



**S**haron Jablonski grew up in Morganton. She remembers the city of her youth as a hub of furniture and textile manufacturing—a place where decent jobs were plentiful and nobody thought much about tourism. But these days, tourism is very much on the minds of locals. And Jablonski, as Main Street director, no longer points travelers northward to the towns of Linville, Banner Elk and Boone. Instead, she proudly extols the resurgence of this comfortable foothills city of 17,000 residents. Morganton's downtown has adopted the theme "Simply Charming," and everywhere you look there are new stores, businesses and restaurants. "In the last few years, we've made great strides in our downtown," says Jablonski. "Folks come from all over and tell us how surprised they are with the renaissance."

Local leaders have pushed public-private partnerships which are paying dividends. For example, city hall relocated to a restored hosiery mill and now includes an art gallery and rental apartments. There's a modern, eight-screen movie theater downtown that was developed with public and private funds, and the downtown association secured a state grant of a quarter million dollars last summer to attract new businesses and upgrade existing ones. In fact, nearly 20 vacant storefronts have been filled in the last year. All this makes Morganton a worthy destination. It's a place of hidden shopping gems, unique restaurants, outdoor adventure and an up-and-coming wine industry. So grab the girls and head for Burke County.

A good starting point is the retail gallery, Kala. The editors of *Niche* magazine were so impressed they named Kala the "Best New Gallery in America" for 2011. Kala showcases a large collection of contemporary hand-crafted items, all made in the United States. It's a great place to buy one-of-kind items or pieces of artistic jewelry. Just down the street from Kala is another gallery, Mesh, which has a unique mission. Mesh is actually a web design company, but the owners decided to locate their offices in the back of a downtown business and create a storefront gallery of rotating art exhibits. The downtown area features many other cool shops and studios, providing plenty opportunity for retail therapy.

Of course, a good downtown requires good eats, and Morganton doesn't disappoint. The new Root & Vine restaurant has been swamped since opening in early summer, with an artsy vibe inside and an out-

door dining patio shaded by trees. Root & Vine's menu is far-reaching, with chef Brian Miller mixing French techniques with a Southern influence. Appetizers include roasted duck crepes and crab cake Napoleon, with entrees such as pan-seared mountain trout, curried red snapper and wood-grilled salmon. There are also plenty of vegetarian offers, and a fantastic wine list. Another can't-miss dining option is Yianni's. This restaurant opened several years ago and spearheaded the downtown resurgence. New this year – thanks to the state grant – is a second-story outdoor seating area called Yianni's Outback. Complete with bar, this elevated perch is a great spot to dine al fresco.

Every downtown needs a top-notch coffee shop. Morganton's offering is The Grind, which Jablonski ranks among the best in Western North Carolina. Located in a renovated brick building, The Grind offers flavors like "Tulip Bud Latte" and "Polar Bear Mocha," plus a great caramel macchiato. The lunch menu has tasty sandwiches and wraps, while upstairs is an intimate wine and tapas bar with live music. The Great Recession has revived bargain shopping, and the best bargains around can be found at Freeman's Salvage Merchandise. The name isn't all that appealing, but it's the regional hub for Birkenstocks and savvy shoppers routinely save 50% off closed-out items ranging from furniture to clothing to household items to shoes. "It's a real hidden treasure," Jablonski says.

Morganton also bills itself as "Nature's Playground," and offers an array of outdoor activities. Visitors can rent bikes and ride the four-mile Catawba River Greenway, which connects with Catawba Meadows Park. The park's highlight is Beanstalk Journey, a zipline canopy tour that resembles a life-sized Ewok village. Further outdoor adventure can be found at South Mountains State Park, a popular destination featuring hiking, waterfalls, natural swimming pools and more. Burke County even has a public beach. It's at Lake James State Park, which is near Lake James Cellars, one of four wineries in Burke County. That number will soon be five when Carolina Mist Winery relocates to downtown Morganton.

Over the years, Morganton hasn't been a place that immediately comes to mind when planning an excursion. But don't discount this area of Western North Carolina—it's emerging as a bona fide daytrip location.