VIRGINIA IS FOR LOVERS

Southwest Virginia:

Blue Ridge Highlands



2024 Annual Economic Impact

STATE OF THE REGION

The Blue Ridge Highlands combines mountain recreation, Appalachian music and arts, historic downtowns, and growing sports tourism. The Crooked Road, Virginia Creeper and New River trails, Barter Theatre, Bristol, Floyd and Virginia Tech anchor experiences across the region.

$1.08B	9.85K	$350.2M	$42.9M	$54.5M
Total Direct Spending	Total Employment Jobs	Total Labor Income	Total State Taxes	Total Local Taxes

STRENGTHS

RECREATION & NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Virginia Creeper Trail • New River Trail • Grayson Highlands • Appalachian Trail • Hungry Mother State Park

ARTS & CULTURE

The Crooked Road • Bristol Rhythm & Roots Reunion • Floyd Country Store • Barter Theatre

ATTRACTIONS & PUBLIC PLACES

Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Bristol • Virginia Tech • Downtown Abingdon, Marion, Floyd and Wytheville

WEAKNESSES

Broad geography • Gaps in broadband, signage and public facilities • Limited higher-end lodging • Thin local staffing and resources

OPPORTUNITIES

DOWNTOWNS & SMALL BUSINESSES

Revitalize storefronts, streetscapes and walkable hubs • Support small business and local retail

HOTELS & HOSPITALITY

Add boutique hotels, unique stays and lodging near sports complexes and outdoor destinations

TRAILS, DINING & TRANSPORTATION

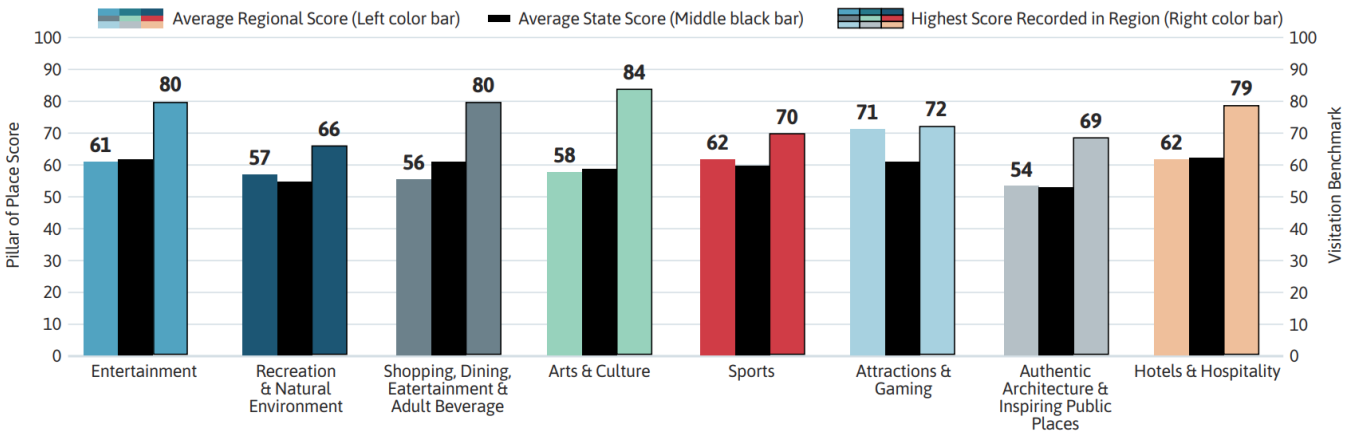
Connect trail networks and visitor services • Grow culinary and craft beverage routes • Plan for passenger rail

THREATS

Competing North Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia destinations • Visitor spending lost to neighboring destinations • Aging infrastructure • Fragmented regional messaging

PILLARS OF PLACE – REGIONAL ASSET PERFORMANCE

Pillars of Place Assessment | Southwest Virginia: Blue Ridge Highlands



Attractions & Gaming performs strongly, led by Virginia Tech and Hard Rock Bristol. Outdoor assets and cultural experiences are major draws; dining, public places, lodging and visitor connections offer opportunities for investment.

VIRGINIA IS FOR LOVERS

SWVA: Blue Ridge Highlands

SCAN HERE TO ACCESS THE STP

vatc.org/STP

AUDIENCE PROFILES

J AUTUMN YEARS

Mature, long-settled couples
Value familiar, quiet routines, scenic drives, heritage and relaxed outdoor trips

Q GOLDEN YEAR GUARDIANS

Financially cautious and traditional retirees
Value community and familiarity
Prefer peaceful, comfortable experiences

L BLUE SKY BOOMERS

Traditional, practical adults in small towns and rural communities
Value affordability, familiarity and outdoor recreation
Enjoy scenic drives, nature and relaxed, accessible experiences

COMPETITORS

Asheville and Boone, North Carolina • Tri-Cities, Knoxville and Smoky Mountains, Tennessee • New River Gorge and Greenbrier Valley, West Virginia

WHAT MAKES THE REGION UNIQUE

Authentic Appalachian music, arts and small towns combine with uncrowded mountain trails and convenient I-81/I-77 access, offering a relaxed alternative to busier mountain destinations.

REGIONAL PRIORITIES

RECREATION & NATURAL ENVIRONMENT | SPORTS

Link the Virginia Creeper, New River and other trails with river access, wayfinding and outfitters. Build on Pulaski County Sportsplex, The Meadows and Virginia Tech to attract tournaments and extend stays.

HOTELS & HOSPITALITY | CONVENTIONS & CONFERENCES

Pursue boutique, adaptive-reuse and nature-based lodging, especially near sports and outdoor hubs. Improve accommodations and visitor services that support group and event travel.

ARTS & CULTURE | ENTERTAINMENT | ATTRACTIONS & GAMING

Connect The Crooked Road, Bristol Rhythm & Roots, Barter Theatre, Floyd and Hard Rock Bristol through coordinated events, cultural itineraries and stronger visitor experiences.

DINING & BEVERAGE | HISTORIC DOWNTOWNS

Invest in walkable Abingdon, Bristol, Marion, Floyd and Wytheville. Connect restaurants, craft beverages, galleries and shops through culinary trails, downtown events and longer evening hours.

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

DOWNTOWNS & CONNECTIVITY

- Improve storefronts and streetscapes
- Coordinate branding and event calendars
- Plan for passenger rail connections

HOTELS & HOSPITALITY

- Develop boutique and unique stays
- Add lodging near sports facilities
- Support adaptive reuse and local character

OUTDOOR & CULINARY EXPERIENCES

- Connect trails and river access points
- Improve signs, rest areas and outfitters
- Link Floyd, Abingdon and Bristol dining