

RALEIGH, N.C. (April 21, 2023) — As spring flows toward summer, Visit North Carolina rolls out [**Dream Big in Small Town NC**](#) in the state's Northeast Lakes & Rivers region, an area dotted with waterside gems, refreshing views and resonant history. Travelers can try their luck with [**sweepstakes prizes**](#) as they follow the Dream Big initiative's roadmap to under-the-radar destinations that will welcome a boost in visitation and interest in longer stays.

"Halifax, Henderson, Tarboro, Warrenton — these towns and others invite travelers to cozy up and connect," said Wit Tuttell, executive director of Visit North Carolina. "Their appeal is immediate as well as timeless with fresh vitality springing from the big dreams of hometown heroes and newly arrived visionaries. Now makes a perfect time for travelers to discover places worth knowing."

Dream Big in Small Town NC, created by the General Assembly as the Rural Tourism Recovery Pilot Program, targets 16 counties at risk for population loss as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative began with a focus on five Scenic Mountain counties and now continues in [**Edgecombe**](#), [**Halifax**](#), [**Vance**](#) and [**Warren**](#) counties, whose bodies of water include Kerr Lake, Lake Gaston, the Tar River and the Roanoke River. The final phase, beginning in June, will zero in on seven Inner Banks counties.

Easily reached from exits along Interstates 85 and 95, the Northeast Lakes & Rivers destinations combine distinctive culture with landmark history plus natural beauty and recreation. Start the getaway dream by entering the [**sweepstakes**](#) for a chance to win:

- A \$1,000 voucher from program partner [**Airbnb**](#).
- Three \$100 gift cards for a choice of restaurants, shops and activities including [**Gear and Beer**](#), [**On the Square**](#), [**Seven Springs Farm and Vineyard**](#) and [**Weldon Mills Distillery**](#).
- A \$500 gift card from Visit NC to assist with travel expenses.

For outdoor lovers, the rivers and lakes create ample reason to explore, Tuttell said. In Henderson, Kerr Lake and its 850 miles of shoreline have a dozen local access points, including eight in a [**state recreation area**](#) known for hiking and birding as well as water activities. At Lake Gaston, between Warrenton and Roanoke Rapids, adventure seekers can sign up for lessons from international wakeboarding champion Adam Fields' [**AF Wake**](#). Tarboro visitors can access the scenic [**Tar River Paddle Trail**](#), and distance paddlers can embark on the [**Roanoke River State Trail**](#) from Weldon. Stunning views of history and nature reward hikers and bikers at [**Medoc Mountain State Park**](#) and on the [**Roanoke Canal Museum & Trail**](#), which makes loaner bikes available.

"There's joy in these outdoor activities plus a sense of wonder from the historic moments since the time of the Tuscarora," Tuttell said. "In Halifax, North Carolina became the first colony to [**call for independence**](#) from Britain. Weldon was home to the [**world's longest railroad**](#), which played an outside role in Civil War history. The Roanoke Canal Trail includes stops on the [**National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom**](#). [**Princeville**](#) became one of the first towns in the country chartered by Black residents, and Warren County is recognized as the '[**birthplace of environmental justice**](#)' based on a 1982 protest."

If economic growth has favored urban areas in recent decades, the Lakes & Rivers towns have been fortified by a deep-rooted community spirit and sense of possibility. Ambitious locals who left have returned with big ideas for revitalizing and reinventing the places where they grew up. Homecoming enterprises include Tarboro's [**On the Square**](#) restaurant and [**Tarboro Brewing**](#), Halifax's [**Hen & the Hog**](#) and [**Halifax Studios**](#), and Littleton's [**Blue Jay Bistro**](#), [**Main Street Wines**](#) and [**Daphne's Coffee Shop**](#) plus the revitalized [**Lakeland Cultural Arts Center**](#). Near Norlina, [**Seven Springs Farm & Vineyard**](#) opened in 2020 to become a popular spot for music events and wine tastings.

“Big dreams have the power to capture the potential of special places and add new dimensions to their stories,” said Lori Medlin, president and CEO of the Halifax County Convention & Visitors Bureau. “We have seen this with newcomers and homegrown champions alike. They draw inspiration from the past and add their vision for the future to create a rare dynamic that benefits travelers as well as the community.”

Medlin cites a pair of entrepreneurs who were inspired to turn a former sleepwear factory in Weldon into a distillery. Almost immediately after opening in 2019, [Weldon Mills Distillery](#) gained national attention with its award-winning bourbons and other spirits. The founders of [Sylvan Heights Bird Park](#) in Scotland Neck arrived by way of Great Britain. And in nearby Vance County, downtown Henderson attracted an achiever who opened [The Eleanor on Belle](#) hotel and a shop called [Gear and Beer](#).

“Small towns are best explored at leisure,” Tuttell said. “Between the outdoors and the distinctive downtowns, there’s infinite opportunity to dream big in our Lakes & Rivers destinations.”

Today’s arrival of the Dream Big initiative in the Northeast Lakes & Rivers region includes the sweepstakes plus a satellite media tour at Weldon Mills Distillery. Representatives from national, regional and in-state outlets have been invited to join this virtual tour and Q&A session.

Dream Big comes with a two-facet approach to economic development: a tourism promotion to infuse revenue into local economies plus appeal to people interested in relocation. As a unit of the [Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina](#), Visit NC is coordinating Dream Big with the [N.C. Department of Commerce](#) and other private and public entities involved in growing the state’s first-in-talent workforce.

Funded with \$1.5 million from the American Rescue Plan Act, the initiative has a dedicated presence on [VisitNC.com](#), complete with links for job postings in the Scenic Mountains ([Graham](#), [Haywood](#), [Madison](#), [Mitchell](#) and [Yancey](#)) and Inner Banks ([Chowan](#), [Gates](#), [Hertford](#), [Martin](#), [Perquimans](#), [Tyrrell](#) and [Washington](#)) as well as the Northeast Lakes & Rivers. The Dream Big homepage also links to the Airbnb website with content to help travelers plan trips and find short-term rental properties in each region.

Beyond the exposure from the satellite media tour and sweepstakes, Dream Big will reach the traveling public via @VisitNC’s social media channels. A digital content creator campaign will bring selected tastemakers to the destinations to engage followers in the local culture and lifestyle appeal for people interested in a long-term change of scenery. Program partner Airbnb, which is also promoting the campaign on its social media channels, will use its inventory of short-term rental properties to host the content creators.

“Through our partnership with Visit North Carolina, we hope to inspire more travelers to discover the appeal of visiting the rural communities that make up the Northeast Lakes & Rivers region,” said Viviana Jordan, head of Southeast public policy for Airbnb. “From the lakes to the countryside, we want to invite travelers to take in the amazing view and explore all that this region has to offer — whether for a leisure trip or to consider making it their new home. Rural North Carolina is filled with opportunity for both guests and locals, and we’re proud to help showcase that. Locally, small businesses and hosts benefit from the increased tourism while, in turn, local tourism authorities benefit from the influx of important tax dollars that help promote their destinations. In 2022, the typical host in rural North Carolina earned over \$14,000 and collectively over \$370 million, more than a 350 percent increase compared to pre-pandemic travel in 2019.”

- For a quick look at enticements in Dream Big destinations, click [here](#).
- Find photos from Dream Big destinations [here](#).

About Visit North Carolina:

Visit North Carolina is part of the [Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina](#). Established in 2014, the EDPNC is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation that oversees the state's efforts in business and job recruitment and retention, international trade, and tourism, film and sports

development. The mission of Visit North Carolina is to unify and lead the state in developing North Carolina as a major destination for leisure travel, group tours, meetings and conventions, sports events and film production. For more information on North Carolina's destinations and travel assets, go to [VisitNC.com](https://www.visitnc.com).

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