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DRIVE 2.0

2020-2025 STRATEGIC TOURISM PLAN

REGIONAL PLAN: **SWVA BLUE RIDGE HIGHLANDS**

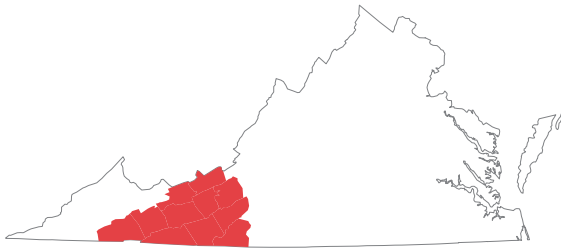
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SWVA BLUE RIDGE HIGHLANDS INTRODUCTION

The Southwest Virginia – Blue Ridge Highlands regional plan builds upon the foundational insights established in the 2020-2025 statewide tourism plan, as well as the original 2013 Blue Ridge Highlands regional plan. Developed for every locality within the region to use, this plan provides insights and recommendations on where to focus product development and promotional efforts over the next five years. The plan aims to help spur the growth and impact of travel and tourism for every locality in the Blue Ridge Highlands region by increasing tourism products, expenditures, employment and local and state tax receipts.

Plan note: Some assets may have shifted from the 2013 regional plan due to the industry increasing the total number of tourism regions from nine regions to ten.

**All DRIVE 2.0 research was conducted in 2019 and compiled pre COVID-19 Crisis.
Please see vatc.org/coronavirus for COVID-19: Industry Response Toolkit.**



The Blue Ridge Highlands region consists of the municipalities of Blacksburg, Christiansburg, Radford, Bristol, Pulaski, Abingdon, Wytheville, Galax, Marion, and Damascus, as well as the counties of Washington, Montgomery, Carroll, Pulaski, Smyth, Wythe, Patrick, Floyd, Grayson, Giles, and Bland.

QUICK FACTS

- Population: 368,222 (6th largest of the 10 VA regions)
- Largest town/city: Blacksburg (44,678)
- Interstates: I-81, I-77
- Border states: NC, TN, WV
- Commercial airports: none

TOURISM IMPACT

The Blue Ridge Highlands region accounted for \$787 million in travel and tourism expenditures in 2018 (approximately 3% of the state's overall travel and tourism expenditures). Year over year, the region experienced a 3.9% increase in expenditures (slightly lagging the overall Virginia state expenditure growth of 4.4%).

- **Total expenditures:** \$787 million
- **Employment:** 7,039
- **Payroll:** \$150 million
- **Local tax receipts:** \$20 million
- **State tax receipts:** \$36 million

From a tourism industry perspective, in addition to tourism marketing at the destination level, the Blue Ridge Travel Association advertises on a region-wide basis. The Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation also has a presence in the Heart of Appalachia and Blue Ridge Highlands regions. The foundation promotes tourism and supports major initiatives in the region, including Southwest Virginia Outdoors (formerly Appalachian Spring), the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center and Marketplace (formerly Heartwood), 'Round the Mountain – Southwest Virginia's Artisan Network, and The Crooked Road: Virginia's Heritage Music Trail.



LURES

The Blue Ridge Highlands' natural and outdoor recreational opportunities continue to be strengths for the region. In addition, music remains a strong offering as well.

When asked to name a the primary lure for the region, industry leaders identify the following:



Nature and outdoor recreational opportunities remain key strengths for the region, as it continues to offer scenic getaways and adventures for families and outdoor enthusiasts. Well-known attractions such as the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Appalachian Trail both run through the region, and other trails include the Virginia Creeper Trail and the New River Trail.

In conjunction with these trails, the region offers numerous opportunities to hike, bike, horseback ride, observe wildlife, hunt, fish, kayak, canoe, rock climb, and camp through a variety of assets such as the George Washington & Jefferson National Forests, Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, Clinch Mountain Wildlife Management Area, the Crooked Creek Wildlife Management areas, or one of five state parks. The region is also home to several of Virginia's highest peaks including Mount Rogers, Whitetop Mountain, Pine Mountain, and

LURES (cont'd)

The region is a popular destination for motorcycle enthusiasts. Claw of the Dragon, with the town of Wytheville as the trail’s center or hub, the trail features loops totaling over 350 miles as it ventures over to the community of Marion to the west and Galax to the east. The drive meanders through parts of seven Virginia counties. Meanwhile, the Jagged Edge Motorcycle trail, using the Blue Ridge Parkway as its backbone, features 268 miles, eight loops, and one run that climbs up and down the many mountains of the region offering riders countless views along the way.

Consistent with its nature and outdoor recreation assets, the region possesses the largest share of camping/RV parks (69 or 22%) and the second largest share of cottages/cabins (187 or 22%) in the state. Primland Resort offers a distinctive upscale resort experience in a natural setting.

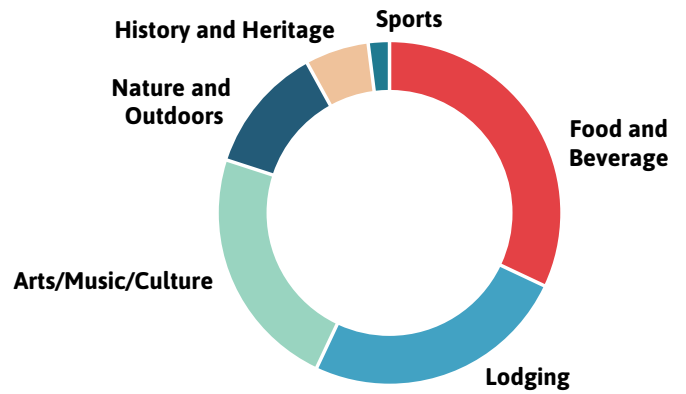
In addition to outdoor recreation, the region is driven by the creative economy and is differentiated by its combination of music, arts, towns, and other offerings, such as wine, agritourism, sports, and other visitor experiences. The Crooked Road, specifically, is a unique asset for the region and a significant differentiator, as visitors can travel the music trail to experience various musical genres, such as bluegrass, mountain music, folk, gospel, and country.

Notable towns along the 300 plus-mile music heritage trail include Floyd, home of the renowned Floyd Country Store; Bristol, known as the “Birthplace of Country Music” thanks to the 1927 Sessions; and Galax, home of the Blue Ridge Music Center. Notable music events include the Bristol Rhythm & Roots Reunion Festival, Floyd Fest, and the Galax Old Fiddlers’ Convention, the oldest fiddlers’ convention in the world. Another asset includes Marion’s “Song of the Mountains” at The Lincoln Theater with its award-winning public television series showcasing music, musicians, musical heritage and culture of the Southern Appalachians.

Visual and performing arts are also strong differentiators for the region, exemplified through venues such as the Barter Theatre, Virginia Tech’s Moss Arts Center, and the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center and Marketplace. A portion of the ‘Round the Mountain – Southwest Virginia’s Artisan Network, is also located in the region, which provides opportunities to experience handmade and homegrown crafts. The Chestnut Creek Center for the Arts in Galax strives to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of southwest Virginia by offering classes and events in traditional music, heritage crafts, and contemporary arts.

Inventory of Regional Assets

Source: VTC Research



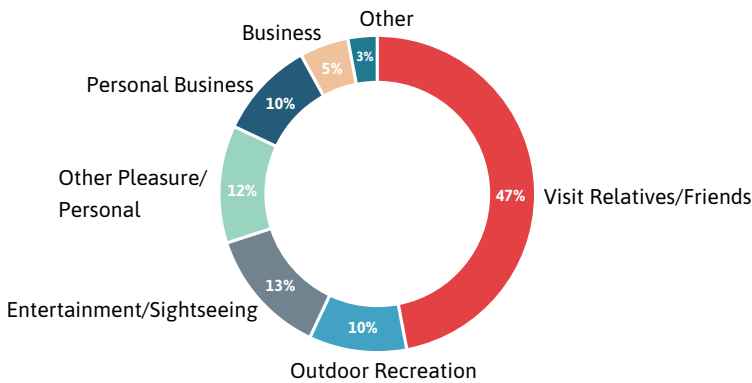
LURES (cont'd)

The Blue Ridge Highlands is also home to many of Virginia's great small towns. Marion, Abingdon, Wytheville, and Bristol are all designated main streets by the National Main Street Program, and other notable small towns and cities include Damascus, Floyd, Radford, and Galax.

While the Blue Ridge region offers a range of visitor opportunities and prominent attractions, they are somewhat dispersed throughout the region. However, The Crooked Road, Blue Ridge Parkway, Appalachian Trail, brewery trails, and outdoor trails certainly help to connect attractions and destinations, and the Southwest Virginia Outdoors effort is designed to help connect outdoor experiences for visitors.

Finally, the region is home to 17 wineries, 12 breweries, and more than 100 agritourism attractions. For sport enthusiasts, the region offers amateur sports, along with football at Virginia Tech or a race at the Bristol Motor Speedway in nearby Bristol, Tennessee. Meeting space is also available at the Wytheville Meeting Center, Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center, Primland, The Inn at Virginia Tech, and various hotels, but supply is generally lower than other areas of the state.

Past visitors to the region cite the following as the primary purpose of their trip and top activities they participated in during their visit:



Top Activities

Shopping	32%
Visiting Relatives	31%
Rural Sightseeing	23%
Historic sites/Churches	21%
Fine dining	16%
Museums	16%
Visiting Friends	15%
State parks/Momuments	13%
Hiking/Backpacking	12%
Urban Sightseeing	11%

HIGHLIGHTS OF REGIONAL LURES

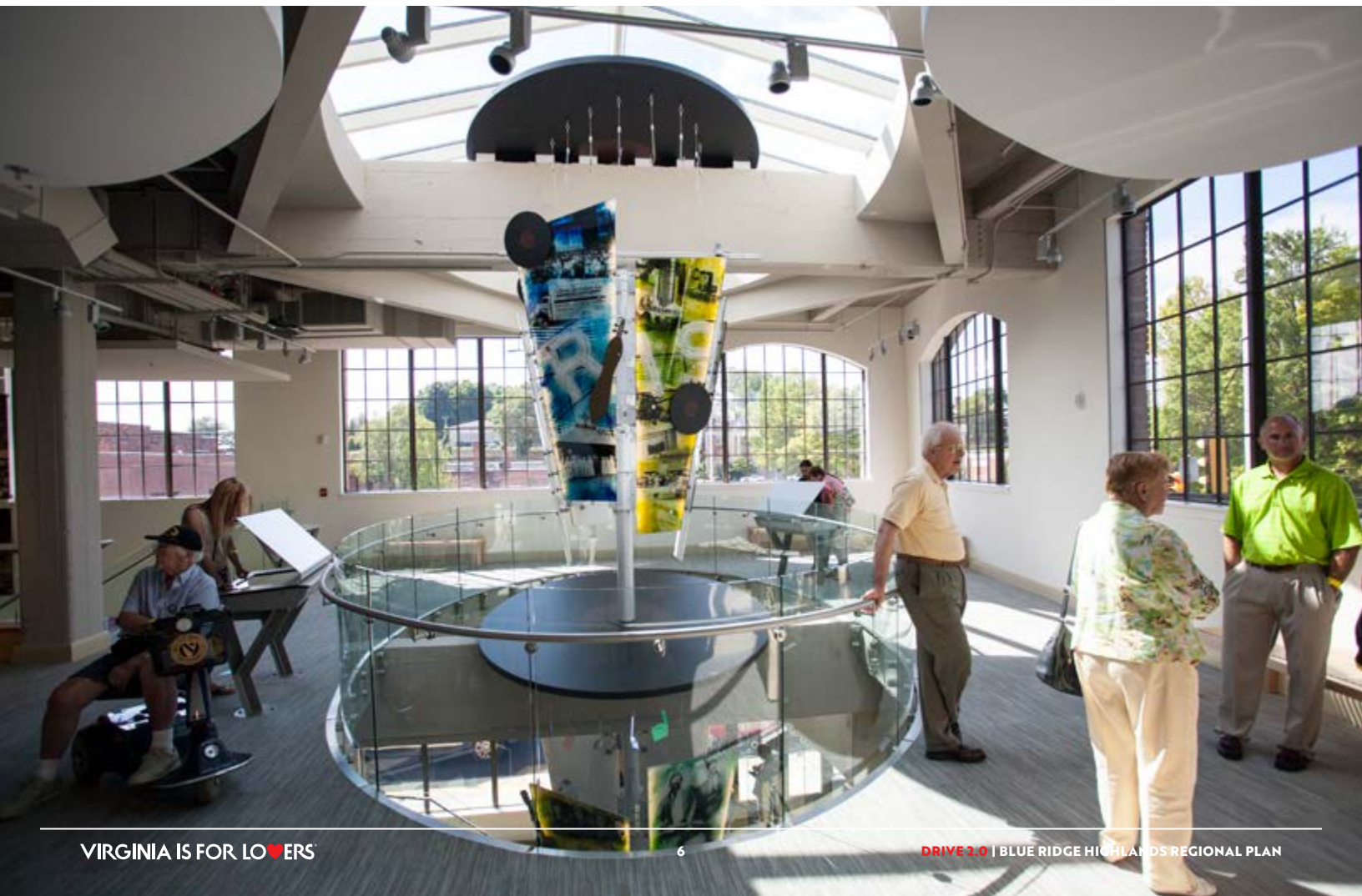
- Scenic beauty and outdoor recreation opportunities
- National assets: Appalachian Trail, Blue Ridge Parkway, George Washington & Jefferson National Forests, Mount Rogers National Recreation Area
- State Parks: Claytor Lake State Park, Shot Tower State Park, New River Trail State Park, Grayson Highlands State Park, Hungry Mother State Park
- The Crooked Road, music, and musical heritage
 - The Crooked Road: Floyd Country Store, Bristol, Birthplace of Country Music Museum, Blue Ridge Music Center
 - Events & Festivals: Bristol Rhythm & Roots Reunion Festival, Floyd Fest, Old Fiddlers' Convention, Mountains of Music Homecoming
 - Song of the Mountains at The Lincoln Center
- Visual & Performing Arts: Barter Theatre, Moss Arts Center, Southwest Virginia Cultural Center and Marketplace
- Virginia Main Streets: Abingdon, Bristol, Marion, Wytheville
- Notable Towns & Cities: Damascus, Floyd, Galax, Pulaski, Radford, Blacksburg, Stuart, Hillsville
- Interstate connectivity
- Virginia Tech, Radford University
- Appalachian culture and heritage
- Camping and campground availability
- APEX Center in Wytheville

CHANGES OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS

In the past five years, the Blue Ridge Highlands has seen several improvements in regional attractions. For starters, there has been strong development in local trails, and in June of 2019, the last leg of the Huckleberry Trail connecting Blacksburg and Christiansburg opened. Additionally, adjacent to the Blue Ridge Parkway, Jagged Edge Motorcycle Trails now offers 286 miles for motorcycle enthusiasts, including nine different loops. Other new trails include the New River Water Trail, Mendota Trail, Cycle Floyd, and the Mountain Brew Trail. More recently, a new Appalachian Trail Center was approved in Damascus which will serve as the gateway to the Appalachian Trail on the east coast.

The Mountains of Music Homecoming — where attendees can experience concerts celebrating old-time, bluegrass, gospel, traditional singing and dance, and many other styles presented in over 40 different communities along The Crooked Road — just celebrated its fourth year. As part of this celebration, the events offer a wide array of cultural experiences, including community meals, gallery exhibits, history walks, artisan demonstrations, outdoor adventures, scenic drives, workshops, educational opportunities, and much more.

Recognizing the importance of the creative arts on the region's vitality, Friends of Southwest Virginia has developed a comprehensive plan for the creative economy. In 2015, the Wayne C. Henderson School of Appalachian Arts opened its doors with the mission to preserve, promote, and provide a learning experience that has its roots in the culture and heritage of the Southern Appalachian Mountains.





CHANGES OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS (cont'd)

Home to motocross races, livestock shows, concerts, travel shows, and other regional events, Wytheville recently opened the APEX Center, which includes an arena floor and has approximately 2,500 permanent seats and an additional 2,000 portable chairs.

Communities throughout the region have seen new businesses opening in their downtowns, including breweries, wineries, and restaurants. New hotels, cabins, and campgrounds are popping up. Farm-to-table dinners are being held in numerous locations. And the region has seen a tremendous boon to its lodging offerings as well, with several new boutique hotels opened or slated to open in historic buildings in Bristol. For example, the Bristol Hotel converted a striking 1925 architectural landmark into the first-ever boutique hotel in Bristol, offering street front dining, a rooftop bar, and 3,800 square feet of historic event space located in the heart of downtown. In 2019 the Bristol Hotel was named a top 10 best new hotel in the U.S. by USA Today and a Top 30 (#21) new hotel in US News & World Report. Similarly, the Sesions Hote that opened in 2020 ,is converting three 100-year-old buildings into a 70-room downtown boutique hotel in Bristol. The \$20 million project combines the former Jobbers Candy factory and Service Mill buildings and includes a restaurant, indoor and outdoor music venues, rooftop space, and a luxury spa.

And finally, the Eupepsia Wellness Resort opened in Bland County in 2018. A wellness sanctuary situated in Virginia in the vicinity of the Jefferson National Forest and in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains, its mission is to help people reconnect with themselves at the level of their body, energy, emotion, mind, and spirit. The resort has already been voted #2 best wellness resort in the US by a USA Today Readers' Choice poll.

FUTURE PRODUCT OPPORTUNITIES

According to the Virginia Office of Outdoor Recreation, Virginia’s outdoor recreation industry contributes nearly \$22 billion annually to the Virginia economy and supports the livelihood of more than 197,000 Virginians. In addition, outdoor recreation is cited by one in four Virginia visitors as one of their top trip purposes.

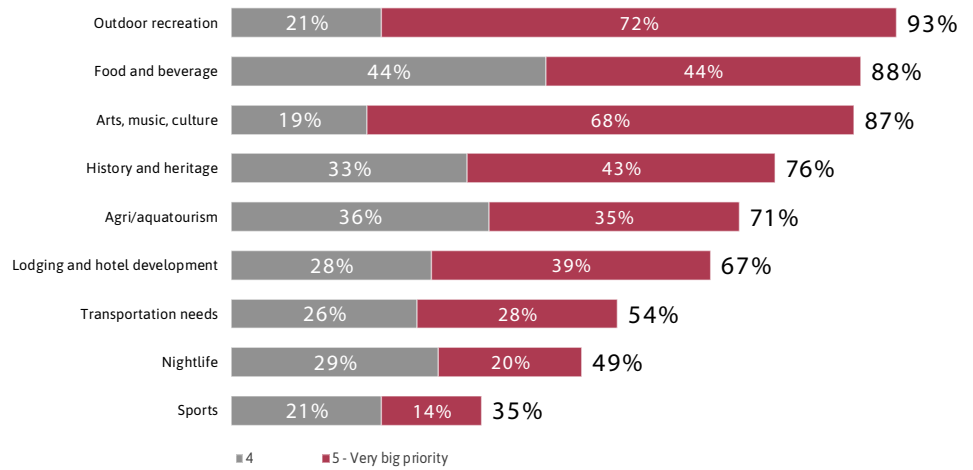
In recognition of this impact, the Blue Ridge Highlands’ tourism industry leaders identify outdoor recreation as a priority need — particularly when it comes to better understanding how to develop and promote outdoor recreation product offerings and experiences.

In terms of improving the outdoor sector, 90% of stakeholders say trail development is the biggest priority. This development could include physical hiking and biking trails, or broader “themed” trails connecting various experiences. While the region has made some recent progress with new trails, stakeholders agree more product development in this area can better connect the region’s localities and attractions and entice visitors to come and keep coming back.

Historic trail development has gained recent focus in areas with a high number of related sites to the Lewis & Clark Western Migration route. From Albemarle to Bristol, partners have gathered to discuss developing the Lewis & Clark Eastern Legacy Trail. In 2019, these partners received portrait signage markers from the Lewis & Clark Trail Heritage Foundation in an effort to provide support to sites with a recognized Lewis & Clark connection.

The Blue Ridge Plateau is a new initiative focused on connecting to the Blue Ridge Parkway with its surrounding localities, including Patrick, Floyd, Carroll, and Grayson counties, as well as the city of Galax. Franklin County in the Virginia Mountains region is also a

When asked to what degree are the following a priority for your region, industry leaders responded:



participating locality. By tapping into a unique geographic point of reference and marketing differentiation of the Blue Ridge Parkway, the initiative aims to create regional themes to connect downtowns to Blue Ridge Parkway visitors.

Southwest Virginia Outdoors, formerly known as Appalachian Spring Initiative, brings stakeholders from community and regional development, tourism environmental stewardship, outdoor recreation, and entrepreneurial assistance backgrounds together to develop and promote SWVA as a world-class destination of natural and recreational assets. The project is continuing to evolve as it works to connect eight anchor recreation destinations to surrounding communities and develop an outdoor recreation industry. Focus areas include assets in both the Heart of Appalachia and the Blue Ridge Highlands regions, including the Appalachian Trail, Blue Ridge Parkway, Breaks Interstate Park, Clinch River, Daniel Boone’s Wilderness Trail, High Knob, Mount Rogers, and the New River.

Another exciting new initiative forming is the Hometowns of

When asked to name a potential game changer for the region, industry leaders identify the following:



FUTURE PRODUCT OPPORTUNITIES (cont'd)

Another exciting new initiative forming is the Hometowns of Mount Rogers program. As the highest peak in Virginia, Mount Rogers provides unrivaled outdoor recreation opportunities for Southwest Virginia and beyond. The purpose of this initiative is to provide a strategic framework for entrepreneurial and economic development growth for the eight gateway communities of Mount Rogers — Damascus, Glade Spring, Saltville, Chilhowie, Marion, Troutdale, Rural Retreat, and Independence.

In addition to these outdoor recreation initiatives, the region's music and cultural heritage continues to build energy and momentum, which can be harnessed to develop unique food offerings, accompanied by breweries, wineries, and distilleries — hallmarks of vibrant communities. Connecting experiences with events like the Mountains of Music Homecoming are great examples of ways to leverage these assets and have visitors experience new communities.

While the region does have interstate access with I-81 and I-77 there are opportunities to improve connectivity to the region via train travel. Amtrak recently completed an expansion to Roanoke. Localities like Bristol are looking for further expansion from Roanoke to Bristol. This would be a great opportunity for the region in making it more accessible to other parts of the state and neighboring states.

AREAS OF FOCUS

Based upon Drive 2.0 research and in consideration of the tourism situation, the Blue Ridge Highlands should focus on the following primary and secondary product opportunities.

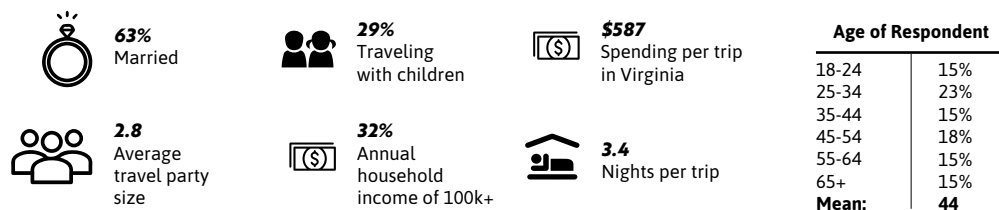
- **Primary:**
Nature & Outdoor Recreation, Arts & Music, Culinary (Agritourism, Dining, Libations), Town/City Centers, Lodging
- **Secondary:**
History & Heritage, Meetings (Meetings & Conferences), Sports (College, Motorsports), Events





CURRENT VISITORS

According to research collected by VTC and TravelTrakAmerica, the primary visitors are:



EMERGING NICHE MARKETS

As the region examines ways to broaden its customer base, keep in mind the key demographic reality facing Virginia and the country today and in the immediate future. Right now, minority children are being born at a higher rate than white children, and by 2044, the country's combined minority populations will comprise the majority of the total population. The shift toward a more diverse, pluralistic society is already underway, and making everyone feel welcome can become a differentiating attribute and strategic advantage, appealing to a broader demographic base of potential visitors.

In addition, operators across the board are showing significant increases in female visitation, especially in outdoor and active travel experiences, which represents another opportunity to increase the region's customer base. So, whether promoting a girl's trip or a solo adventure, a heightened focus on female travelers may also prove beneficial.

EMERGING NICHE MARKETS (cont'd)

Building equity in your region as a diverse and inclusive place to visit, as well as one with appeal for women travelers, will be greatly aided by finding and enlisting ambassadors who can speak to these values and attributes. And, since nearly half of visitors come to spend time with friends and family, helping them understand all there is to see and do, and where to take their friends and family when they come to visit, can enhance the visitor experience and help residents see the value of tourism in their community.

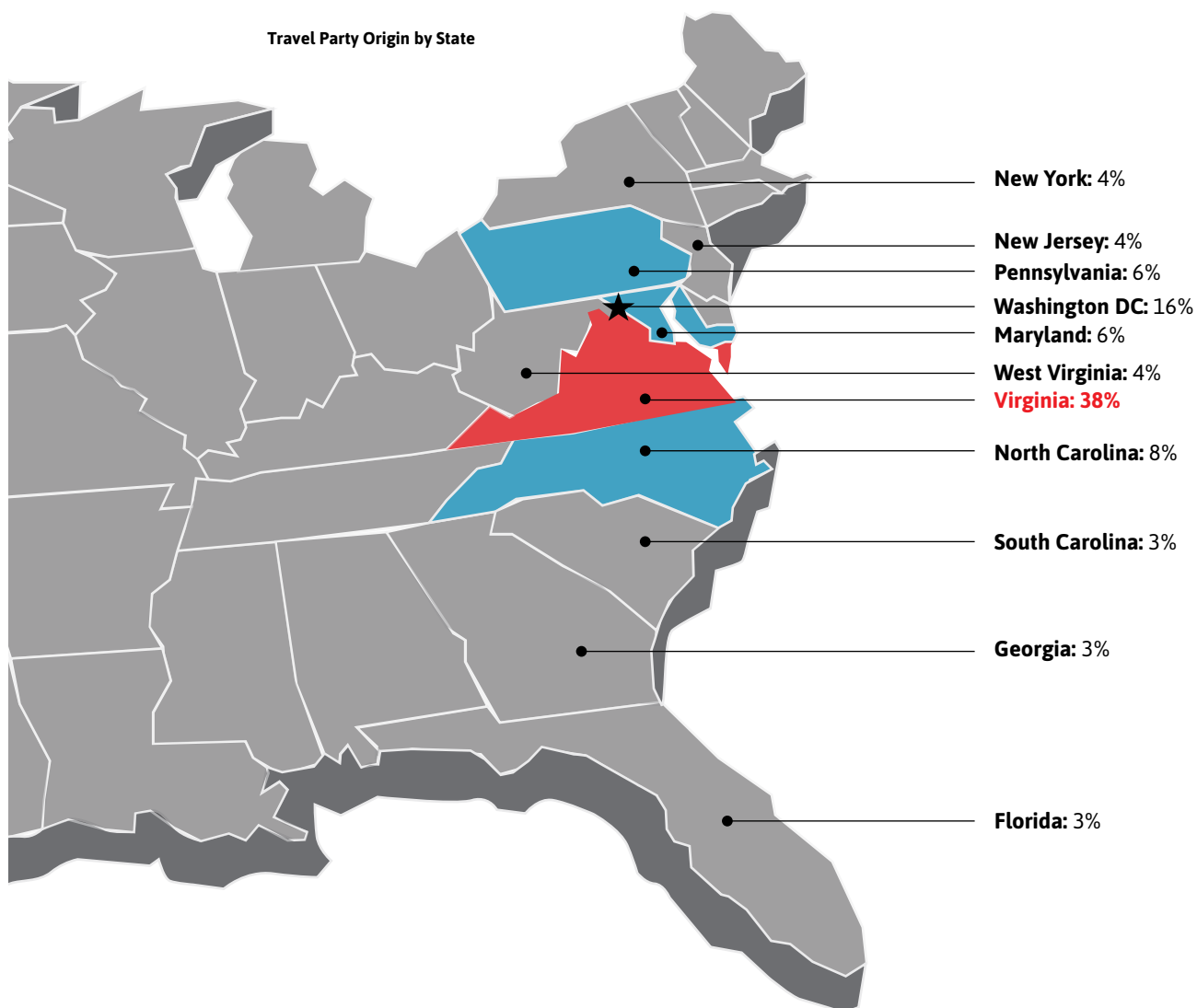
Additional opportunity audiences based on growing trends include:

TRENDS	OVERVIEW	IMMEDIATE IMPLICATIONS FOR SWVA BLUE RIDGE HIGHLANDS
<p>OUTDOOR RECREATION</p>	<p>The outdoor recreation industry contributes nearly \$22 billion annually to the Virginia economy and supports the livelihoods of more than 197,000 Virginians. Outdoor recreation is cited by one in four Virginia visitors as one of their top trip purposes. And, this year Virginia established the Office of Outdoor Recreation, placing even more importance on this industry.</p>	<p>Virginia is experiencing a rising tide when it comes to outdoor recreation. It is overwhelmingly the biggest focus for industry leaders across the state. And with the new state office in place, we should strike while the iron is hot. The Blue Ridge Highlands should pour resources into trail related development and opportunities to explore the numerous mountains and beautiful landscapes throughout the region.</p>
<p>RISE OF MUSIC TOURISM</p>	<p>According to Billboard, 32 million people attended music festivals in 2018. Virginia has a strong and unique music heritage (country, bluegrass, beach music, alternative, hip hop, pop rock, heavy metal), and a growing number of music festivals like Bristol Rhythm & Roots Reunion, Lockn', Something in the Water, and FloydFest, just to name a few.</p>	<p>Music and music heritage is a core identity of Virginia. It's both authentic and it's experiential – two essential traits travelers seek. There are old and new festivals and potential for several new large venues to be built within the next five years. The Blue Ridge Highlands is already doing incredible work promoting music and music heritage and they should continue to leverage their unique assets to reach music lovers.</p>
<p>RISE OF PLACEMAKING</p>	<p>With the unemployment rate at 3.7, a 49-year low, companies and organizations are all challenged with finding qualified talent. Understanding that younger people are going to be even harder to find in the future, enlightened companies are moving or concentrating their footprint in Millennial hotspots – entire markets, as well as areas within a market, such as downtown urban centers. As such, city planners, destination managers, and other organizations are embracing intentional strategies to improve their locations (placemaking) and to promote their locations (place marketing).</p>	<p>Develop strategies to make your region a more desirable place to live, work, play, learn, and visit as competition for workforce is going to become increasingly fierce. Engage community members, leaders, and past and prospective visitors in determining the attributes that make your location unique and appealing. Craft a differentiating and compelling narrative and strategic marketing platform which all community stakeholders can use to spur word-of-mouth buzz and successfully tout your location.</p>

GROWING OPPORTUNITY OF NEARBY DRIVE MARKETS

National tourism trends suggest leisure travel is now a year-round activity, with shorter, more frequent trips taking the place of traditional week-long summer vacations. This translates into the increasing value and impact of near versus far-away markets.

With the average trip length of 3.4 nights, the Blue Ridge Highlands region is no exception, and according to a TravelTrakAmerica survey, half of Blue Ridge Highlands travelers (52%) originate from nearby drive markets — Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland. This concentrated primary feeder area gives all of the Blue Ridge Highland’s destinations and industry leaders an opportunity to work closer together in promotional planning to target prospective visitors.



COMPETITION

Given the Blue Ridge Highland’s primary natural and outdoor recreational and music and heritage lures, the primary competitors identified through this effort include North Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia.

Additional opportunity audiences based on growing trends include:

COMPETITOR	PRIMARY LURES
NORTH CAROLINA	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Outdoor recreation 2. Lodging 3. Food, beverage, arts
TENNESSEE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Outdoor recreation 2. Great Smoky Mountains 3. Music
WEST VIRGINIA	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Outdoor recreation (hiking, whitewater rafting, skiing) 2. Entertainment (Casinos, spas) 3. Hunting / fishing

Competitive insights show that these other destinations offer similar active and family-oriented outdoor recreation, shared Blue Ridge heritage, traditional arts, various musical heritage, and interesting small towns. North Carolina is known for its outdoor recreation, main streets, heritage and arts. Asheville and the surrounding areas of northwest North Carolina, for example, pose strong competition, where towns, cultural offerings, culinary experiences, and outdoor experiences are relatively concentrated. Tennessee is known for its musical heritage and even outdoor recreation, with experiences including rafting, zip lines, and ropes courses. West Virginia is well-known for its active outdoor recreation offerings, as well, and has developed offerings that include ATVing on the Hatfield-McCoy Trails, white water rafting on the Gauley and New Rivers, zip lines, and other adventures.

In appealing to prospective visitors, Blue Ridge Highlands destinations and travel attractions must realize that competing head to head from a siloed or individual experience perspective (my outdoor attraction versus one in Asheville) is less effective than the hub and spoke method of bundling experiences together. The distinct music of the Blue Ridge Highlands region serves as a distinguishing feature in combination with its other tourism lures, including its outdoor opportunities, main street communities and charming towns, arts, cultural heritage, agriculture, and others. This is the hub and spoke method in action.

REGIONAL CHALLENGES (VOIDS)

The 2013 regional plan explored the challenge of the region’s history-related themes. While the Blue Ridge Highlands’ outdoor assets serve as strengths, differentiating these assets from those in nearby states such as North Carolina, West Virginia, and Tennessee remains a challenge. In addition, nearby states may be more recognized than the Blue Ridge Highlands region for active outdoor recreation such as rafting, zip lines, and climbing.

In keeping with its nature and outdoor recreation assets, the region possesses a large share of camping/RV parks, as well as cottages and cabins. New boutique offerings coming online in Bristol are great additions but are limited geographically.

Transportation issues also present challenges. While I-81 runs through the middle of the region, safety and congestion continue to be a concern and challenge for visitors and residents alike. Outside of general aviation airports, the region does not offer any larger airports. However, Roanoke and Bristol, TN do provide access to regional airports just outside the regional boundaries.

AREAS OF FOCUS

- Experiences are dispersed throughout the region
- Differentiation from competition in nearby states – outdoors
- Limited recognition of assets and towns
- Limited upscale hotel supply
- Declining populations

TRENDS	OVERVIEW	IMMEDIATE IMPLICATIONS FOR SWVA BLUE RIDGE HIGHLANDS
SHIFTING FOOTPRINT	The country’s population growth over the past century has been concentrated in urban and suburban areas. Likewise, 80% of Virginia’s population growth is projected to occur in the “Golden Crescent” corridor that runs from D.C. through Northern Virginia, Richmond, Williamsburg, and Hampton Roads. This growth in urban areas is being accelerated by Millennials, who prefer downtowns, activity centers, and 15-minute “livable” communities close to everything.	The Blue Ridge Highlands is an area experiencing this decline firsthand. While some localities like Blacksburg are growing, others, even Bristol, have declined in the last five years. To face the rising economic challenges of declining rural populations and accompanying tax revenue, the region must invest resources in tourism as an economic engine. Positioning the destination’s travel and tourism assets and identifying ways to expose potential new residents to the area is critical.
AGING POPULATION	The age wave is washing over Virginia. Over the next 14 years, America’s 65+ population will increase by roughly 60%, growing from 10 to 20% of the total population. Nationally, we will have 74 million people over the age of 65, compared to only 46 million today. Some counties of Virginia will experience a dramatic increase in seniors, where up to 40% of the population will be 65 or older.	Recognize Baby Boomers (today’s new seniors) as an increasingly important tourism segment; however, it is important to understand that they won’t be looking for the types of experiences their parents sought. The region should work to make attractions and destinations more appealing to Boomers and their desires to stay active and enhance their vitality. The region’s excellent outdoor and nature experiences, along with space, should be very appealing to this audience.

REGIONAL OPPORTUNITY

Bundling or packaging experiences for potential visitors' consideration continues to gain traction. According to TripAdvisor, "[they're] seeing more travelers balancing their itineraries with a mix of classic sightseeing and more unique local experiences." The Blue Ridge Highlands region does have some strong regional collaboration and connectivity efforts through trails like The Crooked Road, 'Round the Mountain artisan network, Hometowns of Mount Rogers, Blue Ridge Plateau, Blue Ridge Travel Association, Blue Ridge Parkway group, New River Valley collaborative promotions, and many others. These efforts should continue to be prioritized and additional opportunities to connect localities and experiences across the region should continue.

Another mounting challenge is the degree that history is one of the region's major draws. There is a growing body of travel research that suggests history and cultural heritage sites continue to become less appealing, especially to the younger generations of travelers – Gen X and Millennials. As such, the Blue Ridge Highlands' heritage tourism assets must work together to make history as appealing as possible to as wide an audience as possible.

Finally, with so many outdoor assets and infrastructural improvements, travel and tourism industry leaders should work together to formulate and orchestrate outdoor product development plans and initiatives. In fact, finding ways to bring together outdoor experiences with the region's music heritage could be unique and differentiating.



REGIONAL OPPORTUNITY (cont'd)

Additional opportunities for the region based on growing national trends, include:

TRENDS	OVERVIEW	IMMEDIATE IMPLICATIONS FOR SWVA BLUE RIDGE HIGHLANDS
SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL	There is a growing economy and movement toward stewardship of the Earth and our cultures. Destinations and attractions are participating in this movement by promoting low impact and green experiences and practices.	In a region rich with natural assets, wildlife, and small towns, low-impact experiences are important. Think about ways to highlight the low impact visitors will have on nature, the wildlife, and the small towns. In visiting, they can contribute to the vibrancy of the local economy in a sustainable way so generations can continue to enjoy the beautiful region and its rich culture.
MINI-CATIONS	According to Allianz, over half of Americans last year did not take a vacation longer than four nights. Millennials are leading this movement.	Campaigns like the recent Crush Friday can take advantage of this trend. Consider other marketing campaigns and packages that encourage younger generations to take their vacation for a long weekend trip. With the average trip length at 3.4 nights, mini vacations should be a natural opportunity for the region to pursue.
CAMPING	Camping and glamping are increasingly popular, especially among Millennials. Moreover, they prefer these trips to be within 100 miles from where they live.	This is another trend that will fall in line with the growing outdoor recreation focus. Consider ways to highlight camping trips of all kinds — the off-the-beaten path to a unique view, or a more traditional trip with a kayak tour, a craft brew, and a campsite under the stars.

PROMOTIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS



RECOMMENDED PRIORITIES

Based on the situation and analysis of the Blue Ridge Highlands region, the following set of recommendations are offered in order of priority:

1. **Connect and promote Blue Ridge Highlands' outdoor experiences.** While almost every town and city across the region are improving their outdoor products to appeal to outdoor enthusiasts, there is an opportunity to build an even greater set of experiences by connecting each submarket's offerings. Blue Ridge Highlands' outdoor attractions and destinations should band together to create even more connected experiences. Whether it's biking, hiking, ATV, horseback riding, golfing, or fishing, trails connecting these experiences across the region create a better sense of place and experience, helping visitors traverse the entire region, hopping from locality to locality.

To get inspired about how to formulate a regionwide product development plan, see DRIVE 2.0's How to Guide #2: Enhance Experiences.



RECOMMENDED PRIORITIES (cont'd)

2. **Bundle and package experiences using the hub and spoke method to increase the overall appeal of individual attractions and offerings.** Overall, the region's primary lures should adopt a packaging perspective to increase average spending and room nights in the Blue Ridge Highlands. Focusing on just one lure will make it more challenging for the region to compete against similar offerings in other states.

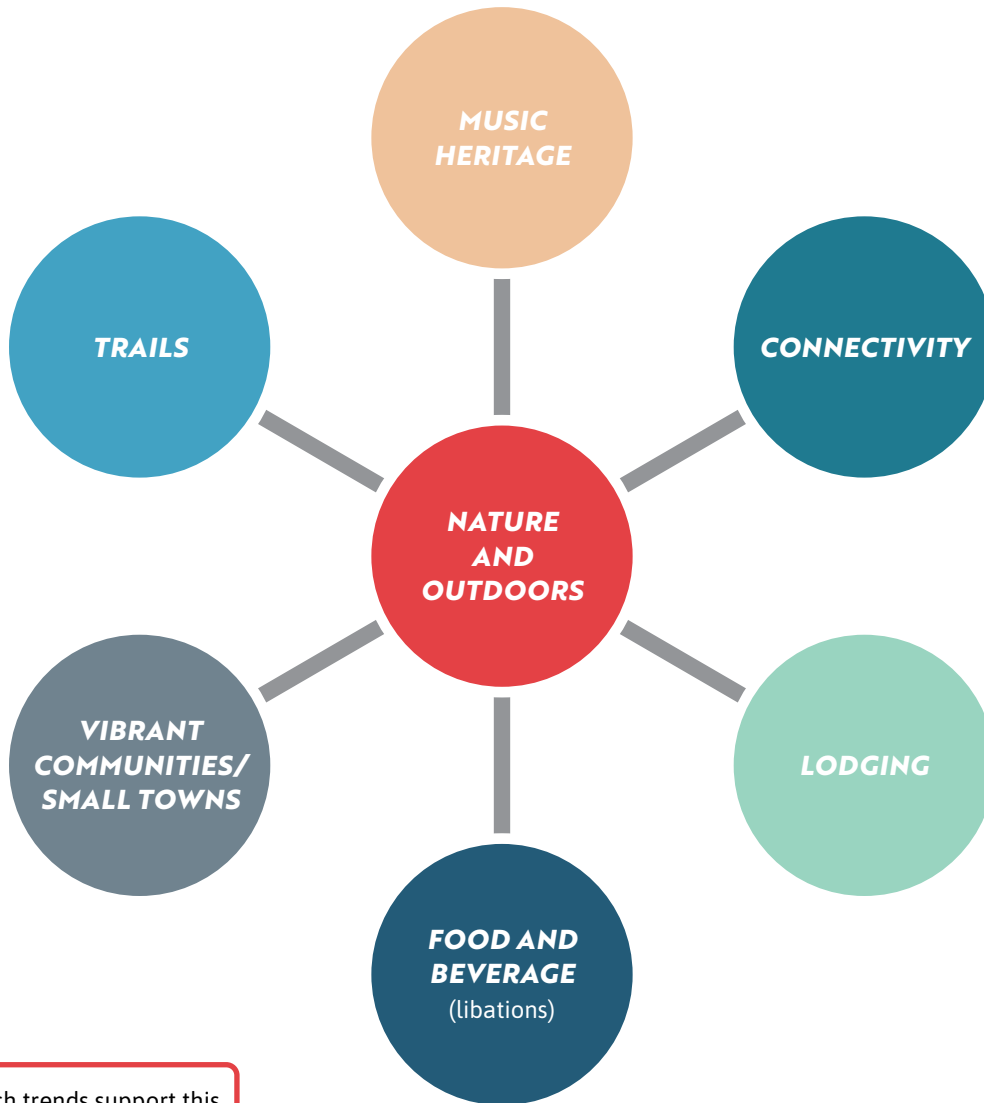
The region has the right lures that make up vibrant communities and working to further connect them can help increase the entire region's appeal. For example, potential exists to create weekend itineraries that allow visitors to explore The Crooked Road, brewery hop, catch a concert, and stay in a boutique hotel with a top restaurant and the next day hike along the Appalachian Trail. Exciting new initiatives like the Blue Ridge Plateau and Hometowns of Mount Rogers are great examples of interesting ways to match and maximize outdoor assets with the exciting small towns and vibrant communities in the region.

Moreover, find ways to bundle these experiences across localities to increase the unique experience and drive people to turn their day trip or overnight into a two- or three-day trip. Promote vibrant communities. As the Blue Ridge Highlands region invests in the assets that develop vibrant communities — arts, music, events, culinary — regional approaches should also be supported. Consider creating itineraries that provide routes for visitors to hop from one small town to the next (like what the Blue Ridge Plateau is hoping to do along the Blue Ridge Parkway. Or perhaps, create themed itineraries around hiking, wineries, beer, cycling, music, or a combination of interests. Another exciting possibility is to find ways to tap into and support the creative economy efforts for the Southwest Virginia region, building up local ambassadors along the way. Opportunity SWVA is a great resource as they serve as champions for small business owners and entrepreneurs in the region. Their strategies and goals stem from The Blueprint for Entrepreneurial Growth and Economic Prosperity in Southwest Virginia.

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

HUB & SPOKE

In considering all of the research to date, the following development hub and spoke approach is recommended for the Blue Ridge Highlands region as a whole:



Exercise: See which trends support this development hub & spoke.

TREND 1

TREND 2

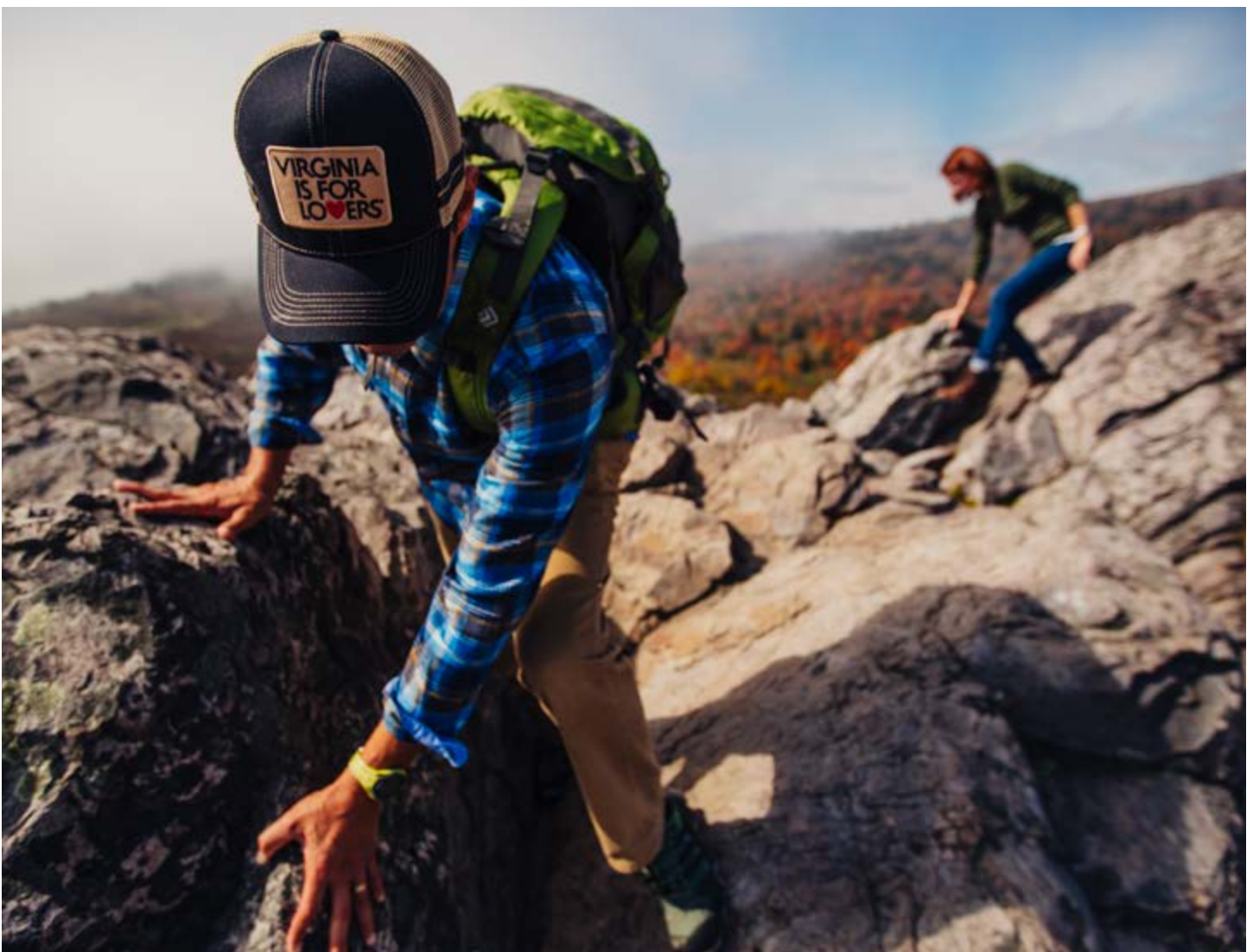
TREND 3

VISION FOR SWVA BLUE RIDGE HIGHLANDS

The vision for the Blue Ridge Highlands regional plan is to collaboratively utilize the region’s natural assets and further develop outdoor recreation in an authentic and sustainable way, while also further developing assets like music and cultural heritage, food, beverage, and the arts — the foundation of vibrant communities — to sustainably maximize the region’s tourism potential.

SUMMARY

The Blue Ridge Highlands region has incredible opportunity, and through increased collaboration, teamwork, and a common vision across jurisdictions, the region can be even more competitive with nearby destinations in North Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia. The communities and assets are there, but regionalism is key to growth. Through better connectivity and cohesion, together we can take the entire region to the next level.





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