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Work Remotely, Play Locally



Dave Arnold

Adventures on the Gorge

Dave Arnold co-founded Class VI River Runners in 1977. Thirty years later, Class VI merged with three other companies to become Adventures on the Gorge, West Virginia's preeminent outdoor adventure resort. Now retired, Arnold serves as a member of the Board of Directors for AOTG as well as the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority. He served as a member of the state Tourism Commission for six governors and chaired the West Virginia Hospitality and Travel Association for 12 years.

I have started many a talk with the following two lines: “In the great house of West Virginia, we are the front porch – we welcome people. We are also the back porch, where we entertain and tell stories.”

There are things about this statement that may or may not be obvious. First, the word “we” can represent a number of things. For example, I have used “we” in the past to mean our company (Adventures on the Gorge), the adventure businesses in West Virginia, or even all of West Virginia tourism. It should also be noted that this statement does not claim a big part of the house. This is because the whole house is much bigger and more complicated. The house must be looked at as a lot of rooms or spaces that are very diverse, but all tied

together with an architectural plan. With that said, any great house still needs a front porch and a back porch.

One important thing to keep in mind when looking at how adventure tourism supports economic development: it does not happen quickly. Adventure tourism is generally not like classic large-scale economic development where someone is announcing a new large plant, such as the Toyota plant Governor Caperton announced 25 years ago. Adventure tourism is generally a very slow bake.

Here is a very quick review of how tourism happened in Fayette County, West Virginia. In the early 1960s, there was recognition that the New River Gorge was really something

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special. The West Virginia House and Senate wrote a joint resolution to President Kennedy asking his administration to look at this area for federally protected park status. In the 1970s, we saw the rise and growth of rafting businesses and the completion of a major four-lane highway through our area, as well as the opening of the New River Gorge National River. This all continued and, at some point in the 1980s, these small cottage businesses became an industry.

Soon after this, and into the 1990s, we started to see many entrepreneurial restaurants and shops coming to town, especially in Fayetteville. Bed and breakfasts, rock climbing companies and hiking started to take off. As we entered



the next century, we saw mountain biking, zip lines and even more retail. Then, in the last dozen years, we saw the creation of the Boy Scouts of America's Summit Bechtel Reserve along with mergers in the rafting industry and a rise in the online vacation rental market. All combined, these "slow-baked" scenarios have built a foundation for what is about to happen next.

Before I get to that, we should take a quick look at Bentonville, Arkansas. As you may know, this is the home of Walmart. Early on, one of the requirements for any of their vendors was that they needed an office within 25 miles of Walmart's corporate offices. As you might guess, most businesses had some of their top people move to Bentonville to man these offices. After all, this was a large client and demanded an experienced, executive-level person.

This seemed to be a great economic development strategy for northwestern Arkansas, but there was a problem. Many of those who relocated there would stay only for a few years since there really was not a lot to do. A few of Sam Walton's grandsons soon realized this was a loss, so they came up with an idea to to change it.

The plan was to change the quality of life in Bentonville. It started with bike trails. Recently, they were named the mountain biking capital of the world. It also involved a huge push in improving the area's culinary businesses. While building a tourism mecca was not the Waltons' primary goal, they have inadvertently helped to create one. The real value, however, is that not only are people staying in Bentonville, but the area is booming with people who can work anywhere and are looking for quality of life. In all fairness, Bentonville did have to market this and give some incentives for people to move their businesses to this area. The bottom line is that it worked. In West Virginia, we still have a way to go, but we are starting with some amazing assets for quality of life.

I believe the next phase of the evolution of our area, if we continue to invest in broadband, education and the outdoor adventure industry, will be the rise in entrepreneurs working here because of quality of life. A great example of this is a company in Fayetteville called Digital Relativity that now has over 30 employees. This is the next great shift, and people are beginning to figure out what many of

us have known for years: this is a great place to work, play and live.

When people realize they can work from anywhere, they start to look at where they want to live and raise their families. They may decide that living in a rural small town with a massive playground of outdoor activities is a better life than a life in the city. We are starting to see this more and more in West Virginia. The big question: is this a temporary trend or is this a major cultural shift?

I have a college friend who wrote a song about West Virginia called, "The Furthest, Nearest Place." Perhaps our location and our wild and wonderful lifestyle will finally pay off. For this to happen, we certainly will need better broadband and better education for our children. Many of us who live in Fayette County, and those in other West Virginia communities that have great outdoor venues, think this is a unique time for West Virginia. This is what many of us have been waiting for. ▽