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TEN MINUTES INTO HIS DIVE, DAVE SHAW STARTED TO LOOK FOR THE BOTTOM LUTER BLACKNESS PRESSED IN ON HIM FROM ALL SIDES... FROM VERISING THE DEDD?

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Blacksburg, Virginia

UPSHOT: *Appalachia gone wired*

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"TODAY IS WEIRD," REPORTS BOB SUMMERS, whose office overlooks an emerald landscape of hardwoods and rolling hills veiled in Blue Ridge mist. "I'm wearing shoes. But only because it's raining." At age 28, Summers is CEO and founder of nanoCom, a videophone software firm. In his flannel shirt and jeans he could pass for Science



Green acres at the Virginia Tech pond

Club treasurer, but by company standards he's a graybeard. The average age of his 17 employees is 22. Like Summers, most residents of this tranquil college town in southwest Virginia take pride in their digital savvy. Nine out of ten go online, and whiz-kid startups thrive like kudzu. (VTLS, for instance, which makes library software, grew out of Virginia Tech's neo-Gothic stone campus seven years ago and now employs 100 locally.)

Despite the high-tech influence, Blacksburg's setting in the New River Valley is as unpretentious as its inhabitants: an uncrowded ground zero for backpackers, boaters, climbers, and cyclists—with a cost of living sharply discounted from that of many towns so topographically blessed. Precious gift shops and nouveau delis have barely infiltrated Blacksburg's small, brick-faced downtown, where commerce sticks to the essentials: cheap eats, cheap drafts, and outdoor toys. But lest you think this is a Blue Ridge backwater, take note: The college pipes in enough non-Appalachian influence (don't be surprised to hear snippets of Chinese or German at the trailheads) to put the *Deliverance* jokes to rest.

PLAYGROUNDS: Local footpaths in the Jefferson National Forest are sublime—not surprising, given that Blacksburg is a mere 20 minutes from the Appalachian Trail. The two-mile hoof into the Cascades, with its 66-foot falls, is everyone's pet hike; other favorites include Tinker Cliffs and Dragon's Tooth. Mountain bikers head for Brush Mountain and Pandapas Pond, a hub where novice and Hail Mary singletracks intertwine; skinny-tire riders take on miles of empty country lanes a mere five minutes from their doorsteps. Best of all, perhaps, is the New River. On the closest stretches, armadas of students float the flatwater on inner tubes. Ninety minutes north and downstream, in West Virginia, the river has carved world-class

Population:
39,000 plus 25,000 students

Median Annual Household Income:
\$48,671

Median Home Price:
\$146,065

Climate:
Seasons stop just short of extremes but stay wet enough to keep things lush

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Class IV/V whitewater and climbing routes in the 800-foot-deep sandstone New River Gorge, also a major BASE-jumping site.

WORK: Although a cross-section of manufacturers remains—Volvo trucks, Corning—most prospects can be found in the Corporate Research Center, a campus of brick-and-glass warrens where about 100 tech firms employ 1,800. Or be one of 5,800 on the payroll of Virginia Tech.

NEST: Prices are creeping up. A 70-year-old Cape Cod or Tudor within earshot of roaring football fans at VT's Lane Stadium could easily fetch \$250,000 or more. Newer, four-bedroom ranch homes in the Ellett Valley, just minutes from Main Street but with views of the Blue Ridge, often list for under \$200,000.

NEIGHBORS: Local-born restaurateur with a degree in wildlife management; genetic-engineering grad student from India learning to kayak and clone sheep.

HOW TO GO NATIVE: Defy fashion smarts by wearing orange and maroon together (Tech's colors); pronounce it "App-a-LATCH-in"; for God's sake patent something. Now.

WATERING HOLES: The Cellar attracts a townie/student mix with Italian grub and beers unnumbered. Unleash your inner Walton at Baylee's—an eatery in a converted 1848 Presbyterian church—by dancing the Virginia reel on Old Time Jam nights.

THE PRICE OF PARADISE: The panoramic views become merely theoretical during the spring, when rain and fog hunker down for days.

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