
A Weekend in West Virginia's White Sulphur Springs

BY BRUCE INGRAM MAY 29, 2023 12:00 AM

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Big Draft Brewing is the happening place in downtown White Sulphur Springs.

For much of its history, Southern West Virginia's White Sulphur Springs was just a small town that people passed through on their way to and from Lewisburg. The community's status suffered a blow when the June 2016 flood ripped through Greenbrier County, destroying homes, businesses, and lives.

However, small town West Virginians are resilient folks, and since the great deluge, White Sulphur Springs has arisen like the Phoenix. A major part of that rebirth is The Schoolhouse Hotel, says Genny Freiman, whose family's nonprofit, The Disability Opportunity Fund, operates the hotel.



The Schoolhouse Hotel is a major part of White Sulphur Springs' renaissance.

Where everyone finds comfort

The structure began as the White Sulphur District High School in 1912, because, as was said at the time: "country boys and girls should have as good opportunities as those who live in town." In 1968, it became a junior high, and later it was a church school and community center.

In 2019, the DOF began the process of turning it into a boutique hotel.

"My parents founded the nonprofit DOF in 2008, as they saw a need to help people with disabilities find affordable housing," Freiman said. "The DOF purchased half a city block, hired a local contracting team, renovated the buildings, and turned them into spaces for local businesses and apartments.

"The town's leadership really wanted a hotel, which would also provide employment opportunities and other community benefits. In keeping with the mission of DOF, we wanted to create the first fully accessible hotel in the world, which could serve as a model for other communities."

Indeed, The Schoolhouse Hotel has been designed to make individuals with visual, hearing, and physical disabilities feel comfortable. Freiman says the DOF tried to just what those individuals wanted from a hotel, and what they liked and disliked about traveling. Those details were incorporated in the structure.

The hotel's bar now features two levels: one for guests who can stand and the other for those in a wheelchair. In the latter case, the floor has been lowered so the bartender and customer can communicate on eye level.

Additionally, every room is designed with open space so individuals in wheelchairs can more easily navigate them, while outlets and electrical controls are all within reach. Wheelchair lifts exist at every stairway.

We were impressed with the warm greeting at the front desk. All the rooms have school-related motifs. As school teachers, we enjoyed our assignment to the English Room.

Advanced technology managed lights, doorways, curtains, and the smart TV.

We dined at The Varsity Club. Where Chef Jesus Vazquez says his signature dishes are the Ahi Tuna Steak and the Meatloaf.

“For the Ahi Tuna Steak, we make our own fresh pasta using onion puree cooked in brown butter. The tomato chow chow adds color and freshness, and with the tuna creates a plate with sweet, sour, salty, heat, and fat.”

Vazquez said the meatloaf entrée is a mixture of beef and bacon, cooked sous vide, finished with a sauce and caramelized in an oven. We opted for the Ahi Tuna Steak and the Crispy Skin Chilean Salmon.

Our entire sojourn at The Schoolhouse proved wonderful, and the school theme was omnipresent from the scoreboard in the fitness center to the auditorium chairs in a hallway, with school memorabilia everywhere.

Breakfast is served Monday through Friday, brunch on weekends, and grab-and-go (we relished the cheese and egg biscuits) is available on weekdays.



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The Greenbrier Resort.



The Greenbrier Bunker

One of the most fascinating aspects of our visit was a tour of the Greenbrier Bunker. Built secretly by the government between 1959 and 1962, the bunker was designed as a nuclear fallout shelter to house all members of Congress. The government thought this giant underground concrete retreat was close enough to Washington D.C. so that representatives could escape, but not so close as to be collateral damage if the capital was nuked.

Among the “Congressional amenities” in the bunker were decontamination chambers, dorm rooms, meeting rooms for the Senate and the House, and enough food for 60 days—all enclosed in 112,000 square feet under Copeland Hill and in the West Virginia Wing of The Greenbrier Resort.

Our tour guide said that very few people knew about the bunker. Greenbrier staff were told that “television repairmen” were there frequently performing various maintenance tasks. In reality, those

people were the work force maintaining the bunker.

In 1992, the Washington Post magazine reported the real purpose of the bunker. By then, given advanced nuclear delivery capabilities, members of Congress no longer had time to make the trip to Greenbrier in advance of a possible holocaust, so the era of the bunker as a government shelter ended. Today, it serves as a data storage site and a tourist attraction.

We remained at The Greenbrier for lunch at Drapers, named in honor of Dorothy Draper, who is credited with modernizing the décor of the resort after World War II.

Valerie Pritt, communications manager for the Greenbrier County Convention and Visitors Bureau, says that Dorothy Draper was known for her bright bold color schemes, which often included the state wildflower, the rhododendron, and vivid pinks, greens, and teals.

Lunch highlights were Dorothy's Chicken Salad, Shrimp Po-Boy, and the Fried Green Tomato Sandwich, which, not coincidentally, we found to be delicious.



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The storefront of Hammer Cycles in downtown White Sulphur Springs.



Outdoor fun

Tracy Asbury operates Outdoor Adventures, which specializes in fishing and hiking/biking quests in the White Sulphur Springs area.

“The Greenbrier River is a beautiful, free-flowing river that offers outstanding smallmouth bass fishing,” he said. “There are floats for people who enjoy whitewater, and there are trips for folks who just want to enjoy the scenery. Second Creek offers a special regulation, catch-and-release section for trout, and is a tributary of the Greenbrier. Visitors who enjoy wildflowers, birding, biking, and just being outside will really enjoy the Greenbrier River Trail.”

Another outdoor option involves Greenbrier Outfitters, which is part of The Greenbrier resort complex. Activities include climbing, kayaking, paintball, and falconry. We enjoyed watching birds of prey soar across the grounds hawking for food.

Hammer Cycles is a biking business in downtown White Sulphur Springs.

“For a long time I wanted to operate a bike shop,” says owner Matt Hammer, “but my wife and I had decided to focus on our kids instead of a risky business move. When the kids got older, I rewrote our business plan. We saw the changes beginning to happen in White Sulphur Springs and decided this is where we wanted to live.”

Road Hogs Barbecue and Hammer Cycles were among the first that opened along the town’s main drag.

“We opened right at the start of the pandemic, and it was a time when people very much wanted to go outside,” Hammer said. “So there was a real desire for people to purchase bikes or have them repaired. Another plus was the Greenbrier Trail being so close, accessible, and easy to bike,” he said.

The 78-mile trail from Caldwell to Cass has a gradient change of only about one percent. “Only a few places in West Virginia offer that kind of easy biking over such a long distance,” he said.

Farmland predominates in the Renick area, and woodlands exist throughout much of the rest of the byway. Openings dot the trail and make access easy for anglers, birders, and photographers.



Erin Lovell of Sweet Cedar and Company arranges a product display.

Sweet Cedar and Company

In 2019, Erin Lovell opened Sweet Cedar and Company in the building where she previously operated a bakery. She enjoyed her work as a chef, but she also felt it was time for a life change. Thus the switch to bath, body, and home products.

“We specialize in creating fragrances and natural cleaners made from mountain spring water and as natural ingredients as possible,” she said.

A signature product is the Wildflower Honey Bubble Bath that produces loads of bubbles. In the body line, Lovell says her Flipper Fluff Whipped Shaved Soap creates a moisturizing effect that leaves “skin as smooth as a dolphin’s.”

Restored vintage living

Barnwood Living marries the concept of salvaging wood from log cabins, barns, and timber frames with an easy, sophisticated style to create works that are reminiscent of simpler times. Visitors will find handmade artisan’s goods like delicately hand-turned wood bowls, occasional tables, and writing pens.

“The goal ... is to highlight and elevate the Appalachian craftsman,” says manager Katherine Shelton. “People who purchase our lumber make a lifestyle decision that involves both practicality and nostalgia,” she says. “We truly only work with vintage wood and restore it for buyers to use in the ways they see fit. We work with American chestnut, poplar, red and white oak, and old growth pine.”



Photo courtesy Greenbrier County CVB

One of the appetizers at Big Draft Brewing.

Big Draft Brewing

Big Draft Brewing specializes in craft beers. Founding partner Clay Elkins said he believes the town needed a spark after the flood, so they renovated an old hardware store into a brewery.

“We’ve strived to become a community focal point where folks can enjoy locally sourced food and 16 kinds of beer made on-site, plus live music and community events like bingo and trivia.”

Among the best sellers are Bo Red (a Czech amber lager), Foreman (an American lager honoring the working man), and Bellini Berlinerwiesse (a raspberry and peach sour wheat ale). Favorite orders include the Big Draft Brewery Pretzel and Lager House Nachos and just about any of the beef entrées, which come from Mountain Steer Meat Company.

We supped on Seared Salmon with coconut risotto and Vegetarian Lasagna with a panko parmesan crust. The meal was pleasing as was the atmosphere.

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