

Lewisburg, West Virginia

RANKED

78

Most people associate West Virginia's arts scene with homespun crafts and mountain music, and to some extent they're right—until Lewisburg pops up. This West Virginia community of fewer than 4,000 residents has used two powerful draws of the 1990s—cultural tourism and outdoor recreation—to build its economy, while improving quality of life for its residents.

The forested mountains outside Lewisburg's 236-acre historic district have attracted more than a few monied retirees in recent years—people seeking a few acres on which to build comfortable homes. With the area's growing base of fine craftspeople and artists, as well as urban families seeking a better place to raise their kids, Lewisburg has been able to sustain a depth to its arts scene that communities many times its size would envy.

Lifestyle

Lewisburg really gears up for its white-water rafting seasons—spring and summer on the New River and fall on the Gauley River—all of which attract hordes of visitors from Washington, D.C., Charlotte, and Raleigh. Winter brings a ski crowd through town on its way to Snowshoe and Silver Creek, while summer's West Virginia State Fair is Lewisburg's most crowded and crazy time—two weeks in August when huge crowds come for top names in country and bluegrass music and “suspend life as we know it,” as one art wag says.

But this is still the sort of town where someone with a little cash and lots of home-repair talent can find a very affordable home. Handyman's specials in the \$50,000 range

abound, even within the historic district, while for \$75,000 it's possible to find large homes with garages, shaded yards, and several bedrooms.

Arts Scene

For a small town that has no college and no nearby population center, Lewisburg sustains a surprisingly diverse and finely tuned arts scene. There are two important presenting organizations, Carnegie Hall and the Greenbrier Valley Theatre.

Carnegie, which just completed a \$3-million, top-to-bottom renovation of its 500-seat performance hall, Old Stone Room art exhibition space, and art education workshop spaces, was a 1902 gift from Andrew Carnegie to a now-closed women's college. Today the Carnegie hosts a September-to-May performance season featuring classical music, dance, bluegrass, and touring theater. It also offers year-round art classes for adults and kids as well as a summer art camp.

Greenbrier Valley Theatre is a true anomaly for such a small community. Believe it or not, the 30-year-old GVT presents a two-month main-stage summer season featuring works by playwrights ranging from Neil Simon to Jean Molière, as well as new plays and commissioned pieces, all in a 170-seat converted-barn. GVT plays regularly to sold-out audiences, and it's now converting a downtown Lewisburg department store into a year-round 120-seat playhouse. The company oversees the Drama Club children's theater company, which has a board of directors staffed by kids and presents two plays in autumn and spring.

There are several galleries in Lewisburg; town's most prominent is the Old Stone Room at Carnegie Hall. Five miles east is the country club, and the Fairlea Springs and the country club is a traditional golf resort; several businesses cluster on Gallery Row—regional contemporary jewelry and studios. There are also a hotel's monied clientele and two live-music venues. The end bluegrass and Fairlea for rock and

Art Talk

Artists need to be elsewhere before coming to painting here from Philadelphia. A lot of support

Population: 3,000

Art Events: V

Summersville C

T.O.O.T. in Oct

Art Spaces: 1

Gallery 1897, C

Gallery, Tuckw

Cooper Gallen

RANKED

78

There are several visual arts and fine craft galleries in Lewisburg's historic downtown. The town's most prominent venue is the Old Stone Room at Carnegie Hall, which also hangs local art in its auditorium lobby gallery. Just a few miles east is the community of White Sulphur Springs and the Greenbrier Hotel, a top national golf resort and spa. Nearly a dozen art businesses cluster inside the hotel's Art Colony Gallery Row—representing everything from regional contemporary work to locally created jewelry and studio glass. But Lewisburg's galleries are also favored destinations for the hotel's monied clientele. Finally, Lewisburg has two live-music venues—Hobnobbery for weekend bluegrass and Roscoe's Cafe in nearby Fairlea for rock and blues.

Art Talk

Artists need to establish gallery connections elsewhere before coming to Lewisburg, according to painter Bonnie Fuoco, who moved here from Philadelphia. She explains: "There's a lot of support here for all the arts and a lot of

support from other artists, but the local market is small and somewhat seasonal, so you've got to have things set up before moving here. Either that or just get a law degree and paint in your spare time. For myself, a landscape painter, this area has all the inspiration I need. Drive five minutes in any direction and you're in the middle of pastoral beauty."

"Sure, there are a number of tourists who make up our audience, but the majority of ticket buyers are locals," says Cathey Sawyer, Greenbrier Valley Theatre artistic director. "What people support here is simple: it's anything we do well. We'll have as many people turn out for a new play as turn out for a musical, and it's because local people like to be entertained. Once our downtown theater is finished, we'll switch to a year-round season, Wednesday through Sunday, with our off nights devoted to experimental works by members of our apprentice company—things that might not work for our main-stage audience, but which we can do as a way of giving playwrights a chance to see their work performed onstage."

Essentials

Population: 3,800

Art Events: West Virginia State Fair in August, Summersville Grape Stomping in September, T.O.O.T. in October, Season of Colors in October

Art Spaces: Carnegie Hall, Art Colony Gallery, Gallery 1897, Old Hardware Gallery, Wolf Creek Gallery, Tuckwiller Gallery, J. Fenton Gallery, Cooper Gallery, Clay Works, Ravenwood Gallery

Hangouts: Roscoe's Cafe, Julian's Restaurant and Coffeebar, Hobnobbery, Del Sol Cafe, The Bakery, General Lewis Inn

Bookstores: The Bookstore, The Open Book

Public Radio: WVPB FM 91.7

Chamber of Commerce: 105 Church St., Lewisburg, WV 24910, (304) 645-1000

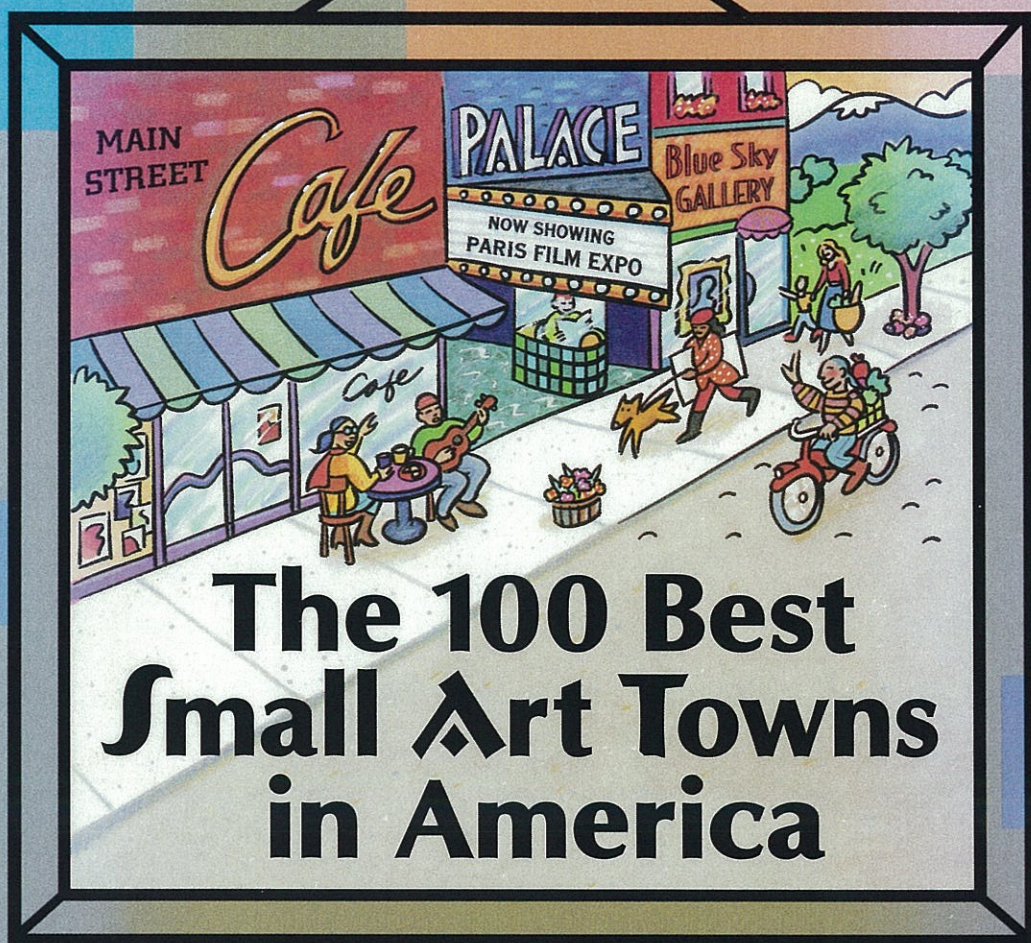
ric district, while
nd large homes
and several bed-

college and no
wisburg sustains
inely tuned arts
nt presenting ord
d the Greenbrier

ompleted a \$3-
ation of its 500-
one Room art ex-
ation workshop
Andrew Carnegie
llege. Today the
-to-May perfor-
cal music, dance,
er. It also offers
ults and kids as

is a true anom-
ity. Believe it or
nts a two-month
aturing works by
il Simon to Jean
ys and commis-
: converted-barn.
it audiences, and
vn Lewisburg de-
nd 120-seat play-
s the Drama Club
hich has a board
nd presents two

Includes
Canada's Best



The 100 Best Small Art Towns in America

Discover Creative
Communities,
Fresh Air, and
Affordable Living

John Villani



J o h n M u i r P u b l i c a t i o n s