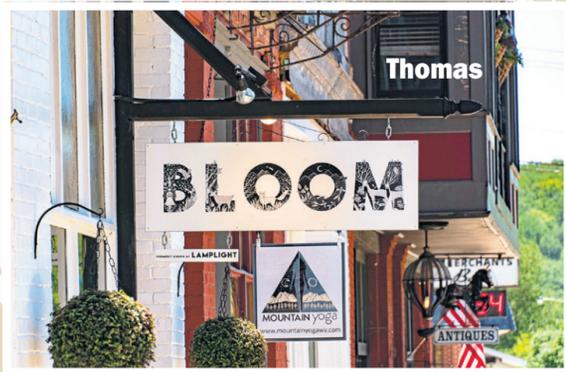


Not your father's Mon Forest

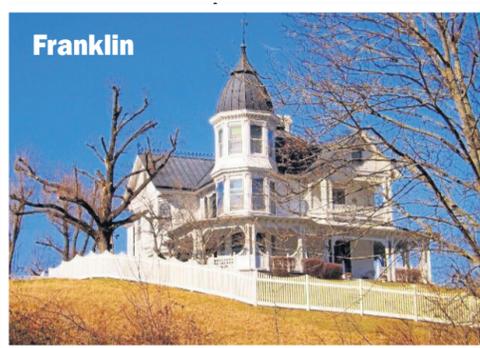


Courtesy photos

Almost 1 million acres, eight counties and more than four hours of travel from top to bottom, the Monongahela National Forest touches not only these towns, but dozens more communities. Their distances make it hard to connect, but connecting could be a boon for visitors planning multi-day activities.



Cowen



Franklin



1. Thomas

Pop. 586
Tucker County
Vibe/brand: Artsy
Must visit: The Purple Fiddle
Big event: Mountaineer Days (July 4)

2. Davis

Pop. 660
Tucker County
Vibe/brand: Outdoorsy
Must visit: Stumptown Ales
Big event: Leaf Peeper Festival (September)

3. Parsons

Pop. 1,485
Tucker County
Vibe/brand: Family fun splash pad
Big event: Pickin' in Parsons (August)

4. Petersburg

Pop. 2,467
Grant County
Vibe/brand: Rural sophistication
Must visit: Landes Arts Center
Big event: Spring Mountain Festival (April)

5. Elkins

Pop. 7,026
Randolph County
Vibe/brand: Eclectic
Must visit: Gandy Dancer Theater
Big event: Ramps and Rails Festival (April)

6. Franklin

Pop. 721
Pendleton County
Vibe/brand: Quaint architecture
Must visit: Warner's Drive-in Theater
Big event: Trout Fest (May)

7. Cowen

Pop. 541
Webster County
Vibe/brand: Railroad heritage, "A small town — kind of amazing!"
Must visit: Hilltop Diner
Big event: Haunted House, (October)

8. Marlinton

Pop. 1,054
Pocahontas County
Vibe/brand: River town, Appalachian hipster
Must visit: Discovery Junction
Big event: Road Kill Cook-off (September)

9. Richwood

Pop. 1,888
Nicholas County
Vibe/brand: Bikers Welcome, "That Unique Mountain Flavor"
Must visit: Whistle Punk Taphouse and Grill
Big event: Feast of the Ramson (April)

10. White Sulphur Springs

Pop. 2,444
Greenbrier County
Vibe/brand: Southern charm
Must visit: Greenbrier Resort
Big event: Freshwater Folk Festival (September)

Mon towns team up to move toward recreation future

By Susan Johnson
For Daily Mail WV

There's a new bear in the Monongahela National Forest.

The black bear in the logo showing up on signage in towns that border the national forest presents a sleeker image than old Smokey Bear, the venerable mascot of the Forest Service. But don't worry — Smokey isn't going away. The new bear on the block is part of a marketing campaign aimed less at Boomers (like ol' Smokey) and more at millennials, and Gen X, Y and Zers.

The initiative is called the Mon Forest Towns partnership, and its aim is to promote the small towns surrounding the 921,000-acre forest. It's about connecting people and communities.

Here are a few of those people.

Anne Mitchell and Mark Hengemihle

On any given weekend at Knapp's Creek Lodge in downtown Marlinton, Anne Mitchell puts on a pot of coffee and opens her sliding glass doors that look onto their private fishing hole. A thick mist is rising off the water and the scent of honeysuckle is strong. Her guests rise and eat a hearty breakfast of eggs Benedict and trout smoked on the premises.

Her partner, Mark Hengemihle, starts early in the tack room hauling fishing rods, flies, coolers and chairs to the creek bank. He and Anne are able to instruct their guests on the basics of fly fishing right in their backyard.

Other days, they lead small groups of skilled and novice fly-fishing enthusiasts on excursions deep in the Monongahela National Forest in search of native trout. Though the COVID-19 lockdown delayed their opening this year, they are still looking to expand their operation.

Not far upstream, Discovery Junction sits waiting for the day to begin. This vacant lot is in the process of being transformed into a community green space and outdoor venue for concerts, plays and even a farmer's market.



Davis



White Sulphur Springs

Jonathan and Cindy Robeson

In Davis, on the upper edge of the national forest, brewmaster Jonathan Robeson is firing up the hot liquor tank at Stumptown Ales. A barmy aroma hangs in the brewery, much like rising bread. Jonathan oversees the process of adding the carefully selected ingredients into what's called the mash tun: oats, malt, hops, yeast, sugar and water. This batch — a breakfast stout — will contain cocoa nibs from Ghana and baker's chocolate.

Meanwhile, his wife Cindy is on the phone finalizing orders for the week. The Robesons do their own distributing and sell exclusively in West Virginia. Their local customers include Sirianni's Pizza, Hellbender Burritos, Wicked Wilderness and Canaan Valley BBQ in Davis. Stumptown also delivers tap kegs to businesses in other Mon Forest towns — The Purple Fiddle in Thomas, Brewstel in Elkins and The Whistlepunk Taphouse and Grill in Richwood.

Joey and Mandy Riddle

It's noon in Elkins, the northern gateway to the Mon Forest. Joey Riddle, owner of Joey's Bike Shop, is showing a Scott Aspect 940 Mountain Bike to a potential buyer from Pennsylvania. Joey's wife, Mandy, is fitting a family of four from Virginia with GIRO bike helmets. The family plans to hop onto the nearby Allegheny Highlands Rail Trail, where they will climb Pheasant and Polecat Knob Mountains, cross Shaver's Creek on a restored railroad bridge and ride along Black Fork River.

Unlike restaurants and lodges, Joey's 12-year-old business has boomed during the COVID-19 pandemic. "I had 100 bikes in my inventory starting out the year," he said. "I now have two." They also rent bikes and do around 500 bike repairs in a typical year.

Nikki and Jake Tyler

At 27 and 25 respectively, Nikki and Jake Tyler of Richwood are among the youngest entrepreneurs to open a small business in the Mon Forest. Cherry River Roasting of Richwood ships whole bean custom roasted coffee all over America. They figured out how to eliminate the middle man and import fresh beans directly from Ethiopia, Costa Rica and Chile. Their business grew so fast they quickly burned up small Baymore roasters and invested in a larger machine that cranks out several pounds per hour.

Just this summer they realized their dream of operating their own coffee bar inside Rosewood Florist on Main Street, where they serve up cappuccinos, lattes, smoothies and fresh, local baked goods.

These are just a few of the entrepreneurs working to capitalize on increased tourism and outdoor recreation in the Monongahela National Forest, which draws approximately 1.3 million visitors a year.

In the past, most of residents in these small towns would have earned their livelihoods from the coal and timber industries. As

Cap West says ...



I'm usually not a fan of bears, but I'll make an exception for the Mon Forest Towns mascot.