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36 HOURS

Morgantown, W.Va.

By SUSAN BRENNAN

THIS self-designated "micro-city" of 26,000 gets its most excited visitors in the fall when 65,000 blue-and-gold-clad football fans fill Mountaineer Stadium at West Virginia University, making Morgantown temporarily the largest city in the state. But it's actually in spring that the town explodes with life. The wildflowers are at their peak, the Cheat River is at its white-water wildest and bikers and skaters rip up and down the hilly streets. In the last decade, conservationists have converted 51 miles of rail corridor into bike trails with parks and picnic shelters. Preservationists have sparked a night-life scene along the riverfront and saved a grand old playhouse from destruction. Work has begun on a 15,000-seat waterfront theater. But the real appeal may be the lively and walkable downtown, gone neither to seed nor to preciousness. The lack of urban attitude takes some adjustment. When a store owner offers to lend you a vintage book overnight, or bikers slam on their brakes to let you cross, just smile and nod. You could get used to this.

Friday

5:30 p.m.

1) Get the Kinks Out

The new hub of the city is the Wharf District, a mile-long stretch of converted warehouses along the Monongahela River at the western edge of downtown. Restaurants and shops line this landscaped section of the Caperton Trail, an asphalt path that snakes along the river for eight miles. Join the parade by renting a bike at Whitetail Cycle and Fitness (54 Clay Street, 304-291-2270). A bike is \$10 for two hours, \$25 a day or \$40 for the weekend; kayaks are also available. Pedal north for a view of the hilltop Evansdale campus of West Virginia University. Dusk erases the river's industrial edge and the town looks almost dainty as it rises from the river in sparkling pinpoints of light.

7:30 p.m.

2) A Drink With a View

The restaurants and pubs along the Caperton Trail have bike racks, so it's easy to stop for a drink. Two — La Casa Mexican Grill (156 Clay Street, 304-292-6701) and Oliverio's (52 Clay Street, 304-296-2565) — are usually packed. If their riverfront decks are full, try the West Virginia Brewing Company (1291 University Avenue, 304-296-2739), which offers a changing selection of house-brewed ales and lagers. The deck overlooks a riverfront park.

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9 p.m.

3) Bacchanal

The restaurant of the moment is Cafe Bacchus (76 High Street, 304-296-9234), serving contemporary American food in a century-old house an easy walk from the Wharf District. Diners linger near the windows of the front dining room or in the dimly lighted turquoise back parlor, which has the look of nighttime at the bottom of a Hockney pool. Entrees are \$20 to \$32.

Saturday

9 a.m.

4) Blue Morning

Let the college students sleep in. All ages mix at the Blue Moose Cafe (248 Walnut Street, 304-292-8999), a corner place with window walls for people-watching. At this hour adults trade sections of the newspaper as they drink organic coffee and order the off-menu egg-white omelet filled with spinach, avocado and grape tomatoes (\$3.75).

10 a.m.

5) View From Above

Walk west on Walnut Street, behind the courthouse. Pay 50 cents to board the university's 3.6-mile computer-controlled Personal Rapid Transit system — with cars that look like blue-and-gold breadboxes — that connects the Evansdale, Health Sciences and Downtown campuses of W.V.U. Travel just one stop, to Beechurst Avenue and the downtown or main campus. Take advantage of the remarkably open access that is a state tradition; West Virginians presume their university is for everyone, not just tuition-payers. You can walk right into the Wise Library, where you are welcome to sit in the deep mission-style chairs and browse through the Appalachian Collection as long as you would like.

11:30 a.m.

6) The Spine of Downtown

Pause at the south end of campus at the top of High Street, the spine of downtown. What you will see, rolling downhill for five blocks, is an old-fashioned commercial street with Queen Anne and Roman Revival buildings dating from the turn of the last century. Stop at the Mediterranean Deli (350 High Street, 304-292-3506) to pick up wine, crusty bread and an assortment of garlicky Middle Eastern dips for a picnic lunch later at Hazel Ruby McQuain Riverfront Park.

Continued

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36 HOURS

Morgantown, W.Va.

(Page 2 of 2)

2 p.m.

7) Glass From the Past

Glassmaking was a major local industry through most of the 20th century. The Seneca Glass Company was among the last of the factories to close, in 1983. Its building, now called Seneca Center (709 Beechurst Avenue), houses a restaurant and shops as well as a tiny museum of glassmaking, which is open only on weekend afternoons. The highlight of the shops is the Gallery at Seneca Center (304-292-7250), a cooperative that features the work of artists like Ron Hinkle, a Buckhannon, W.Va., glass blower who loves color in dapples and swirls. His pieces range from \$12 to \$300.

3:30 p.m.

8) Utopia Lost

Get in the car and head 16 miles out of downtown, on winding Route 7 East to 92 South, toward the Arthurdale Heritage Inc. museum (off Route 92 on the corner of Q and A Roads, the visitors' center is in Center Hall, 304-864-3959). Explore what is left of the nation's first New Deal cooperative community, a homestead for displaced coal-mining families, opened in 1934 under Eleanor Roosevelt's guidance. A crafts program was created to provide jobs, and businesses were lured to the area. All but one of the 165 original boxy frame and stone homes still stand (though many have been altered). Descendants of the original owners have helped bring about the restoration of the main wood-and-stone structures, including the meeting hall, filling them with Arthurdale-made furniture snatched off eBay. Hours from May through October are weekdays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturdays, noon to 5 p.m.; and Sundays 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.; or by appointment. Ask about a guided tour, preferably with Jennifer Bonnette, whose homesteading grandmother still lives there.

8 p.m.

9) Artful Eating

At Madeleine's (229 Pleasant Street, 304-296-6230), an exuberantly buzzing storefront restaurant, it seems everyone from the dishwasher to the waiters either makes art (the evidence is hanging on the walls) or plays in a band. The pan-ethnic food — some Italian, French, Mexican — includes seafood puttanesca (\$16). Portions are generous. Don't miss the Parmesan scones.

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10 p.m.

10) New Mountain Music

Walk two blocks downhill to 1-2-3 Pleasant Street (123 Pleasant Street, 304-292-0800), one of the region's best venues for live music — hillbilly, punk-rock or blues. Audiences for weeknight local bands are mostly students, but grown-ups come out on weekends. Recent headliners were the acid bluegrass band Hackensaw Boys and the surf guitarist Dick Dale. Cover charges are \$5 to \$20.

Sunday

8 a.m.

11) Hot Bread

The barely sweet cinnamon-currant bread has just come out of the brick oven at Daily Kneads, a takeout bakery (89 Kingwood Street, 304-292-7323). For sour-tasting buckwheat cakes (\$3.50 for a stack of three), try Ruby & Ketchy's, an unadorned mom and pop restaurant near Cheat Lake (2232 Cheat Road, 304-594-2004).

9 a.m.

12) Just Hang On

The Cheat River has much of the drama of West Virginia's more famous New and Gauley Rivers, but not the bumper-boat crowds. Partisans of extreme water can get a rattle from the 33-spring Class 4 and 5 rapids on the Cheat Canyon run. A \$62.50 guided raft trip is offered by Cheat River Outfitters (in Albright, W.Va.; 888-997-4837). A dry alternative is Coopers Rock State Forest, just east of town on Interstate 68. It's a favorite of mountain bikers, rock climbers and W.V.U. alumni, who often have marriage ceremonies at the breathtaking Cheat River Gorge overlook with its 1,300-foot drop.

The Basics

Morgantown is a three-and-a-half-hour drive northwest of Washington and an hour and a half south of Pittsburgh. Morgantown Municipal Airport is served by U.S. Airways with direct flights from Washington and Pittsburgh. If you fly in, you will probably want to rent a car.

To get walking maps or a listing of weekend events, stop by the Greater Morgantown Convention and Visitors Bureau (Seneca Center, 709 Beechurst Avenue; 304-292-5081).

The 76-room Clarion Hotel Morgan (127 High Street, 304-292-8200) opened in 1925 and was recently refurbished. It is the place for those who like to ditch the car and walk to downtown, the Wharf District or the Personal Rapid Transit system. The hotel will happily store bikes overnight. Rooms start at \$95. The 74 two-room suites at the Euro-Suites Hotel (501 Chestnut Ridge Road, 304-598-1000) start at \$99. A 16-story Radisson Hotel (2 Waterfront Place, 304-296-1700) is taking reservations for its July 1 opening. Its 206 rooms will start at \$89 a night.

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West Virginia

Morgantown meander

This college town gets high marks for its pleasant atmosphere and easy access to the great out-of-doors.

By **Jerry V. Haines**

Special To The Sun

Originally published May 11, 2003

Please put your books on the floor, and write the answers to the following questions in your test booklet:

1. What was the first commercial product to be shipped using the transportation systems of the upper Monongahela River?
2. Compare and contrast the ecological outlook for fish species in the Monongahela before and after the 1972 Clean Water Act.
3. Explain the derivation of the name "Monongahela."

Morgantown, W.Va., is a university town, so you would expect exam questions like these.

And if you didn't do well on them, perhaps you could do the extra-credit term paper on Hezekiah Napoleon Bonaparte Alsoupe (the Hermit of Uffington) or the Headless Lockmistress.

But don't worry, you're not sweating in the lecture hall or pulling an all-nighter in the dorm. You're in a kayak, drifting in the gentle current of the Monongahela, looking up at the crumbling cliffs that line its banks.

(The Delaware Indian term for "river" and "crumbling cliffs" was "Monongahela.")

Adventures with Magic River outfitters don't really have exams or term papers, but education is a nice byproduct of a kayak trip on the Monongahela just above Morgantown.

Your guide/lecturer is Tim Terman, who runs kayak tours on the river every year, beginning when the trees on the high banks start sporting their foliage.

Terman takes up to 12 people at a time out in one-

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Coopers Rock State Forest (Sun photo by Doug Kapustin)
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person boats (first giving the beginners a quick course on how to pilot them), and then, as they all paddle downstream and up, he shares with them the area's history and folklore. (The line between history and folklore is sometimes fuzzy, as he acknowledges.)

Occasionally, he has to raise his voice as a novice kayaker drifts away, but the river is so quiet that he rarely has to yell.

This is not Terman's day job, of course. Like so many in Morgantown, he works for West Virginia University. WVU is easily Morgantown's leading employer. When school is in session, Morgantown's population jumps from 29,000 to 50,000.

The city is located in the north central part of West Virginia, within 10 miles of the Pennsylvania border and 30 miles from Maryland. It stands near the corner of Interstates 68 and 79, but the more important intersection historically was the confluence of the Monongahela River and Decker's Creek.

There, in the mid-18th century, Col. Zackquill Morgan and others first settled the area. It was still just "Virginia" then, and it would be until the Civil War when Virginia's northwestern counties resisted the attempt to break away from the Union.

The coal loading facilities along the area's rivers make it obvious that this is coal country, but (and here's another test answer) the first major product shipped on the river was whiskey.

Monongahela rye, produced from surplus grain upriver, developed an international reputation and was shipped down the river on flatboats as early as the 18th century. ("Down" and "up" are confusing concepts on the Monongahela, one of the few American rivers that flow from south to north. Thus, you sail north - and "down" - from Morgantown to Pittsburgh.)

Prohibition did not stop the flow of liquor; it merely forced its makers to be more clever. Terman has some great folk tales about it, including that one about the ghostly lockmistress who sometimes can be heard rowing in the fog, her moonshine jugs clinking together in the stillness of the night.

The city's first chief industry was glassmaking. Morgantown had the sand, the coal and natural gas to fire it, and, thanks to the locks and dams on the Monongahela, the means to ship it. The largest operation was Seneca Glass Co., whose lead crystal and other products competed worldwide with the likes of Waterford.

But people stopped demanding elegant glass tableware, and Seneca Glass closed in 1983, after 88 years of operation (its old glassworks on the east bank of the Monongahela today is used as a retail center). Fortunately, Morgantown wasn't dependent on just one major industry. It had WVU.

Ivy-league looks

The university's downtown campus lies on the northern edge of the city's small central business district, and a more striking setting for a university is hard to imagine. Dating to 1870, WVU looks like the Ivy League.

Campus streets lead uphill from downtown to hills and more hills. (After four years at WVU you not only would have a bachelor's degree, but Olympic-class leg muscles as well.)

At the crest of one landscape-dominating mound is Woodburn Circle, comprising three of the university's oldest buildings, which stand like three distinguished

professors posing for a yearbook photo, overlooking the city and the Monongahela Valley.

In the 1950s, WVU ran out of room to expand, and a second campus - the Evansdale Campus - was initiated three miles to the north. Unfortunately, the Ivy League architecture stayed downtown. The new campus buildings are more functional and, well, dull. Except for the coliseum. This huge arena on a hilltop is visible for miles.

The coliseum looks like a concrete UFO. Saucer-shaped, big enough to hold 14,000 beings, it appears to be merely parked there, waiting for a call from its home planet.

(A WVU alumni friend, whose devotion to the university's sports teams is fanatical, insists that the true atmosphere of the university is revealed on any given football Saturday, when its Mountaineer Stadium is filled with 60,000 people chanting "Let's go, Mountaineers" and the prize-winning marching band performs.)

When WVU began operating two separate campuses, it needed a way to connect them. It was too far to walk, the hills discouraged bicycling and shuttle buses had problems on the narrow streets.

So in 1975 planners created the Personal Rapid Transit system, which is essentially a horizontal elevator. You put 50 cents into the turnstile (WVU students use a "Mountaineer Card") and select your station, just as you would choose a floor in a high-rise. You wait for a yellow, electric-powered, rubber-tired car about the size of a soccer mom's SUV to sidle up to the platform. And off you go, even though there's no driver at the wheel - and there's no wheel.

The PRT system runs about nine miles from the medical center through the old campus to downtown. Most of the passengers are WVU students and staff, but anyone may use the system.

If you sit near the windows, you can enjoy the scenery - river views, the old campus, the streets below. On my trip, I shared a car with a young professor taking his kids on a PRT excursion. They clearly thought it was cool - and so did I.

If you prefer some exercise, Morgantown is a grand place to walk or bike. Old railway tracks along the edge of the river have been paved to make a 29-mile trail that extends south from the Pennsylvania line through downtown Morgantown to Prickett's Fort and the river's headwaters. A good starting point is the lock and dam at the south edge of town.

The river rebounds

To the casual visitor, there may be nothing remarkable about the Monongahela's water, but the river is being reborn. At one time, it approached the Dead Sea in hostility to aquatic life, as Tim Terman explains, with acid mine drainage and other biological insults killing off nearly every species of fish therein.

But after implementation of the federal Clean Water Act, the river is slowly coming back to life, and now 100 different fish species may be found in the improved waters.

After you've trekked and come back to the dam, pause and appreciate the name of a nearby street. A section of University Avenue has been renamed Don Knotts Boulevard. The actor was born in Morgantown in 1924 and reportedly returns to town for high school reunions.

So far, it appears that the street name and a page on the city's Web site are the only recognition Knotts has gotten here. (But I'd sure show up to meet Barney Fife, Ralph Furley and the Incredible Mr. Limpet if the city ever staged a Don Knotts festival.)

A drive down Don Knotts Boulevard can turn into an outdoor adventure if you keep going. Coopers Rock State Park, about 10 miles east on I-68, is a popular place for picnics and the occasional wedding.

I paused at the scenic overlook there, one sunny Sunday morning, for a view of the Cheat River Gorge and watched the mist rise from the hills. Feeling in a historical mood, I left the paved park roads to walk a tricky, mile-long trail down to the ruins of the 1835 Henry Clay Furnace, also within the park grounds.

At one time, 200 people worked at this furnace, producing iron, putting it aboard tramways and floating it down the Cheat River. All that remains of the operation and the community built to support it is the furnace itself, looking like an abandoned, oversize barbecue.

Back toward Morgantown is Cheat Lake, surrounded by retirement cottages and getaway townhouses. The origins of the "Cheat" name are obscure, but the lake's pleasures are obvious.

Created in 1926 with the damming of the Cheat River for electric power production, the lake is a placid venue for boating and fishing, while the river upstream challenges whitewater rafters. Cheat Lake is also the site of Ruby & Ketchy's, a 45-year-old diner near the water's edge, still ladling out the chili and flipping the burgers in classic diner style. Fortify yourself, and then get back to exploring.

Stunning vistas

Any excuse to drive proved rewarding. The smaller roads in particular curved, rose and fell, taking me through green woods and up onto hilltops where I could see for miles. (Even interstates, usually synonymous with sterility, here provide stunning hill and valley vistas.) Occasionally, the welcome smell of spring clover would greet me.

From the hilltops, the road would swoop down to creek level, sometimes so abruptly that my ears would pop. I got lost a lot - which is not hard to do, because the highway folks seem to be really stingy with signs - but given the scenery and the clover, I didn't mind.

A good drive is the trip to Arthurdale, 16 miles southeast of Morgantown and 70 years back in time. This New Deal community was a pet project of Eleanor Roosevelt. You can still tour the town today - many of the buildings remain.

Arthurdale's claim to fame was its flirtation with a new way to deal with the nation's destitute. Poverty-stricken coal miners would become cooperative farmers and craftsmen. Not surprisingly, the concept met opposition, as the Utopian plans for self-sustaining community life sounded suspiciously like something a congressional investigating committee would love to tear into.

Even though Mrs. Roosevelt was Arthurdale's personal champion, the project could not withstand frequent political and budgetary problems, and it was sold off in 1941, as the country turned its attention to World War II.

This is all rich material for yet another essay question. But you may prefer Tim Terman's floating lecture on local folklore:

Before the construction of dams raised the river level, there was an island near Uffington, where I-79 now crosses the river. Erstwhile medical student Hezekiah Napoleon Bonaparte Alsoupe reigned there in the mid-19th century, vigorously defending his island empire against encroachers.

The island and its hermit are both gone now, officially that is. But Terman says you might run across his ghost out in the fog some quiet night on the river - as you paddle your kayak in the classroom that is the Monongahela.

WHEN YOU GO

Getting there: Morgantown's small airport is served by US Airways Express via Pittsburgh. Current round-trip fares from BWI begin at about \$300. By car, Morgantown is a 215-mile, 3.5-hour drive, using Interstates 70 and 68.

Getting around: Downtown Morgantown and WVU's downtown campus are walkable, if you don't mind steep hills. Aside from that (and intercampus trips on the PRT), most travel in and around the city will require a car.

The PRT - Personal Rapid Transit - system operates from 6:30 a.m. to 10:15 p.m. weekdays and from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday; closed Sundays and university holidays, and during summer weekdays closes at 6:15 p.m. Cost is 50 cents per ride. For more information: 304-293-5011.

Lodging

Many motel chains are represented near WVU's Evansdale Campus and at interstate highway interchanges. But for a little more personality, try one of the following:

Clarion Hotel Morgan, 127 High St., Morgantown, W.Va. 26505

304-292-8200

www.clarionhotelmorgan.com

- On National Register of Historic Places, the recently renovated hotel offers river views from some rooms. Doubles from \$95, but first-time guests are offered a promotional rate of \$76.

Almost Heaven Bed & Breakfast, 391 Scott Ave., Morgantown, W.Va., 26508

304-296-4007

- Hilltop views from the back porch; impressive dining room. Rooms from \$75.

Dining

Ali Baba's Mediterranean Market & Deli, 350 High St., Morgantown

304-292-3506

- Inexpensive Middle Eastern fare and college students always seem to go together, but this place does a better than average job with the traditional salads and pita sandwiches. Lunch about \$10.

Glasshouse Grille, 709 Beechurst Ave., Morgantown

304-296-8460

- Homemade soups, light crepes and sturdy meatloaf. Lunch with dessert is about \$20, with tip.

Madeleine's, 229 Pleasant St., Morgantown

304-296-6230

- Lots of hand-painted whimsy in this place. A good place for Sunday brunch (about \$15). Dinner with wine is about \$25.

Ruby & Ketchy's, 2232 Cheat Road, Morgantown

304-594-2004

- Diner food, pure and simple. Typical lunch or breakfast about \$8.

Attractions

Adventures on Magic River, Uffington landing, south of the city

877-338-9003

www.magicriverwv.com

- Daytime or evening kayak tours combine moderate exercise with sightseeing and interesting lectures on history and ecology of the area. About \$25 per person, by appointment only.

Arthurdale Homestead Community, Route 92, Arthurdale, W.Va. 26520

304-864-3959

www.arthurdaleheritage.org

- Through May 23, open weekdays only, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.; thereafter also open Saturday noon to 5 p.m. and Sunday 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Admission \$5, with discounts for seniors and children.

Coopers Rock State Forest, I-68 Exit 15

304-594-1561

www.coopersrockstateforest.com

- Hike or just mellow out in this nearly 13,000-acre reserve with striking valley views. As with all West Virginia state parks, there is no admission charge.

Information

For more information about visiting Morgantown, contact the Greater Morgantown Convention and Visitors Bureau: 800-458-7373; www.tourmorgantown.com.

AN IDEAL DAY

8 a.m.: Breakfast at Ruby & Ketchy's near Cheat Lake. Be adventurous and try the sour buckwheat cakes (made from locally milled grain) and sausage (from Maryland's Mennonite country).

9 a.m.: Explore Cheat Lake and the Cheat River, or wander through Coopers Rock

State Park. Take your camera.

Noon: Lunch in downtown Morgantown at one of the many student hangouts (the major food groups all seem to involve frying), or at Ali Baba's, for something a little easier on the arteries.

1 p.m.: Shop for antiques or crafts on Morgantown's High Street, followed by a brisk walk uphill to WVU's old campus. (Maybe you should have gone more lightly on that fried food at lunch.)

3 p.m.: If you still need exercise, take a hike or bicycle ride on a rail trail. Otherwise, take a budget sightseeing tour on the PRT.

6 p.m.: Meet Tim Terman of Adventures on Magic River at the Uffington landing and take off on a kayak tour of the Monongahela. Paddle until the sun sets.


8:30 p.m.: Late dinner at Madeleine's. If you're lucky, they will be serving wild rice and duck salad. Order your wine from the handwritten list on the chalkboard and drink a toast to Hezekiah Napoleon Bonaparte Alsoupe.

- Jerry V. Haines

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