESTIVAL
mgmnc.org

JULY 4 AMERICA 250 INDEPENDENCE DAY CELEBRATION
destinationmcdowell.com/events

AUG. THE WNC BIGFOOT FESTIVAL
marionbigfootfestival.com

FALL

SEPT. CULTURA UNIDOS FESTIVAL
destinationmcdowell.com/events

SEPT. ASAP FARM TOUR
asapconnections.org

SEPT. FLOAT LIFE FEST
floatlifefest.com

OCT. 43RD ANNUAL MOUNTAIN GLORY FESTIVAL
mountaingloryfestival.com

WINTER

DEC. APPALACHIAN POTTERS MARKET
mcdowellarts.org

DEC. VERY MARION CHRISTMAS
destinationmcdowell.com/events

DEC. NEW YEAR'S EVE STREET CELEBRATION
destinationmcdowell.com/events

JAN. LAKE JAMES ICE FESTIVAL
destinationmcdowell.com/events



Livermush Festival



Old Fort Trains and Trails Festival

INGS



Mountain Glory Festival



WNC Bigfoot Festival



Photo by Pete Schreiner

Hellbender 100

RACES

SPRING

MARCH MT. MITCHELL
HEARTBREAKER 50K/100K
tanawhaadventures.com

APRIL ROCK N ROLLER
2026
mcdowelltrails.org

MAY HELLBENDER 100
hellbender100.com

SUMMER

JUNE RIDGE TO RAILS
50K, HALF & 10K
tanawhaadventures.com

JUNE SASQUATCH
SCRAMBLER
blueridgeadventures.net

JUNE WOODS MOUNTAIN
MTB RACE
blueridgeadventures.net

JULY JERDON MOUNTAIN
CHALLENGE
blueridgeadventures.net

JULY ORAMM OFF-ROAD
ASSAULT ON
MT. MITCHELL

blueridgeadventures.net

AUG. PISGAH ENDURO
pisgahproductions.com

FALL

OCT. GEYSER GROWL
HALF MARATHON
gloryhoundevents.com

OCT. FONTA FLORA 50K,
HALF & RELAY
tanawhaadventures.com

WINTER

DEC. OLD FORT
STRONG FESTIVAL
tanawhaadventures.com

FEB. CATAWBA FALLS 15K
ultrasignup.com

FEB. LAND AND LAKES
RELAY RUN
gloryhoundevents.com

Scan this QR code
to get started, or visit
[destinationmcdowell.com/
events](http://destinationmcdowell.com/events) for a complete
list of events.





DESTINATIONMCDOWELL.COM