

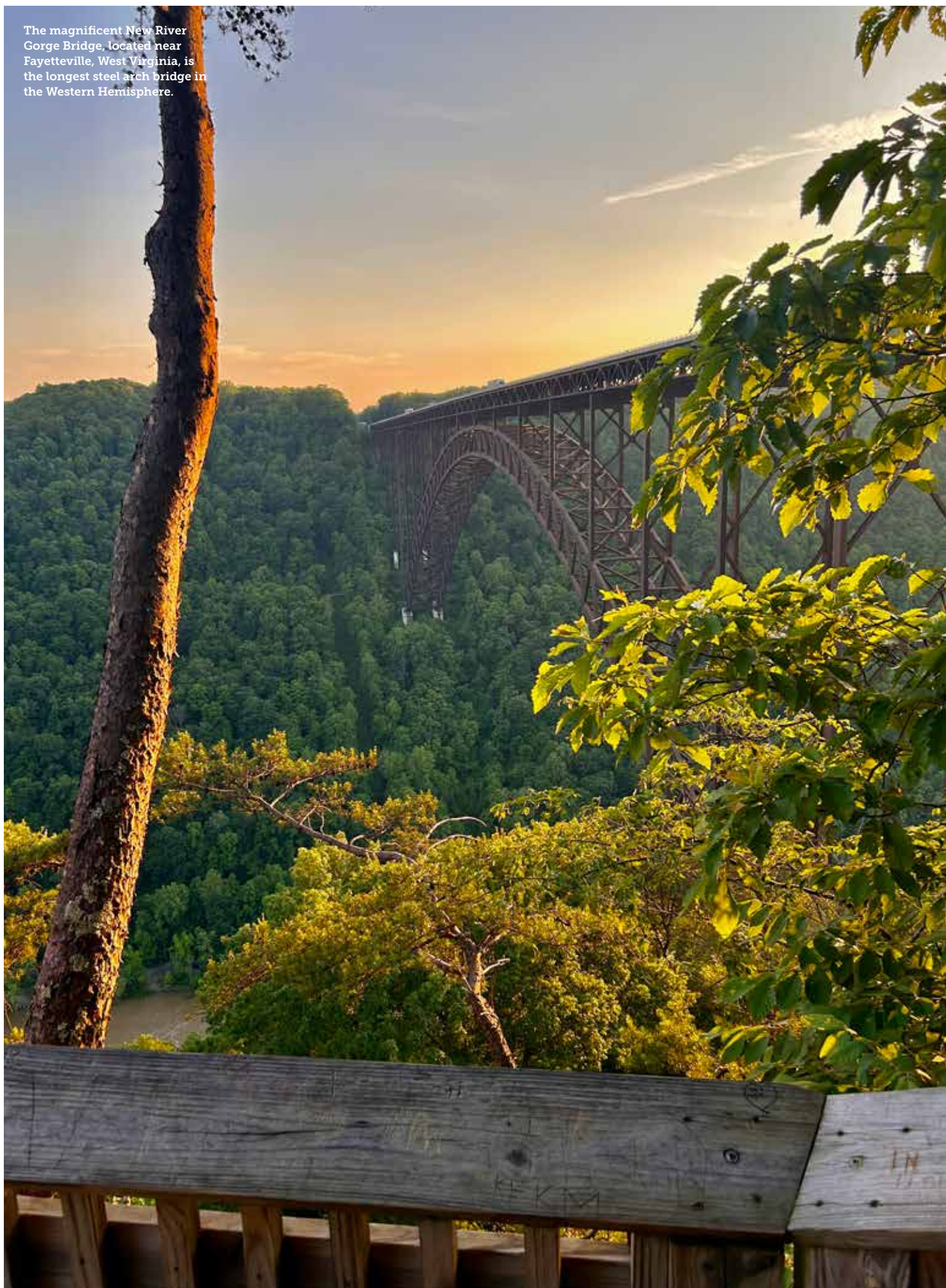
Take Me Home,
COUNTRY ROADS

AN APPALACHIAN ROAD TRIP | WEST VIRGINIA | VIRGINIA

It's too easy, isn't it? Popping John Denver on the car stereo and drifting off down the winding roads. I hear her voice in the mornin' hour, she calls me. Sunlight trickling through leafy foliage, serpentine byways in green tunnels, punctuated here and there by an open overlook to deep gorges and milewide views. *Almost heaven, West Virginia.*

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY CAJSA LANDIN

The magnificent New River Gorge Bridge, located near Fayetteville, West Virginia, is the longest steel arch bridge in the Western Hemisphere.



I’ve come to this part of Appalachia, straddling the state lines of Virginia and West Virginia, not sure what I’m looking for. My to-do list is peppered with sights to see, a few inklings of what this region is about, and the sense that I must do it all in a limited amount of time. But time, I will soon learn, runs on its own schedule here.

OLD RIVER, NEW RIVER

The car rolls across the bridge near Fayetteville, West Virginia, an unassuming highway overpass with a steady stream of thundering long-haul trucks. This isn’t the way to see it. A quick detour gets me to the Long Point Trailhead, an easy two-mile stroll into the forest that has me wondering if I’m on the wrong trail. It’s important to get everything just right, asap.

Then, suddenly, the woods clear and there she is: the majestic New River Gorge Bridge, an inspiration hiding under the humdrum motorway. This steel arch bridge spans an impressive 924 meters and is part of the New River Gorge National Park. The gorge itself is over 240 meters deep, lined with billowing greenery the whole way down.

For being a national park in the US, the outlook is blissfully unregulated. No fences, no signs telling you that a thousand-foot drop can kill you. There are fewer people than at parks out west, a camaraderie among strangers making their way out of the foliage. At the very edge of the outcrop, overlooking the bridge, two old ladies sit chatting. They turn around, smiling. “Do you want us to take your picture?”

Before the bridge was built in 1977, the only way to cross the New River was to make your way down the gorge on a narrow 13 km switchback road and across a rickety bridge at the bottom, a bridge which remains today. I follow the now scenic one-way road into the depths. On the old bridge, someone has sprayed “Joseph loves Cynthia 2023”. Wonder if it’s still true in 2025.

The river is fat here, calm, diving into little rapids, mostly muddled. That’s the way it goes when you, despite your name, are one of the world’s oldest rivers. The air is a thousand percent humidity. “Air you can wear,” as a woman said in the parking lot.

Personally, I think I might be wearing mosquitoes.

I stop in for coffee at Waterstone Outdoor Co. to get some work done, and I feel a little like the woman at the beginning of a Hallmark movie who is about to learn that



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The charming center of Elk City, West Virginia.

The view from the trail at Mountain Lake Lodge, Virginia.



The views are spectacular on most trails in West Virginia and Virginia. Here is a view near Mountain Lake Lodge, Virginia.

deadlines aren't everything. The barista tells me I have to see the bridge at sunset, so I do. It's gorgeous. A family stands next to me on a little outlook platform. I want to tell them it's gorgeous. The look in their eyes tells me they already know.

PRESIDENT JACKSON, HAVE A SEAT

Eschewing the interstate, I hop on the windy scenic byway known as the Midland Trail, which bucks and weaves along the old New River, every turn a stomach-dropping view. On a narrow landing, the Mystery Hole appears, a secret attraction the kind you could only expect to find here. The fact that it is closed, and the hole will forever remain a mystery, irks my to-do list, but more so my curiosity. I shake the feeling around the hairpin turn of Devil's Elbow, and the car rolls into Glen Ferris at twilight.

Glen Ferris, a town of 200 people and the Kanawha Falls, figured in the Civil War before turning into a mining town. In 1930, drilling in nearby Hawk's Nest led to the deaths of 400 mainly black workers after exposure to silica dust, one of the worst industrial disasters in American history.

By the Kanawha Falls, the town's first permanent building remains: the Glen Ferris Inn. I drag my bag into the carpeted, 19th century halls, passing a wraparound patio and a sunroom full of games. The receptionist tells me several prominent Americans have stayed here, presidents and Civil War generals alike. Most residents seem convinced they remained, but I think that's just superstition.

TAKE THE UNEXPECTED EXIT

In the morning, after a deep sleep punctuated only by a few startled convictions that the empty rocking chair in the corner did, in fact, move, I reclaim the chair and try to remember how to feel stressed about my to-do list.

It's become clear that it's hard to resist the calm here. The soft, swelling Appalachian Mountains, the old, slow river. The friendly West Virginia drawl that lulls you through conversations. Suddenly you're rocking gently in a haunted inn along an aged river at sunrise, letting time and thoughts drift away around the river bend, and it feels just fine.

Continuing on to Charleston, West Virginia's unassuming capital, a large billboard catches my eye. For salt. Now I don't know about you, but I thought salt came



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THEY'RE BOTH EAGER TO TELL ME THEY'RE NOT THE WEST VIRGINIA STEREOTYPE.
IT SURE FEELS TRUE, BUT THE WAY LILLIAN SAYS ANY-ALL-HOO MAKES
ME THINK MAYBE SHE GOT ALL THE BEST PARTS OF THE STATE THAT MADE
HER. A LITTLE BIT NORTH, A LITTLE BIT SOUTH. WEST VIRGINIAN.



from the ocean, and I am nowhere near one. This wasn't on the itinerary, but maybe the itinerary doesn't matter. Sometimes you have to get off the main road, let yourself be distracted by a billboard. I take the exit.

J.Q. Dickinson Salt Works looks like a winery: same bucolic farmlands, same fancy barn that has you craving a folksy wedding. Lillian Kratz shows me around the operations, which have been around since 1817, pulling brine from deep in the ground out of what was once the ancient Iapetus Ocean.

Turns out this salt does come from the sea. All it needed was time.

While I scour the giftshop, Lillian entertains me with witty stories about growing up here as a preacher's daughter. A man comes in, delivering insurance papers. A history buff who refurbishes hundred-year-old ice boxes, Matt Porta explains how West Virginia was different in the war. (Everyone is still talking about the war. They always mean the Civil one.) In fact, the state itself was created during the war, seceding from Confederate Virginia and joining the Union, partly to abolish slavery.

"It's the northernmost Southern state and the southernmost Northern state," Matt sums it up, and the pieces of my experience here start to come together. It's not quite the South. But it's not not the South.

"Are West Virginians what you assumed?" he asks, not the first time I've heard it this trip.

West Virginia has higher poverty rates than the rest of the country and is one of its poorest states. The main industry is coal mining – an industry that is both in decline and providing mostly low-income jobs, while also fueling declining health in its workers. Backwards hillbillies with a meth problem is a common trope.

They're both eager to tell me they're not the West Virginia stereotype. It sure feels true, but the way Lillian says any-all-hoo makes me think maybe she got all the best parts of the state that made her. A little bit North, a little bit South. West Virginian.

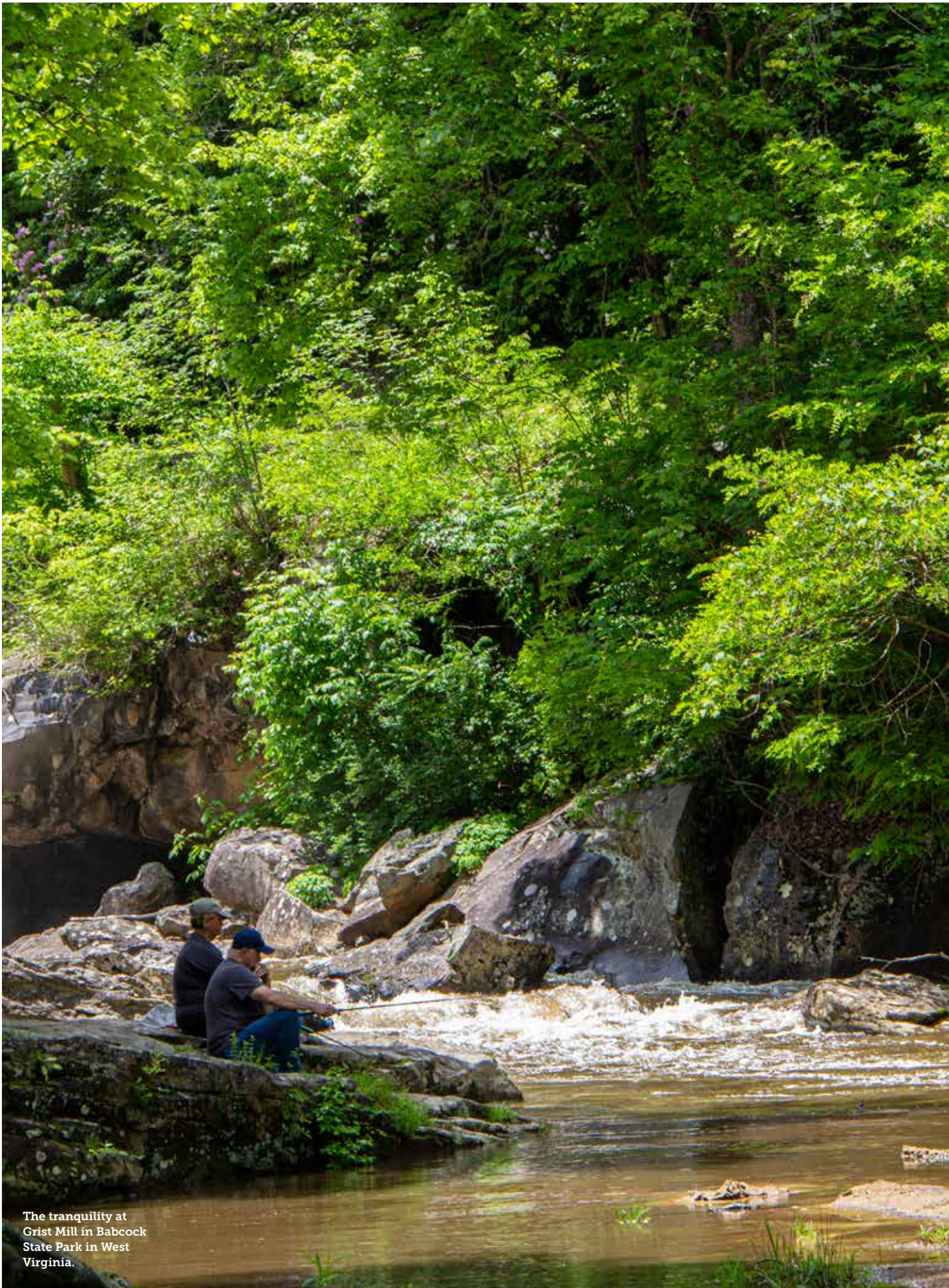
Armed with their list of recommendations for Charleston, I get back on the road: Taylor's Books. Biscuit World. Nano Brewery. Bullock Distillery. The to-do list grows again.

THAT'S JUST CAPITAL

Charleston is a small town of around 47,000 people but an impressive state museum, with a rickety old escalator and a lobby full of quilts. The museum is free – just like the national park, just like the other museums I've visited on this trip, an excellent quality in a state. The museum winds you through all of West Virginia history; it could be cheesy, but at the end of it, I feel happy.



The Mystery Hole remains a mystery to us. Unfortunately, it was closed when we visited.



The tranquility at Grist Mill in Babcock State Park in West Virginia.



Nobody puts Baby in the corner at Mountain Lake Lodge!

Matt and Lillian told me I had to go to Elk City, the up-and-coming part of Charleston, and it is clearly the cool neighborhood. Beautiful old buildings restored into breweries, coffeeshops, and bicycle repairs.

I have a coffee (and the best pastry this side of the Atlantic) at The Vandalia Company before sauntering in to Kin Ship Goods, where I want to buy all of their on-brand possum mugs. The cashier tells me she moved here from Florida, and that she's found the town liberal, forward-thinking, with a lovely community. This pocket is full of life, but remnants of a ghost town are just around the corner. Is West Virginia digging itself out of its mining rubble and toothless stereotypes? The state feels like a secret that hasn't fully discovered itself yet.

NOBODY PUTS BABY IN THE CORNER

Heading east again, I stop by the Grist Mill at Babcock State Park, and it's the first breath of fresh, cool air I've had all week. My shirt unsticks from my spine.

The Grist Mill sits at the top of a fall, spring flowers just starting to stretch their limbs in purples and pinks, the

roaring waters drowning out conversations but not smiles. I take pictures of a family in front of the old house. "Do you want one of you as well?"

A middle-aged couple sit on a rock outcrop below the mill, fishing. I ask if they catch anything. The husband chuckles, shaking his head.

"It's a moment's peace, at least," he says, and maybe that's the better catch.

The drive curls through small towns along the New River, overlooks and river rafting landings, lush foliage and sweeping valleys, and before I know it, I've crossed the state line into Virginia, beginning a climb into the mountains.

And then it appears as if out of a movie: the large stone edifice just outside of Blacksburg that is Mountain Lake Lodge, better known as Kellerman's from *Dirty Dancing*. The movie was shot here in 1986 and still thrives off its legacy. You can stay in Baby's cabin, play games on the sprawling front lawn, or wait for Patrick Swayze at the gazebo. The Hallmark movie feeling taps me on the shoulder again.



New River Gorge
Bridge attracts
many visitors.



West Virginia State Museum in Charleston, West Virginia, showcases the state's history. Free admission.

The old library-turned-bar beckons in the early afternoon. It's dark, all mahogany and leather seats and a big fireplace, and I want to live in here an entire winter. The bartender warns me, "It goes from Dirty Dancing to the Shining real quick," while the couple next to me says "You have to try their fried green tomatoes." The husband makes it clear that only his wife is here for the movie, he's here for the golf.

A VIEW TO THE END OF THE WORLD

In the end, though, it isn't the dream of being lifted into the air by Patrick Swayze that wins me over and steals my heart.

Around the lodge, 2600 acres of land have been preserved for public use and education, an immense treasure. Julius gives me a gator ride up to Bald Knob, sidwinding to the top of the mountain, and there it is: the whole world, I think, although Julius tells me what we see is

southwest Virginia and into West Virginia. While he tells me all about the region, its history and its people, my lungs are busy slowing their breath, expanding to the horizon. The Virginias remind you to slow down, tell you that you may not always know what you need, but you'll know it when you see it. The Appalachian Mountains took a few hundred million to get where they are, you can stand to sit on this rock a little longer.

A couple approach, inching out to the ledge. I put down my bag, and a to-do list flies away on the wind.

"Any-all-hoo," I say to them. "Would y'all like me to take your picture?" **AT**



The beautiful old Grist Mill is located at the top of a waterfall.