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Visiting West Virginia

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Introduction

West Virginia, aptly nicknamed the "Mountain State," beckons travelers with its rugged beauty, rich history, vibrant Appalachian culture, and abundant opportunities for outdoor adventure. Nestled entirely within the Appalachian Mountain system, it offers a stunning landscape dominated by forested hills, deep river gorges, and rolling highlands. This captivating scenery serves as the perfect backdrop for a memorable journey into the heart of one of America's most impressively wild and geographically diverse states.

This guide, 'Visiting West Virginia: A Guide for Tourists,' aims to be your comprehensive companion as you plan each step of your adventure to this less-traveled but richly rewarding destination. Our focus goes beyond generic travel advice, delving deeply into the unique aspects and offerings that make West Virginia an exceptional place to explore. Whether you're an adrenaline junkie seeking the thrill of outdoor adventures or a history buff captivated by rich tales of the past, this book will ensure you have the insights needed for an enriching experience.

West Virginia is more than a destination; it's a cultural tapestry woven from tales of early pioneers, coal miners, and resilient communities whose stories resonate through its landscapes and traditions. From the enchanting calls of bluegrass music echoing through mountain hollows to the vibrant local arts scenes and Appalachian gastronomy, the spirit of West Virginia awaits every traveler willing to explore.

Accessing the wonders of West Virginia is only the beginning. Steep hills and winding roads lead to hidden delights: scenic drives with panoramic vistas, corridor hikes to awe-inspiring views, and the quiet beauty of a starlit night in the mountains. With comprehensive guidance on the best means of travel, accommodations to suit every preference, and practical advice for navigating the Appalachian terrain, you'll be equipped to experience the state's splendor to its fullest.

Moreover, each season unveils a different facet of the Mountain State. From spring's wildflower blooms and summer's lush greenery to the vibrant hues of autumn and winter's tranquil snowscapes, West Virginia promises a unique adventure regardless of when you visit. This guide helps you find the perfect match between your interests and the state's seasonal offerings, ensuring every visit feels fresh and exciting.

Prepare to be enchanted by the wild and wonderful spirit of West Virginia. This book invites you to traverse its diverse landscapes, immerse yourself in its rich heritage, and discover why this often-overlooked state holds a special place in the hearts of those who call it home—and those who venture to explore its depths. Welcome to an

unforgettable journey through the mountains and valleys of West Virginia.

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CHAPTER ONE: Getting to West Virginia: Accessing the Mountains

West Virginia, the Mountain State, lives up to its name in every sense. Its beauty lies in its rugged, undulating terrain, but that same terrain shapes how visitors arrive and navigate within its borders. While reaching West Virginia is certainly achievable, understanding the transportation landscape is the first crucial step in planning your adventure. Unlike regions dominated by sprawling flatlands and grid-like road systems, accessing many of West Virginia's gems involves traversing mountains and valleys, often on roads that demand attention and reward with stunning vistas. This chapter guides you through the primary ways to enter the state, offering insights specific to navigating this unique Appalachian landscape.

The overwhelming advice for anyone planning extensive exploration of West Virginia is to have access to a personal vehicle. While you can certainly arrive by plane, train, or bus, the state's attractions – its parks, historical sites, charming small towns, and trailheads – are dispersed. Public transportation options diminish rapidly outside of the main population centers, making independent travel by car the most practical and flexible way to experience the true breadth of what West Virginia offers. Consider your arrival method as the first leg of the journey, with subsequent exploration likely dependent on four wheels.

Flying directly into West Virginia means utilizing one of its regional airports. These gateways offer convenient access to different parts of the state, though they typically handle fewer flights than major metropolitan hubs. In the state capital, Yeager Airport (CRW) in Charleston serves the Metro Valley and provides a central starting point. Heading north, Morgantown Municipal Airport (MGW) caters to the region surrounding West Virginia University and Mountaineer Country. Near Huntington and the western border, Tri-State Airport (HTS) is another option. North Central West Virginia Airport (CKB), near Clarksburg and Bridgeport, serves that corridor, while Greenbrier Valley Airport (LWB) near Lewisburg is particularly convenient for those visiting the luxurious Greenbrier resort or heading into the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve region.

Choosing a regional West Virginia airport offers the distinct advantage of landing directly within the state, often amidst the rolling hills that characterize the landscape. These smaller airports typically mean quicker transit through security and baggage claim compared to massive international terminals. However, passengers should anticipate potentially fewer direct flight options, often requiring connections through larger hubs like Charlotte, Washington D.C., or Chicago. Available carriers and routes

can fluctuate, so booking well in advance is advisable. Rental car facilities are available at these airports, but again, reservation is key, especially during peak seasons, as fleets may be smaller than those at major hubs.

For many travelers, particularly those coming from further afield or seeking more competitive fares and direct flight options, utilizing larger airports in neighboring states is a popular and practical strategy. Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) to the north is a common choice, offering a relatively straightforward drive south into West Virginia, particularly towards Morgantown and the northern tier of the state via Interstate 79. The drive from PIT typically takes around an hour and a half to reach Morgantown, opening up Mountaineer Country and beyond.

To the east, the Washington D.C. area airports, Washington Dulles International (IAD) and Reagan National (DCA), serve as major gateways. From Dulles, travelers can head west, reaching the Eastern Panhandle towns like Harpers Ferry or Shepherdstown in under two hours, depending on traffic. Continuing deeper into the state towards the Potomac Highlands or central West Virginia is also feasible from these airports, though the drives become longer, often involving scenic but potentially slower routes after exiting the interstate system near the state line. Drives from the D.C. area offer a transition from metropolitan sprawl to the rolling hills and eventual mountains of the Appalachian range.

South of West Virginia, Charlotte Douglas International Airport (CLT) in North Carolina is another significant hub used by visitors. The drive north from Charlotte typically involves Interstate 77, entering West Virginia near Princeton and Beckley. This route provides excellent access to the southern coalfields, the New River Gorge region, Winterplace Ski Resort, and points northward towards Charleston. Depending on the final destination, the drive from CLT into southern West Virginia might take around three to four hours, traversing parts of Virginia before crossing into the Mountain State.

Opting for an out-of-state airport necessitates factoring in driving time and the cost of a rental car. However, the potential savings on airfare and the wider availability of flights often outweigh the inconvenience of the drive for many visitors. These drives themselves can be an enjoyable part of the experience, offering a gradual immersion into the Appalachian landscape. Ensure your rental car agreement allows for out-of-state travel, although this is rarely an issue for contiguous states. Remember to account for potential urban traffic delays near the departure airport before enjoying the more open roads leading towards West Virginia.

Driving your own vehicle or a rental car into West Virginia unveils a network of Interstate highways that form the primary transportation arteries. Interstate 64 (I-64) cuts across the southern part of the state on an east-west axis. Coming from Virginia to the east, it passes through White Sulphur Springs and Lewisburg, climbs onto the

plateau near Beckley (where it merges for a stretch with I-77), descends towards Charleston, and continues west through Huntington towards Kentucky. This route is crucial for accessing the New River Gorge area and connecting the southern tier's main cities.

Running predominantly north-south is Interstate 77 (I-77). Entering from Virginia near Bluefield, it climbs northward, intersecting I-64 near Beckley. This combined stretch, known as the West Virginia Turnpike, requires tolls. North of Beckley, I-77 continues to Charleston, where it splits from I-64, heading north through Parkersburg and crossing into Ohio. This interstate provides vital access to the capital city and connects the southern and mid-Ohio Valley regions. Be prepared for significant elevation changes and mountainous terrain, particularly on the Turnpike section between Princeton and Charleston.

Interstate 79 (I-79) is the main north-south corridor through the central and northern parts of West Virginia. Starting in Charleston (where it meets I-77 and I-64), it runs north through Clendenin, Weston, Clarksburg, and Fairmont before reaching Morgantown and continuing into Pennsylvania towards Pittsburgh. I-79 is essential for reaching Mountaineer Country and provides access points for exploring the central Appalachian region. While generally a modern highway, it still features curves and grades typical of mountain construction.

Two other Interstates play important roles in specific regions. Interstate 81 (I-81), a major north-south route along the eastern seaboard, briefly clips the northern tip of West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle near Martinsburg. This provides easy access to this historic region from points north and south along the I-81 corridor. Further north, Interstate 68 (I-68) enters West Virginia from Maryland, connecting Morgantown eastward towards Cumberland, Maryland. It offers a high-speed route across the northern tier, linking I-79 with I-81 via other highways in Maryland and Pennsylvania.

While the Interstates offer the fastest way to cover long distances, much of West Virginia's charm lies off these main highways. A vast network of U.S. Highways and State Routes winds through the mountains, connecting smaller towns, state parks, and scenic areas. Routes like US-219 traverse north-south through the eastern mountains, offering passage through areas like the Monongahela National Forest. US-50 runs east-west across the northern half of the state, passing through historic towns and diverse landscapes. State routes, often designated by numbers like WV-39 or WV-150 (the Highland Scenic Highway), frequently follow river valleys or ridge lines.

Driving these secondary roads requires a different mindset than interstate travel. Expect lower speed limits, sharp curves, steep grades, and occasional switchbacks. Travel times will invariably be longer than GPS predictions based purely on mileage might suggest. Allow ample time, enjoy the scenery, and be prepared to share the road with local traffic, trucks (including logging and coal trucks in certain areas), and

potentially wildlife. Pull over at designated overlooks to safely admire the views rather than trying to do so while navigating a challenging curve.

Mountain driving in West Virginia presents unique conditions throughout the year. In winter (roughly November through March, though sometimes earlier or later at high elevations), snow and ice are significant concerns, especially on less-traveled state routes and within mountainous areas like the Potomac Highlands or the regions around Snowshoe Mountain. Even major interstates can experience temporary closures or hazardous conditions. Always check weather forecasts and road conditions (available through the West Virginia 511 system) before setting out. Ensure your vehicle has good tires, and consider carrying an emergency kit with blankets, water, snacks, and a flashlight.

Fog is another common phenomenon, particularly in river valleys and higher elevations, often occurring in the mornings or during damp weather. It can reduce visibility dramatically, requiring significantly reduced speeds and heightened awareness. Wildlife, especially deer, can be a hazard year-round, particularly at dawn, dusk, and during the night. Bears are also present but are less commonly involved in vehicle collisions. Always scan the roadsides, especially in forested areas.

Furthermore, services like gas stations and restaurants can be infrequent along some stretches of state routes and even certain parts of the Interstates away from major interchanges. It's wise to keep your fuel tank reasonably full, especially if venturing into more remote areas like the Monongahela National Forest or the southern coalfields. Cell phone service is notoriously spotty, and often completely absent, in many mountainous and rural parts of West Virginia. Do not rely solely on electronic navigation; carry physical maps as a backup and download offline maps to your device before entering areas known for poor connectivity. Inform someone of your intended route and estimated arrival time if heading deep into the backcountry.

For those seeking a more relaxed, albeit less flexible, mode of arrival, Amtrak's *Cardinal* route offers a unique perspective on southern West Virginia. This passenger train runs three times a week between New York City and Chicago, cutting scenically through the New River Gorge and the Kanawha Valley. Westbound trains typically pass through during daylight hours, offering passengers dramatic views of the mountains and the New River itself. Eastbound journeys often traverse the state overnight or in the early morning.

The *Cardinal* stops at several West Virginia towns, providing access points along its southern corridor. These include White Sulphur Springs, convenient for The Greenbrier resort; Alderson, a small historic town; Hinton, a former railroad hub at the confluence of the New and Green Rivers; Prince, a tiny station offering access near Beckley and the heart of the New River Gorge (though requiring pre-arranged onward transport); Montgomery, near WVU Tech; the state capital, Charleston; and finally, Huntington,

before crossing into Kentucky.

Traveling by train offers a chance to unwind and enjoy the landscape without the stress of driving mountain roads. The views, particularly through the New River Gorge section between Hinton and Montgomery, are often spectacular and inaccessible by car. However, the limited schedule (only operating three days a week in each direction) requires careful planning. Furthermore, upon arrival at a station, you will likely need to arrange for a rental car (which may require delivery to smaller stations or pickup in a larger nearby town), a taxi, or a pre-booked shuttle service to reach your final destination, as stations are often not located directly within main tourist centers or near recreational trailheads. Booking Amtrak tickets well in advance is highly recommended, especially for sleeper accommodations or during peak travel seasons.

Bus travel provides another alternative, primarily serving the state's larger towns and cities and connecting them to the national network. Greyhound Lines is the principal carrier, with routes generally following the major interstate corridors. You can expect bus stations or designated stops in cities like Charleston, Huntington, Beckley, Bluefield, Morgantown, Clarksburg, Parkersburg, Wheeling, and Martinsburg. Regional bus lines might offer additional, more localized services in certain areas.

Bus travel represents the most economical option for interstate travel to West Virginia. It eliminates the need to drive long distances yourself and can be a viable choice if your destination is one of the main cities served. However, like the train, reaching destinations beyond the immediate vicinity of the bus station will require further transportation. The frequency of bus services can vary depending on the route, and travel times can be longer than driving due to multiple stops. For accessing remote state parks, trail systems, or smaller rural communities, bus travel is generally not a practical primary option unless combined with other forms of transport upon arrival.

Regardless of how you initially arrive - whether landing at a regional airport, driving across the state line, stepping off the Amtrak *Cardinal*, or disembarking from a bus - the theme of needing personal transportation for in-depth exploration remains constant. Ride-sharing services like Uber and Lyft have a presence in larger cities such as Charleston, Morgantown, and Huntington, but their availability diminishes rapidly outside these urban cores and is virtually non-existent in most rural and recreational areas. Taxis may be available in larger towns but can be expensive for longer distances and might need to be booked in advance.

Therefore, planning your transportation *within* West Virginia is just as critical as planning how you will get *to* West Virginia. If flying in, securing a rental car reservation is paramount. If arriving by train or bus with plans to explore beyond the immediate station area, arranging a rental car pickup or coordinating with local shuttle services is essential. Even if driving your own vehicle, ensure it is in good repair, particularly the

brakes and tires, before tackling steep mountain grades and winding back roads.

Understanding the scale and nature of West Virginia's road network is key. A fifty-mile journey on a winding state route through the mountains can easily take twice as long as covering the same distance on an Interstate. Embrace the journey itself; the drives are often a significant part of the West Virginia experience, offering constant scenic rewards. Check your routes beforehand, have backup maps, allow generous travel times, and be prepared for the occasional adventure that comes with navigating the beautiful, challenging, and rewarding transportation landscape of the Mountain State. Accessing West Virginia is the first step; exploring it thoroughly requires readiness for the road ahead.

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