

VIRGINIA  
IS FOR  
LOVERS®

# DRIVE 2.0

2020-2025 STRATEGIC TOURISM PLAN

REGIONAL PLAN: **SWVA HEART OF APPALACHIA**



**VIRGINIA  
IS FOR  
LOVERS®**

# **SWVA HEART OF APPALACHIA INTRODUCTION**

The Southwest Virginia – Heart of Appalachia regional plan builds upon the foundational insights established in the 2020-2025 statewide tourism plan, as well as the original 2013 DRIVE Heart of Appalachia 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 Heart of Appalachia region by increasing tourism products, expenditures, employment and local and state tax receipts.

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



The Heart of Appalachia region consists of the municipalities of Big Stone Gap, Wise, Bluefield, Norton, Coeburn, Clintwood, Grundy, St. Paul, Tazewell, Lebanon, Pennington Gap, Gate City, Richlands, Honaker, and Haysi, as well as the counties of Tazewell, Wise, Russell, Lee, Buchanan, Scott, and Dickenson.

## QUICK FACTS

- Population: 162,223 (9th largest of the 10 VA regions)
- Largest county: Tazewell County (25,139)
- Interstates: Proximity to I-77
- US-460, US-19, US-58
- Border states: TN, WV, KY
- Commercial airports: None
- Proximity to urban hubs: Knoxville, Charleston, Charlotte, Winston-Salem, Roanoke

## TOURISM IMPACT

The Heart of Appalachia region accounted for \$182 million in travel and tourism expenditures in 2018 (approximately 1% of the state's overall travel and tourism expenditures). Year over year, the region experienced a 3.4% increase in expenditures (trailing the overall Virginia state expenditure growth of 4.4%).

- **Total expenditures:** \$182 million
- **Employment:** 1,888
- **Payroll:** \$39 million
- **Local tax receipts:** \$3.4 million
- **State tax receipts:** \$7.9 million

From a tourism industry perspective, the Heart of Appalachia Tourism Authority is the state-legislated body that markets the region. In addition, the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation has a presence in both the Heart of Appalachia and Blue Ridge Highlands regions. The Foundation promotes tourism and supports major initiatives in the regions, including Southwest Virginia Outdoors (formerly Appalachian Spring), 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 Heart of Appalachia’s natural and outdoor recreational opportunities continue to be strengths for the region, offering visitors scenic and relaxing getaways. In addition, arts, music, entertainment, and food and beverage are strong offerings as well.

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



Natural beauty is the hallmark of the Heart of Appalachia region. Picturesque mountains and valleys dominate the landscape, and its natural assets include the George Washington & Jefferson National Forests, Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, Burke’s Garden (“God’s Thumbprint”), Breaks Interstate State Park (the “Grand Canyon of the South”), Natural Tunnel, and a host of rivers and streams to explore, including the Clinch River, Bluestone River, Pound River, and Powell River.

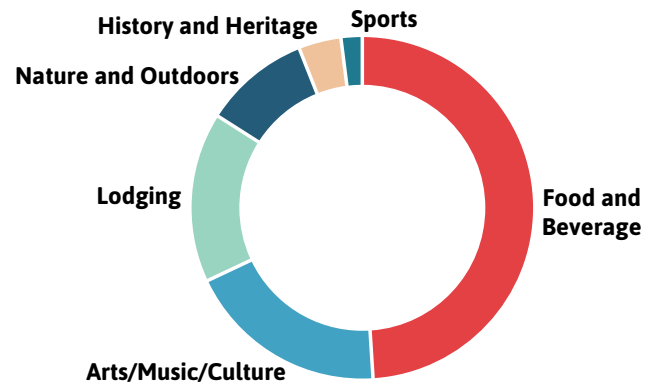
**LURES** (cont'd)

The region boasts an expansive network of trail systems to explore by foot, hoof, or wheel, including the Heart of Appalachia Bike Trail and the Spearhead Trails, which provides visitors with a multi-use trail system of over 500 miles across six systems for equestrian, ATV, and bike access. Appalachian Backroads offers a range of routes positioned for motorcycle and sports car enthusiasts to ride, including the Back of the Dragon, which runs along Route 16 and offers 32 miles of technical roads. These assets and trails offer visitors the opportunity to ride ATVs, hike, bike, horseback ride, observe wildlife, hunt, fish, kayak, camp and canoe. Also, Breaks Interstate Park offers class IV and V rapids during certain times of the year when dam release occurs.

In addition to its natural assets and trail systems, vibrant communities dot the region and can particularly be found along the Clinch River. In Tazewell, visitors can explore historic architecture and mountain heritage. The former coal town of Richlands has developed into a cultural hub, and Honaker is listed on the Virginia Register of Historic Places. Cleveland offers opportunities to explore waterfalls and rare plant species, while further down the river lies St. Paul, where visitors can explore its Virginia Main Street and also go tubing, hiking, play riverside disc golf, ride an ATV on Mountainview Trail, or visit Bluebell Island.

**Inventory of Regional Assets**

Source: VTC Research

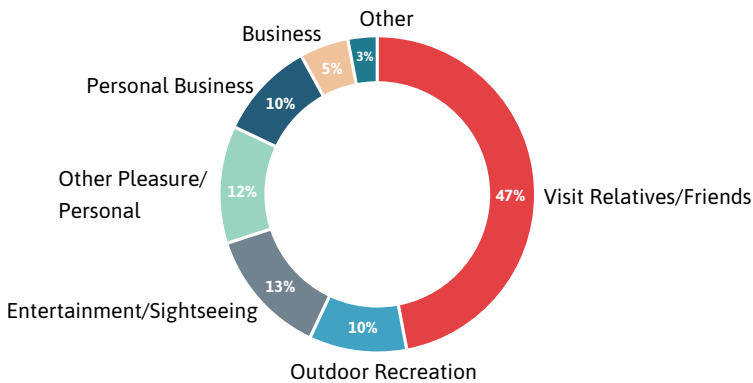


**LURES** (cont'd)

Music heritage provides another core experience in the Heart of Appalachia, as the region will forever be linked with the genesis and evolution of bluegrass, folk, and country music. As such, it features numerous stops on The Crooked Road: Virginia’s Heritage Music Trail, including the Carter Family Fold near Hiltons, which provides access to the family and their traditional mountain and folk music, The Country Cabin in Norton, which hosts musical events every weekend, and the Ralph Stanley Museum in Clintwood, which highlights one of country music’s most authentic voices.

With its deep historical roots of Appalachian heritage, coal heritage, and musical history, it shares many of its cultural assets with the adjacent Blue Ridge Highlands region, such as The Crooked Road and ‘Round the Mountain – Southwest Virginia’s Artisan Network.

**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
  - Natural assets: George Washington & Jefferson National Forests, Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, Channels State Forest
  - State Parks: Southwest Virginia Museum Historical State Park, Natural Tunnel State Park, Wilderness Road State Park, and Breaks Interstate State Park, which includes class IV and V rapids at certain times in the year, and soon to be opened Clinch River State Park
  - Spearhead Trails
- Virginia Main Street: St. Paul, Tazewell
- Notable Towns & Cities: Bluefield, Pocahontas, Tazewell, Richlands, Honaker, Clintwood, Haysi, Lebanon, Norton, Coeburn, Wise, Big Stone Gap, Gate City, Duffield, Grundy, Jonesville, Pennington Gap, St. Paul
- Visual and craft arts
- History and heritage assets
  - Appalachian culture and heritage: Daniel Boone Wilderness Trail, Daniel Boone Interpretive Center, Southwest Virginia Museum, Historic Crab Orchard Museum, Pocahontas Exhibition Coal Mine & Museum, Mountain Heritage Museum & Gallery
  - Music heritage: The Crooked Road: Virginia’s Heritage Music Trail, Carter Family Fold, Ralph Stanley Museum

### **CHANGES OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS**

In the past five years, the Heart of Appalachia region has seen some expansion of tourism attractions in the area. Of particular note is Spearhead Trails, where several new trails have been added to the already extensive trail system. From the original Mountain View trail in 2013, there are now 550 miles across six multi-use recreational trail systems, and Spearhead Trails is now undertaking the development of equestrian trails. Nearby towns are embracing this growth and have become ATV friendly towns. Most notably, St. Paul has experienced increased growth in visitation as a result of the trails, and the boutique Western Front Hotel has opened to help meet the lodging and event space demand as a result. Likewise, St. Paul also welcomed Sugar Hill Brewing Company and other small businesses as part of the town's offering as well.

The Breaks Interstate Park has expanded, now offering zipline, and leaders are working with Southern Gap Outdoor Adventure to provide elk viewing tours. Meanwhile, the City of Norton has developed mountain biking trails.

In 2019, the Daniel Boone Wilderness Trail Interpretive Center was opened as a satellite location of Natural Tunnel State Park. At the center, visitors learn about the important role Wilderness Road played in America's westward expansion.







**CHANGES OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS** (cont'd)

Appalachian Backroads was launched by Heart of Appalachia as a way to enhance the region's high-quality, scenic byways as a draw and market to motorcycle enthusiasts coming to the region to ride.

The Clinch River Valley Initiative (CRVI) is currently underway and is in the process of transitioning into a 501c3. This is a collaborative effort in Southwest Virginia, focusing on the Clinch River Valley – one of the most biodiverse river systems in North America. Working at a watershed scale with many local partners, this grassroots effort has developed significant momentum with applicability for communities in Appalachia and beyond. The effort builds upon the unique cultural and ecological assets of the Clinch River to create new possibilities in the communities along the Clinch, particularly around environmental education, economic development, and entrepreneurship.

Finally, Tastes of the Clinch was developed to promote local restaurants along the Clinch River, and Spirits of the Clinch was developed to promote the breweries, wineries, and distilleries along the river communities. Similarly, many other communities beyond the Clinch River watershed are experiencing more businesses popping up, including restaurants, breweries, and lodging

**FUTURE PRODUCT OPPORTUNITIES**

According to the Office of Outdoor Recreation, Virginia’s outdoor recreation industry contributes nearly \$22 billion annually to the Virginia economy and supports the livelihoods 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.

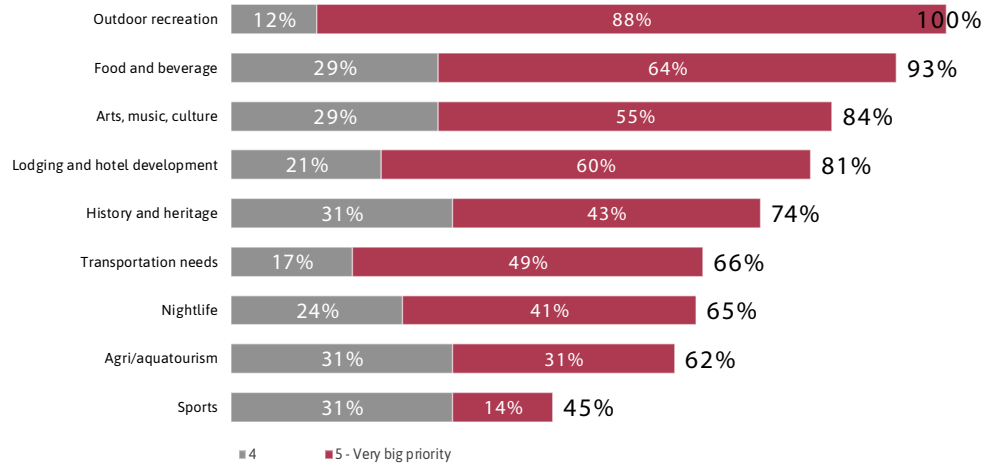
As such, in the DRIVE 2.0 strategic plan development survey, Heart of Appalachia travel and tourism industry leaders identify outdoor recreation as a priority need — particularly when it comes to better understanding how to develop and promote outdoor recreation product offerings and experiences.

This need was also identified as a primary focus area in 2013, and the region has made significant efforts in this space, improving outdoor product offerings and adding new experiences.

That said, the strides the region has made in its outdoor recreation experiences has highlighted the need for more lodging options to meet the demand of more visitors coming to the area seeking to take advantage of those assets and experiences.

With the number of natural assets and outdoor recreation opportunities, outfitters and eco-oriented lodging options, such as cabins and camping, appear to be limited for the region in comparison to other areas of the state. Overall, the region only offers 30 hotels, and as the region continues to focus on tourism development, boosting that number will be critical. As such, the region as a whole should consider a feasibility study to determine the capacity, need, and ideal type of lodging to meet visitor needs.

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



Related to lodging, industry leaders also recognize the need for more cultural assets and elements that contribute to making their communities more vibrant, such as music and especially food. Tastes of the Clinch and the Spirits of Clinch have served as a great way to promote and connect the culinary and beverage offerings currently on hand in that regard; however, there is opportunity to increase the number of offerings when it comes to unique dining options and libations — wineries, breweries, distilleries, and cideries.

In terms of continuing to enhance outdoor experiences, 88% of tourism industry stakeholders say trail development is the biggest need, followed by park improvements and development (81%). So, while the region has a robust outdoor offering, the real opportunity lies in connecting and enhancing these experiences through deliberate partnerships.

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



**FUTURE PRODUCT OPPORTUNITIES** (cont'd)

For example, the counties of Buchanan and Tazewell are working with the Thompson Charitable Foundation, Friends of Southwest Virginia, VTC, and Breaks Interstate Park to develop sustainable outdoor recreation options spanning both municipalities and beyond.

Similarly, the Clinch River Valley Initiative builds upon the unique culture of the river valley to create new possibilities in the communities along the Clinch, particularly around environmental education, economic development, and entrepreneurship. State and local partners are now focusing on the development of the Clinch River State Park, which, when open, will increase eco and heritage tourism. Also, Fish Virginia First serves as a resource and guide for those interested in freshwater fishing throughout Virginia and represents a potential partnership to connect and promote fishing opportunities in the region.

Continued investment in Southwest Virginia Outdoors, formerly Appalachian Spring, will also help to further develop the region's outdoor recreation industry. A partnership of community and regional development leaders, SWVA Outdoors provides tourism environmental stewardship, outdoor recreation, and entrepreneurial assistance for stakeholders to develop and promote SWVA as a world-class destination of natural and recreational assets for visitation and enjoyment. The project continues to evolve as it connects eight anchor recreation destinations to surrounding communities and develop an outdoor recreation industry. Focus areas currently 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.

Finally, on the immediate horizon, officials with Breaks Interstate State Park are currently in the fundraising stage to construct the longest pedestrian swinging bridge in North America, connecting the Virginia and Kentucky sides of the park, which will enhance the park's appeal.

**AREAS OF FOCUS**

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

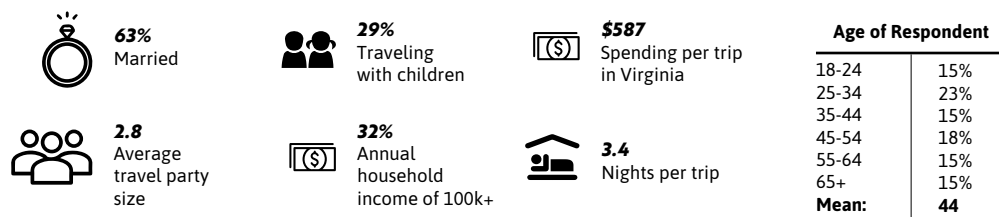
- **Primary:**  
Nature & Outdoor Recreation (trails), Lodging (feasibility study), Culinary (unique food and libations), Town/City Centers.
- **Secondary:**  
Arts & Music, History & Heritage, Events





## 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.

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.

**EMERGING NICHE MARKETS** (cont'd)

Additional opportunity audiences based on growing trends include:

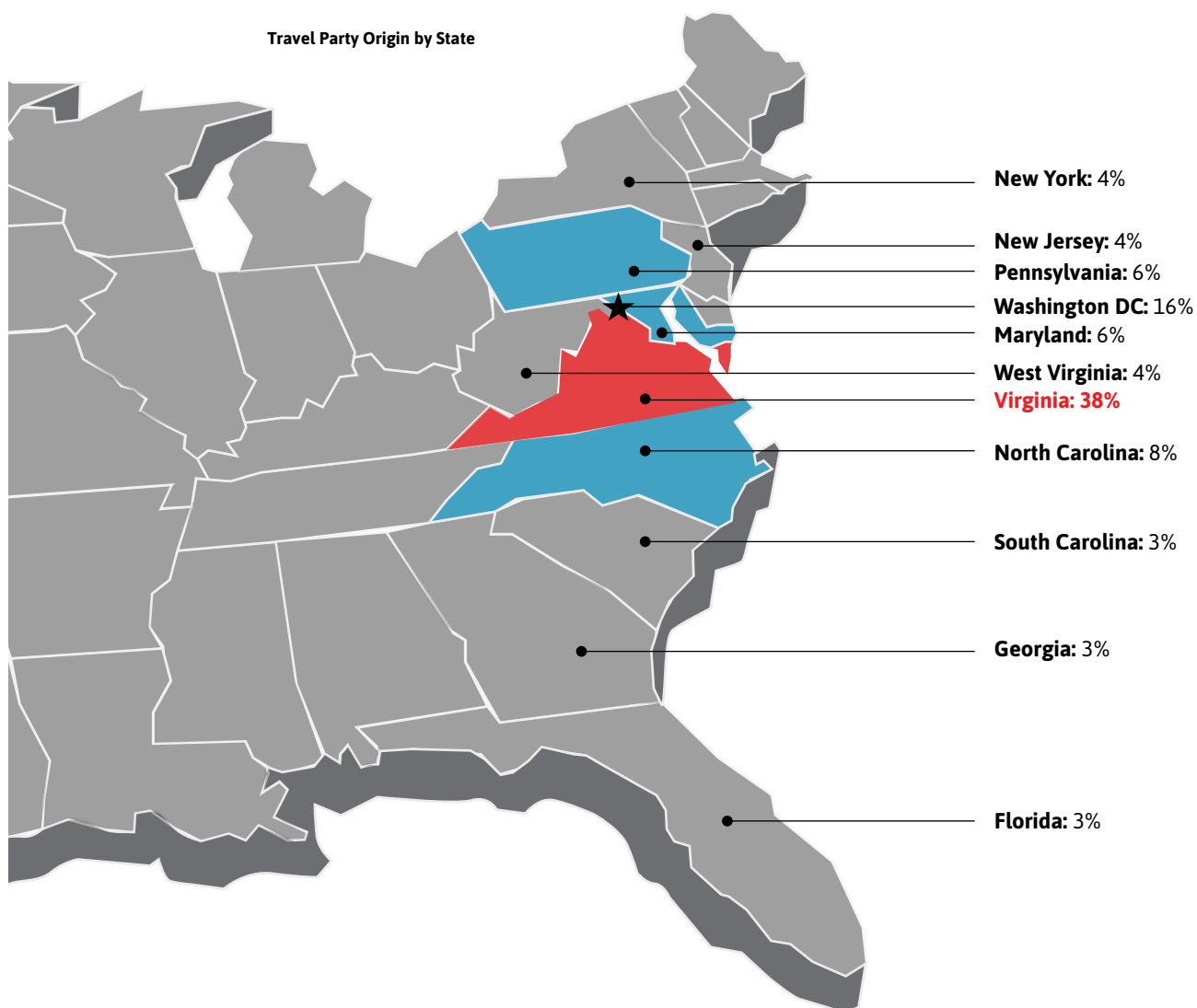
<b>TRENDS</b>	<b>OVERVIEW</b>	<b>IMMEDIATE IMPLICATIONS FOR SWVA - HEART OF APPALACHIA</b>
<b>OUTDOOR RECREATION</b>	<p>The outdoor recreation industry contributes nearly \$22 billion annually to the Virginia economy and supports the livelihoods of more than 197,000 Virginians. Outdoor recreation is 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. Pour resources into these experiences and think about ways to connect experiences across localities, regions, and even the entire Commonwealth.</p>
<b>SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL</b>	<p>There is a growing economy and movement toward stewardship of our earth and our cultures. Destinations and attractions are participating in this movement by promoting low impact and green experiences and practices.</p>	<p>In a state rich with natural resources, wildlife, and small towns, low-impact experiences are important. Think about ways to highlight 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 Virginia’s beauty and rich culture.</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 Heart of Appalachia region is no exception, and according to a TravelTrakAmerica survey, half of travelers (52%) originate from nearby drive markets — Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland. This concentrated primary feeder area gives all of the Heart of Appalachia’s destinations and industry leaders an opportunity to work closer together in promotional planning to target prospective visitors.



## COMPETITION

Given the Heart of Appalachia’s primary lure of nature and outdoor recreation, the primary competitors identified through this effort include Gatlinburg/Pigeon Forge, TN, Asheville, NC and West Virginia.

Additional opportunity audiences based on growing trends include:

COMPETITOR	PRIMARY LURES
<b>GATLINBURG/PIGEON FORGE, TN (EASTERN TENNESSEE)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Dollywood</li> <li>2. Great Smoky Mountains</li> <li>3. Shopping</li> </ol>
<b>ASHEVILLE, NC (WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Outdoor recreation</li> <li>2. Lodging</li> <li>3. Food, beverage, arts</li> </ol>
<b>WEST VIRGINIA</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Outdoor recreation (hiking, whitewater rafting, skiing)</li> <li>2. Entertainment (Casinos, spas)</li> <li>3. Hunting / fishing</li> </ol>

The Heart of Appalachia has difficulty differentiating itself from these competitive destinations — mainly due to the fact that they offer similar recreational opportunities and are more competitively marketed and therefore have more brand recognition. In addition, many active outdoor experiences in these competitive markets are clustered in close proximity to one another, offering a one-stop shop for an active outdoor vacation with opportunities for families and outdoor enthusiasts to experience many activities in one area. For example, West Virginia has continued to develop its whitewater rafting on the Gauley and New Rivers, as well as ATVing on the Hatfield-McCoy Trails (competing directly with the Spearhead Trails). Other destinations also offer varying levels of attractive mountain towns, Appalachian heritage and culture, yet the distinctive music and arts of the region with The Crooked Road help to set the destination apart.

In appealing to prospective visitors, Heart of Appalachia destinations and attractions must realize that competing head to head, from a siloed or individual experience perspective (my outdoor attraction versus one in West Virginia) is less effective than the hub and spoke method of bundling experiences together. But cultural heritage, food, and outdoor recreation bundled together makes the Heart of Appalachia unique when compared to these key competitors. This is the hub and spoke method in action.

## REGIONAL CHALLENGES (VOIDS)

Locally, nationally, and even worldwide, populations are moving away from rural areas and into more urban areas to live, work, and play. In fact, an estimated 80% of Virginia’s population growth will 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. Unfortunately, the Heart of Appalachia is experiencing the negative effects of this trend. In just the past five years, the region’s total population has decreased from 200,000 to 162,000. The largest county of Tazewell has shrunk from 45,000 to 25,000. This is significant, as it not only impacts the vibrancy of communities but challenges tax revenue and ultimately tourism budgets.

In addition to bringing visitors to the area, the region should begin to consider how to position its travel and tourism assets in ways that expose potential new residents to the area, with the understanding that certain areas in the region face challenges in terms community infrastructure, such as technology, water/sewer, and waste management, and some areas are in need of beautification.

With the exception of the Spearhead Trails, the region has limited regional attraction anchors and concentrated experiences, making it difficult to differentiate the region, especially without coordinated marketing and product development efforts across the jurisdictions. With a declining population, the region is slowly growing its tourism assets, beginning to understand that tourism is an economic driver for the area. Yet more needs to be done to create vibrant communities and unique experiences.

### REGIONAL CHALLENGES

- Limited regional attraction anchors and concentrated experiences
- Differentiation from competition in nearby states — outdoors
- Limited recognition of assets and towns
- Lack of tourism industry maturity
- Limited outdoor and traditional accommodations
- Limited accessibility — interstate and air
- Limited community infrastructure in certain areas
- Challenged economic base
- Underdeveloped towns for visitors
- Declining population
- Lack of sense of arrival
- Attraction/destination distance regionally







**REGIONAL CHALLENGES (VOIDS)**

While there are a variety of rustic lodging options, currently the entire region offers 30 hotels, the majority of which are lower scale. As the region’s tourism assets grow, however, the need for more mid- and upper-scale lodging options will continue to increase as well.

Finally, the region faces accessibility limitations without the benefit of major interstate access running throughout the region and no commercial airports. There are, however, several general aviation airports.

TRENDS	OVERVIEW	IMMEDIATE IMPLICATIONS FOR SWVA - HEART OF APPALACHIA
<p><b>AGING POPULATION</b></p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p><b>SHIFTING LABOR DYNAMICS</b></p>	<p>Available workers between the ages of 16 and 54 have been in decline for the past decade – a decline projected to continue – while the supply of workers 55 and older is projected to increase 18%. With overall population growth far outpacing working age population growth, competition for younger workers will intensify, and Baby Boomers as workers will become more important to ALL industries, including travel and tourism.</p>	<p>Assess the region’s destinations and attractions’ current workforce, as well as future workforce needs. Work with destinations and attractions to determine how workplace culture aligns with the values and priorities of a shifting workforce population. Future players could be entrepreneurs for their next stage of life.</p>

**REGIONAL OPPORTUNITY** (cont'd)

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." In this vein, Heart of Appalachia travel and tourism efforts have an opportunity to build on its current partnerships to establish more regional cross promotions, connectivity, and packaging of complementary experiences. This is especially true between towns and cities across the region.

Working together to create trails and experiences will be critical in helping to elevate the entire region against competition. Packaging experiences around outdoor recreation and the Appalachian culture are authentic and, in many ways, differentiating for the region. Continuing to invest in current trail development, along with elevating and focusing on vibrant communities, are great places to start.

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

TRENDS	OVERVIEW	IMMEDIATE IMPLICATIONS FOR SWVA - HEART OF APPALACHIA
<b>VALUE TOURISM</b>	Virginia is increasingly being known for affordable travel experiences. In fact, Williamsburg was named as a top 10 most affordable vacation in the US in 2019. Marketing Outlook Forum also predicts that there will be a decline in luxury travel nationwide in the near future.	Find ways to promote free and affordable experiences. These messages will tie-in well with promoting outdoor recreation. Vacations can be equally exciting and affordable no matter where they travel in the Commonwealth.
<b>MINI-CATIONS</b>	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.
<b>CAMPING</b>	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.
<b>RISE OF MUSIC TOURISM</b>	According to Billboard, 32 million people attended music festivals in 2018. Virginia has a strong and unique music heritage (country, bluegrass, beach, alternative, hip hop, heavy metal, pop rock), and a growing number of music festivals like Bristol Rhythm & Roots Reunion, Lockn', Something in the Water, and FloydFest, just to name a few.	Music heritage is a core identity of Virginia, and the Blue Ridge Highlands is more poised to capitalize on this than most regions. It's both authentic and it's experiential — two essential traits travelers seek. Leverage these assets, events, and experiences as a way to tell the story of the region and of Virginia and keep people coming back to their favorite music destination and experiences.
<b>UNPLUGGING</b>	People are constantly connected these days, whether it's with work or maintaining their social presence online. As a result, people are increasingly wanting to fully disconnect when on vacation. The travel industry is taking notice. Many travel firms are offering trips that require clients to leave phones at home (or in the hotel). Some hotels no longer tout "free WiFi" and instead offer programs that promote "tech detoxes."	Find ways to partner with hotels or attractions to see if there are ways to embrace this trend. With Virginia's strength in outdoor recreation there are great opportunities to promote experiences outside where phones are not allowed.

# PROMOTIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS



## **RECOMMENDED PRIORITIES**

Based on the situation and analysis of the Heart of Appalachia region, the following set of recommendations are offered in order of priority:

1. **Connect and promote Heart of Appalachia's outdoor experiences.** The region is flush with trails, and more trails are coming. What's missing are connected experiences to bring the entire region's outdoor experience to life. The competition for the region's attractions are pretty fierce, so to stand out, localities must build a broader, bigger picture of all the outdoor offerings in the wider area. Concepts like Tastes of the Clinch offer great cues regarding how to tie together a broad area.

**To get inspired about how to formulate a nationwide 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 Heart of Appalachia. Focusing on just one lure will make it more challenging for the region to compete against similar offerings in other states.

The region has many lures that are enticing. For the most part, existing trails focus on one type of product offering, rather than tying together experiences — like outdoor, music, and food. Ideas might include a weekend that allows them to ATV one day, stay in a boutique hotel and sip on a local brew, followed the next day with a music heritage tour or a fishing trip coordinated through a local outfitter. Potentially create actual tours that combine off-roading (ATV or mountain bike) and cultural heritage. And, think about how 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 because they recognize all they can see and do.

3. **Promote Vibrant Communities.** As the Heart of Appalachia region invests in the assets that develop vibrant communities — arts, music, events, culinary — the region’s tourism leaders

should come alongside and support these efforts. Consider creating itineraries that provide routes for visitors to hop from one small town to the next (like along the Clinch River). Or, perhaps, develop themed itineraries around hiking, wineries, beer, cycling, music, or a combination.

4. **Cultivate local ambassadors.** Not only because of the high percentage of visitors who are traveling to see friends and family, but also because of the economic challenges the region faces, creating local ambassadors is critical. Helping residents understand how tourism is economic development, along with all there is to see and do across the region, can make the job of selling tourism easier. This is a year-round opportunity, as friends and family come any time of the year. Create opportunities for locals to experience various activities and experiences so they know where to take their friends and family when they visit. Moreover, creating local support and having them help champion the assets needed to develop vibrant communities is essential. Focusing on residents also means helping local entrepreneurs understand they are in the business of tourism by encouraging new business development to help contribute to the growth of vibrant communities.

**For inspiration on how to engage local ambassadors, see DRIVE 2.0’s How to Guide #1: How to Tell and Sell Your Story.**

# PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

## HUB & SPOKE

In considering all of the research to date, the following hub and spoke approach is recommended for the Heart of Appalachia region as a whole:



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

### TREND 1

---

---

---

---

---

### TREND 2

---

---

---

---

---

### TREND 3

---

---

---

---

---

## **VISION FOR SWVA HEART OF APPALACHIA**

The vision for the SWVA Heart of Appalachia 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 and beverage, and arts — the foundation of vibrant communities — to sustainably maximize the region’s tourism potential.

## **SUMMARY**

The SWVA Heart of Appalachia 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 Tennessee, North Carolina, 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.











VIRGINIA  
IS FOR  
LOVERS<sup>®</sup>