

Do **You** Have Asheville

SOME PEOPLE COME DOWN WITH IT FOR A WEEK, OTHERS ARE HAPPILY AFFLICTED FOR LIFE. IN THIS NORTH CAROLINA TOWN, VIRTUALLY EVERYONE IS SEEKING A WILDERNESS FIX. AND NO ONE GOES HOME DISAPPOINTED. IN FACT, YOU MAY NOT GO HOME AT ALL.





BY DAN KOEPEL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX DI SUVERO

Syndrome?

+9

77 HAINES, AK
78 PORTLAND, ME
78 CARBONDALE, CO

79 NEVADA CITY, CA
80 ASHLAND, OR
80 SANDPOINT, ID

81 ROSSLAND, BC
82 WOODSTOCK, VT
82 BELLINGHAM, WA

More Tempting Towns



TEMPTING TOWNS

The mountain bikers rode past the rock climbers approaching the kayakers who waved to the hunters. The riders turned off the dirt road, heading toward a distant waterfall. The climbers reached the top of Snake's Den; in the distance, Mount Mitchell, the highest point east of the Mississippi, poked through the Great Smoky Mountains haze.

A new Volkswagen Beetle, license plate reading EXTREME, a kayak rack hugging the roof, was tucked alongside the trailhead below. Around the first switchback, six men stood by what looked like a miniature television antenna; the back of their truck was loaded with cages.

"Hunting season," local Stuart Cowles explained, lacing his hiking boots. Two months a year, you can go out for bear near Asheville,

North Carolina. The dogs wear radio collars. Cowles gathered his gear and stuffed it into a duffel; he'd been climbing all morning and was thinking about a bike ride after lunch. A chorus of yelping rose in the distance. "There's a lot going on," Cowles told me. "But people pretty much respect each other's activities. Even if they don't totally understand them."

I spent a fall week in Asheville and was surprised—over and over—to find out how right Cowles was: so much to do, so many kinds of people doing it. The town of 70,000, tucked into North Carolina's western hills, has such a broad adventure menu—and such a reasonable cost of living—that it is rapidly becoming known for migration as well as vacation. After visiting with bikers and paddlers, climbers and trail runners, hunters, evangelists, hippies, and one warlock, I, too, was tempted, and in spite of what seemed to me to be the town's most popular bumper sticker ("Don't Move Here"), I tucked a few real estate brochures into my luggage.

Doing so made me think about what is perhaps Asheville's second most popular decal: "Regime Change Begins at Home." To me, the phrase isn't political—it's personal, the kind of transformation anyone struggling to squeeze a little sunlight into a metropolitan existence might find attractive. Visiting Asheville doesn't mean you'll decide to live there—but the notion will cross your mind.

THE FIRST CLUE TO ASHEVILLE'S TRUE nature is Highway 25, the main route through town. It contains the usual assortment of supermarkets and fast-food palaces, but the thoroughfare's most prominent commercial denizens are those offering services to the bruised: chiropractors, massage therapists, orthopedists, specialists in pain management, medical imaging, foot and knee problems.

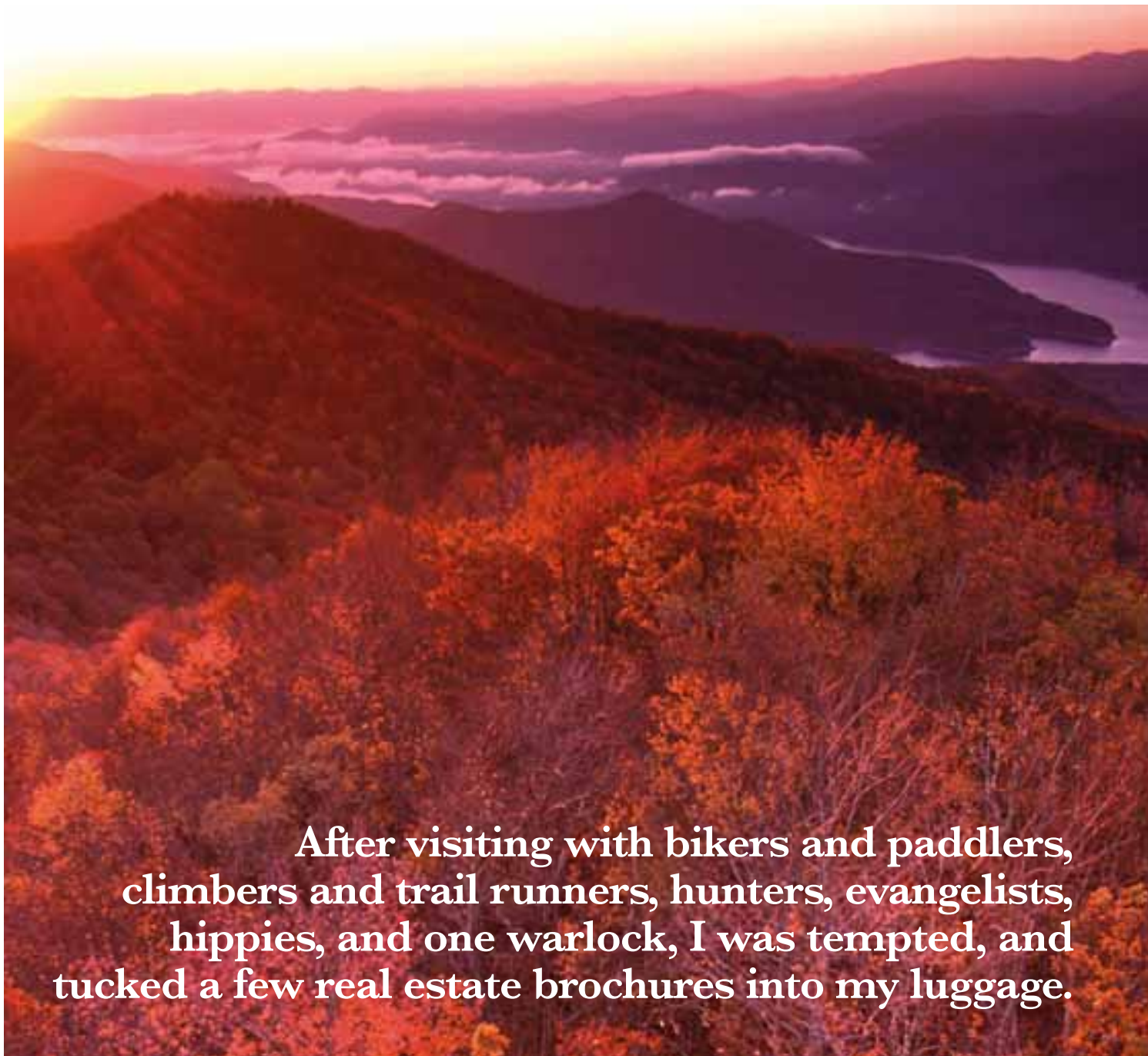
Pain and ruggedness have always been Asheville requirements. The town's original European settlers crossed mountains and fast-running rivers to a place so remote that some inhabitants fancied it a sovereign state, which they dubbed the "State of Buncombe." Many of Asheville's early outdoor elite were backwoodsmen skilled enough to make the trip frequently, crossing wilderness to guide visitors to the outpost. These hardy folk still exist in Asheville; you'll find them on the trails, in the gear shops, and getting repaired by one of Highway 25's healing enterprises.

You don't so much play *in* Asheville as *around* it. In three sports—climbing, paddling, and mountain biking—the area contains spots that are brand-name legendary: Looking Glass Rock, in the Pisgah National Forest; the Tsali bike trails, an hour out of town in the Nantahala National Forest; and the rivers—the French Broad, Nantahala, and Green—that have made the place the Southeast's white-water capital. Locals often compare their town to Boulder; the vibe is similar, but there's a key difference: Boulder is a college town, which gives it a built-in economic and cultural anchor. Figuring out how to get by in Asheville is harder. The result is a secret identity for nearly everyone: The guy behind the counter in the bagel shop is a hard-core kayaker; as he lays sprouts onto my tuna sandwich, he invites me to a huge white-water race. At the Biltmore Estate cultural center just outside of town, a bellhop introduces himself as a mountain biker, also offering an invite: "We're going to bomb some runs tomorrow," he says. Jessica Tomasin, former manager of the local climbing gym, fits the profile of a buff and committed wall-crawler. In many parts of the country, that would mean an itinerant existence, chasing the seasons unencumbered. But Tomasin just bought her first house: "This is one of the few



ASHEVILLE SKYLINE: Welcome to the adventurer's metropolis (below). Clockwise from above: Sunrise in the Smokies; packed up for the Green River race; climbing on Looking Glass Rock.





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TEMPTING TOWNS

places where I can do what I love and still feel like I have a real life.”

Asheville's action-obsessed pursue their passions with varying levels of fiscal success. At “level one,” Stuart Cowles explains, “you earn enough to pay for a car that runs and to support a single sport.” One notch up, you find a job in your chosen sport; this gets you employee discounts and more time in the field. From there, you can contemplate level three, where you actually open a business that establishes you in the community. (An additional level was implied by one resident who described himself, due to entrepreneurial pressures, as a “lapsed kayaker”).

OF COURSE, NOT EVERYONE WHO LIVES

in Asheville has built their career around an outdoor obsession. I met Chuck Cloninger, 48, an attorney who religiously paddles the French Broad with six friends after work every Wednesday. I was introduced to Eddie Dewey, 31, a Realtor, bluegrass picker, and mountain biker. James Nichols, 41, works as a CAT scan technician; on the weekends he builds Frisbee-golf courses. Chuck Pickering also fits the bill. For the past 15 years he's worked as an executive vice president at the Biltmore Estate—the Vanderbilt family has owned the sprawling, wooded spread here for more than a century—and he spends most of his days involved in the buttoned-down operations of the estate's businesses, which range from growing grapes to raising horses.

But as Pickering drives me around the 8,000-acre property, all he can talk about is the ways he plays: There's a competitive trail running event that he finished just inside the official time limit last year; there are the more than 75 miles of dirt roads on the Biltmore grounds; and there's lazy floating on the French Broad, which cuts through the Biltmore property. Pickering isn't a serious outdoor athlete, and his day job isn't a shorthand way of getting more time to play. Rather, he came here and then was stricken with the community's fervor. “You can't help it,” he says. “In other places, people go to the mall or stay in and watch television. Asheville would never allow me to live like that, even if I wanted to.”

ALL OF ASHEVILLE'S IDENTITIES SEEMED

present as we pedaled along fallen leaves into the Pisgah National Forest. Our group was climbing steadily along a rocky path, moving



SMOKIES SPIRIT: Hiking in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (above). Clockwise from right: The renowned Nanahala Outdoor Center sits beside its namesake river; the daily commute, Asheville style; wrapping up a workday lunch break outside town.

through shade and light. The ride had come together in typical Asheville style: spontaneously, 30 minutes late, and with a cast of characters that seemed to change right up until we saddled up. Two riders—Tim Bateman and Dan Bennett—worked in competing local bike shops. I'd found Ben Hinker by a bonfire the night before. (His girlfriend was a no-show; she'd taken a helmet-cracking header the previous day and was on a self-imposed breather, at least, she explained, “until I stop seeing double.”) I'd met Matt Moses earlier, at a local sports shop; he was just starting an outdoor tour and travel business and had volunteered to show me around.

Asheville-style riding matches the terrain. We'd climb tiny, steep slopes, then swoop through their corresponding descents: bursts of intense effort followed by easy gliding. Bateman—shadowed by his dog, Cotton—had spent the past decade as a mountain bike privateer, roaming the hills, racing, working in shops, leading mountain bike tours. His chosen Asheville survival technique was to pare down: He lived in the woods outside of town, spending his nights in his car. With winter coming, he was searching for warmer quarters. His chosen bike was a single-speed—fewer parts to break (and replace). “I've got pretty much everything I need,” he told me, glancing at his dog, then his bike.



ADVENTURE GUIDE

Asheville, North Carolina

GETTING THERE: By car, Asheville is one and a half hours from Charlotte, two hours from Knoxville, Tennessee, three and a half hours from Atlanta, and an hour and a half from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Delta, Continental, and U.S. Airways fly into Asheville Regional Airport, 20 minutes outside of town, where you can rent a car.

CLIMBING: Looking Glass Rock's granite dome is legendary, but don't underestimate its difficulty. Slopey holds and hard-to-protect face slabs make popular routes like the 5.8 Nose more challenging than they might look at first glance. The guides at Climbmax, Stuart Cowles's gym, will introduce you to the local crags on a day of privately guided climbing (\$175 and up per person; 828-252-9996; www.climbmaxnc.com). To develop your lead-climbing skills, ask them to belay as you scale 5.6 Short Man's Sorrow at Looking Glass.

BIKING: Tsali trails, Bent Creek, DuPont State Forest — no sooner has one Asheville hot spot earned national name recognition than another local singletrack haven pops up on the fat-tire map. Touring company Bio-Wheels guides four-day Mountain Bike Mecca trips that sample the area's offerings, riding hard by day and

resting easy by night (\$950; 888-881-2453; www.biowheels.com). They'll also rent top-notch mountain and road bikes (\$35 a day) and guide clients on full-day custom tours.

PADDLING: In town, Diamond Brand Outdoors will equip independent paddlers for the French Broad River (\$35; 828-251-4668; www.diamondbrand.com). The Nantahala Outdoor Center offers two, four-, and six-day courses that will teach you the skills you need to plunge headlong into the local kayaking scene (from \$380; 800-232-7238; www.noc.com). Or, try a no-skills-required afternoon float down the Nantahala River's Class II and III rapids (\$40). You'll drift through a dramatic granite gorge and marvel at the colorful, rhododendron-lined banks.

LODGING: Treat yourself like a Vanderbilt at the four-star Inn on Biltmore Estate. Talk about all-inclusive — this place boasts an off-road driving school *and* chocolates on your pillow (\$229 and up; 800-624-1575; www.biltmore.com). Closer to town, the Sweet Biscuit Inn is a cozy B&B on a tree-lined street (\$105 and up; 866-280-0170; www.sweetbiscuitinn.com). The Lake

Powhatan Campground is 15 minutes away (\$15; 828-670-5627; www.reserveusa.com).

DINING: With sushi, Cuban fare, and even a bellydancer-equipped Moroccan restaurant, Asheville has the urbane taste buds of a major metropolis. For classic Southern cooking with an haute twist, try Tupelo Honey Café (www.tupelohoneycafe.com), where the shrimp and grits is served with goat cheese and roasted red peppers. Local mountain bikers gather for heaping bowls of rice noodles at Doc Chey's Noodle House (www.doccheysnoodlehouse.com). The Celtic Jack of the Wood pub's locally brewed Green Man Porter will be enough to lure you from the outdoor climbing wall across the street (www.jackofthewood.com).

RESOURCES: For more information and travel tips, visit www.exploreasheville.com. National Geographic Trails Illustrated publishes maps to the Pisgah Ranger District and the Nantahala Gorge (\$10; www.nationalgeographic.com/trails). For an amusing take on Asheville sites, check out *The Underground Asheville Guidebook* by Tom Kerr and Gail Forsyth-Kerr (Whisper Press, \$16).



Even with one gear, Bateman is a stellar rider, with the technical skills needed to navigate the wet, root-covered trails of North Carolina's western mountains. Hinker, 33, a freelance sales rep for outdoor gear companies who moved to Asheville from Charlotte five years ago, was able to keep up, as was Bennett, the other bike shop employee, whose tightly trained athletic demeanor stood in contrast to Bateman's ride-like-hell style. But we stuck together, stopping for scenery without complaint or pressure to move on. It was still morning, and the vantage points were especially pretty—expanses of green poking

through fast-moving mists. "Enjoying the view," Bateman said, "is the most important skill you can have." I caught my breath, stared in amazement, and then descended through tunnels of rhododendron.

"YOU'RE GOING TO SEE PAGAN RITUALS," Hinker said. It was Halloween night. Having arrived just a day earlier, I had the chance neither to develop an Asheville alias nor even to pick up anything to hide my identity for the evening's festivities. My best attempts netted only a set of plastic "hillbilly fangs"—Dracula in overalls—at a local convenience store. After a dinner that seemed sufficiently local (barbecued tofu washed down by Pabst Blue Ribbon), I joined some revelers for a walk through town; one of my companions was dressed as a wizard, another as a Jedi knight, and another as Scooby Doo. I had a hard time telling them apart. As we neared Pritchard Park at the center of town, we heard music: A dozen people—men with long beards, women wearing headcloths—were strumming guitars and singing hymns.

Asheville is still the Deep South, and that doesn't just mean bear hunters and PBR. One of Reverend Billy Graham's com-

pounds is on the outskirts of town. The singers were singing as hard and loud as they could. The tallest one handed me a packet of tracts and explained that his group, We Still Pray, was trying to counteract the town's transformation into an infidel beachhead in the Bible Belt. The year before, he told me, a rally at the local stadium attracted more than 10,000 people, gridlocking the highways around town. ("Just like at Woodstock," he said, as if vengeance were his.) The aim, he said, was cleansing the community of devilry. A counter-rally held by the Appalachian Pagan Alliance was nowhere near as well attended.

"And tonight?" I asked. "Is this a protest against Halloween?"

"It's not just about one night," he said. "It's about souls."

He picked up his guitar and began to sing. A few passersby stopped. The faithful chorus appeared besieged—they were thousands short of their traffic-jamming record—but they carried on with intense focus, like Tim Bateman on the trail, or the folks climbing Looking Glass. Live in the woods? Try and save Asheville from trick or treat. That's hard-core.

TEMPTING TOWNS

ON MY LAST VISIT TO NORTH CAROLINA, a decade ago, I'd taken in two of the state's most popular recreational activities: a Winston Cup race and a "professional" wrestling match (20 guys trying to eject each other from a steel cage). I was amazed both times at the intensity of spectatorship; watching and doing, if not identical, seemed organically linked. With that in mind, I accompanied Matt Moses to check out the Green River kayak race I'd learned about at the bagel shop a few days earlier.

Like many area rivers, the Green is dammed. Even in fall, when natural rivers run dry, dam-controlled flows keep the Green open for business. (Asheville's most peculiar lingo: "The river is turned on.") The Green's thunderous rapids make it expert-only, but Moses promised a mini-adventure just getting to the event. To reach the river, we'd hike a mile into the woods, then rope down a 200-yard slope. At best, I thought, such an event might attract 30 or 40 people. Nope. The line of parked cars stretched a mile in either direction. A throng of spectators was crowded at the trailhead, waiting to hop a tiny brook before disappearing into the brush. There were senior citizens and golden retrievers, kids carrying skateboards, and dads toting babies in high-end backpacks. When we reached the embankment, it was exactly as described: steep, with a banister of static line snaking downward. I heard water flowing and saw sunlight reflecting off oversized boulders below. But mostly I saw people—so many that the rope looked like a grapevine. Some navigated deftly, others stumbled, but everyone was game. We waited our turn behind a pair of elderly women.

"This is crazy," one of them said.

"We're crazy," the other replied, glancing at me. "We're crazy, but we have fun."

They sized me up.

"You look like you can handle this rope," the first one said. "And if you can, we can."

The line bottomed out just a few yards from the Gorilla—a legendary 18-foot rapid that thunders violently as the Green squeezes through a granite-strewn gorge. The boulders along the riverbank were acting as skyboxes, packed with spectators drinking beers, aiming video cameras, and waiting as each racer appeared upriver. Then—with competitor and viewer locked in anticipation—the racers dropped into



An old pump at the Mellow Mushroom restaurant

the chutes. *Splash! Bam! Splash!* When one paddler lost control of her boat and ended up wedged between rocks, the crowd surged, watching as she struggled to stay afloat while a rescuer made his way along a hastily strung line. This was NASCAR for shredders.

A few minutes later, as I was chatting with a woman who'd come to hand out flyers advertising her new day spa, another contestant pushed through, hitting the first drop perfectly but angling hard on the final one. Boat and paddler plunged beneath the surface, then popped up, with the kayaker cursing. He'd shattered the fiberglass nose of his craft. He pulled the broken boat out of the water just next to us and stood up, still swearing, breathing hard. Then he reached inside his dry suit and pulled out a pack of Winstons.

He saw me and grinned, offering me a smoke.

"He's sponsored," Moses told me, as I passed on the paddler's North Carolina hospitality. "He's lucky, because kayaks are expensive."

Most of Asheville's outdoor types have to figure things out on the fly. My day spa friend admitted that she didn't quite have full control over her business—a hotel was subsidizing it, offering her facilities, and business was still slow. "You really have to keep remembering why you're here," she said. "To do the things you love—and keep doing them." Moses was booking lots of ski trips for church groups.

I have a friend in Los Angeles, Amy Colyar, who lived in Asheville in her early 20s but ended up leaving because she wanted a more

substantial career. "At some point," Amy, now 32, told me, "you realize that struggling to get your outdoor time in isn't much fun. And you want to interact with a broader range of people." I've lived in Los Angeles for more than a decade, and with my job—freelance writer—I could move just about anywhere I want; Asheville has long been on my shortlist. But I understand what Amy's talking about: Asheville is balanced precisely in the middle between smaller, pure-destination spots (like Moab or Crested Butte—places where city folk might find little to do outside of playing and little ability to advance an already established career) and outdoor-oriented cities like Portland or Boulder. My week in Asheville was an absolute blast, and arguing with myself over the possibility of making the place home was a good part of the fun.

That restlessness is reflected in the city itself. At first, I thought it was simply anxiety over making a living, over how to build a functional life in which play lives alongside work. But as the crowd filed up the embankment at the end of the race, I decided my first impression was wrong. The climb up was even harder than the descent. The trail was worn, with little traction. But if you wanted to be part of the event—of this community—you had no choice. You had to do it the hard way. Making a living can be tough, and it can generate worries, but I think what Asheville fears most is that the hard way—the way of the chain-smoking Johnny Reb paddlers, the hunters and climbers, the pious and the pagan, and the heat generated by their mixing—might vanish, overwhelmed as newcomers make the town one kind of place, instead of many kinds of places. "Don't move here" doesn't mean don't visit. It doesn't mean don't stay. It means don't upset Asheville's delicate equilibrium. As Cowles told me: "Don't try to change Asheville—instead, let it change you."

TO SEE PHOTOGRAPHER ALEX DI SUVERO'S OUTTAKES FROM HIS ASHEVILLE TRIP, VISIT www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure.

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