



BLOWING ROCK

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

# Annual Report

Fiscal Year 2023-2024



# A Message From the Executive Director

Overall, fiscal year 2023-2024 was marked by strategic growth, meaningful community partnerships, and continued recognition as a premier mountain destination. Occupancy tax revenues saw continued growth, with an 8.14% increase year-over-year, resulting in total collections of \$1.87 million. This indicates visitor spending in excess of \$93.5 million. However, traffic and visitation growth has stabilized following the spike in post-COVID years. Recent surveys show that nearly half of tourism-related businesses experienced slightly lower sales than the previous year. In response to unique market challenges post-COVID, the TDA's marketing efforts continued to focus on promoting outdoor experiences and boosting shoulder season visitation to reduce the strain on residents during peak tourism periods. Significant investments were also made in tracking short-term rental trends through Airdna and enhancing insights into visitor behavior with a new partnership with Arrivalist.

A highlight of the year was the opening of the new upscale hotel, Embers, bringing fresh and modern inventory and a new restaurant to town. Blowing Rock also hosted several notable events over the last fiscal year, including the Porsche 356 Registry East Coast Holiday and the Mountains to Coast cycling event, both of which attracted visitors from across the country. The town received numerous accolades, including recognition as the "Best Mountain Town to Retire" by Southern Living, "Best Small Town in NC" by Southern Living, and other prestigious mentions by Outside Magazine, New York Travel Guides, Blue Ridge Outdoors Magazine, and Fishing Booker.

In line with its commitment to inclusivity, the TDA partnered with Black Folks Camp Too, with all staff members becoming Unity Blaze Certified. The town also strengthened its conservation and outdoor ethics through participation in the NC Trail Town Stewardship Program as one of only 15 inaugural towns in the state involved in Outdoor NC's initiative.

Market-wide, room rates have risen, reflecting sustained demand. Despite this growth, the perceived economic woes and the national election is expected to temporarily soften leisure travel demand until early 2025. The Blowing Rock TDA will continue to leverage positive experiences and partnerships to build the brand and tell the Blowing Rock story.



Tracy Brown  
Executive Director, Blowing Rock Tourism  
Development Authority

**Fiscal Year 2023-2024  
marked the highest  
gross revenue year on  
record. Blowing  
Rock remains a  
premier and highly  
sought-after  
destination.**

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# 2023-24 Highlights



## Local Tourism Highlights

- \* FY 2024 is highest gross revenue on record
- \* More than 16.7 million people visited the Parkway in 2023 (+6% over 2022) and over 500K vehicles were counted at the 321 exit in town.
- \* Overnight visitors to Blowing Rock spent an estimated \$93.5 million
- \* NC Trail Town Designation in 2024
- \* Unity Blaze Certified Destination
- \* Voted Best Small Town in NC by readers of Southern Living, plus a dozen additional accolades

## Broader Trends & Notables

- \* Travelers increasingly prioritizing sustainable practices, such as eco-friendly accommodations, support for local economies & cultures, and “local first” travel
- \* Wellness and Retreat Travel continues to grow, as well as Solo & Niche Travel
- \* Visitors are looking for authentic cultural experiences
- \* Destinations are focusing on creating inclusive experiences for travelers with disabilities, offering better accessibility in transportation, accommodations, and activities

Despite utility work and disruptions in the downtown district throughout the year, visitors were understanding and sympathetic to the nature of the work. Making these infrastructure improvements will enhance the ability to retain and attract businesses while providing essential services for years to come.



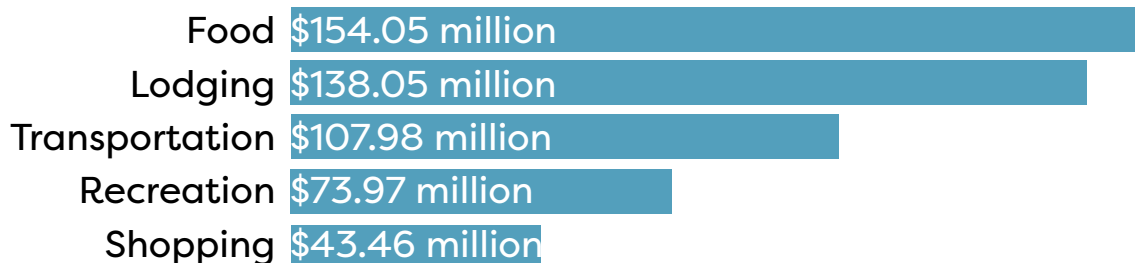
# Tourism helps drive our local economy!

## 2023 Tourism Economic Facts for Watauga County\*



Visitor spending leads to lower taxes for residents by offsetting the amount that would otherwise need to be collected.

### Record Visitor Spending in 2023 by Category\*



Visitor spending in Watauga County increased 3.2% from 2022 to 2023.

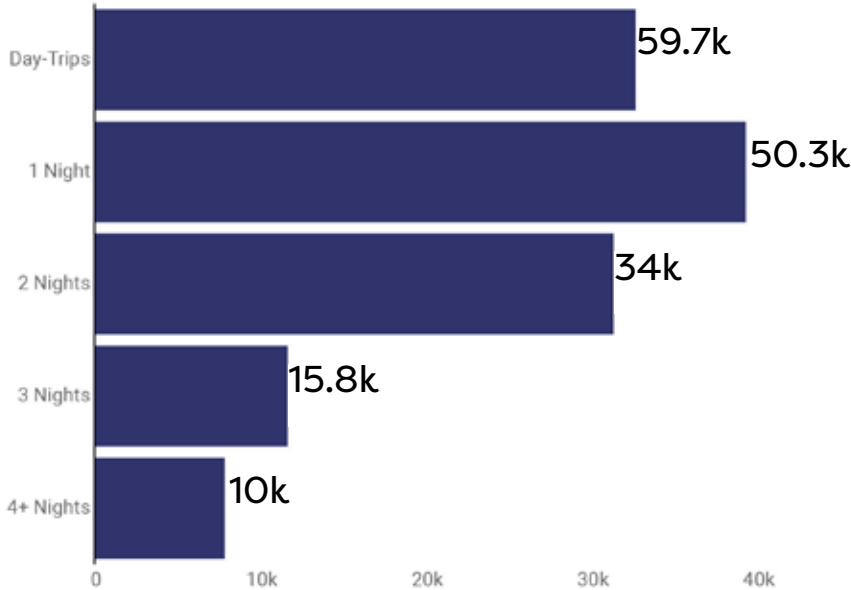
Watauga County is ranked 15th in total visitor spending among NC's 100 counties.

\*2023 visitor spending data from Visit NC / Tourism Economics

# Blowing Rock's Visitors

A total of **170k trips** to Blowing Rock were observed between July 2023 and June 2024. Of those trips, **64.9% were overnight** visits.

Trip Volume by Nights in Market



**3.0**  
Average party size

**66%**  
are Married

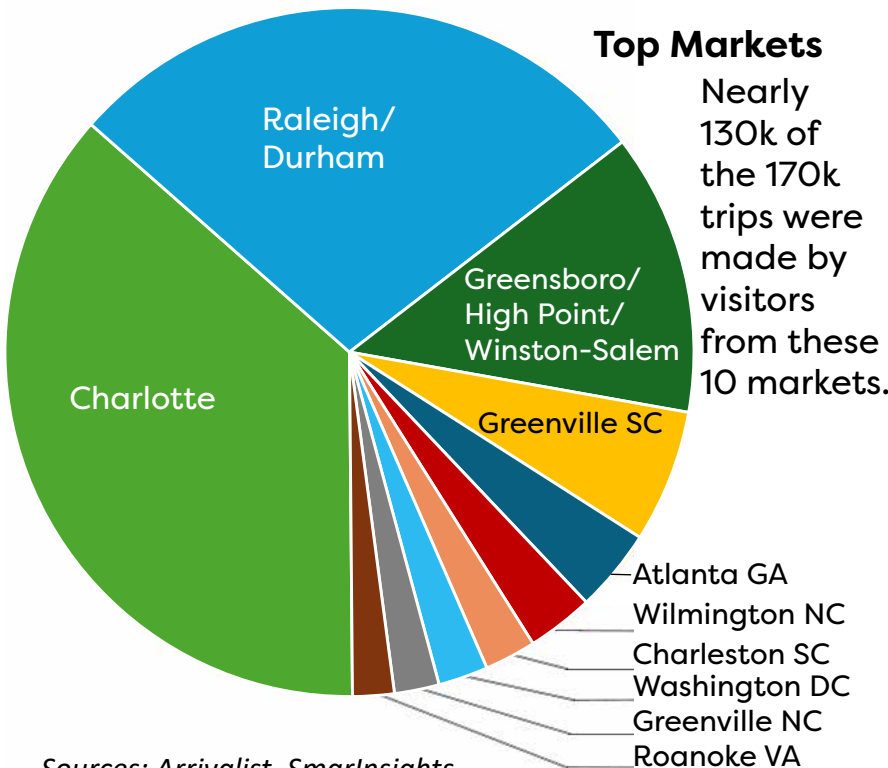
**34%**  
have children in household

**47**  
Average Age

35% Millennials (27-42)  
30% Boomers (59-77)  
23% Gen X (43-58)  
9% Gen Z (18-26), 3% Silent (78+)

## 3/4 of Blowing Rock Visitors can be described as:

- Variety Travelers:** like to do a little bit of everything during their leisure trip. 31%
- Discoverers:** prefer to be off the beaten path, active; find fulfillment thru travel. 28%
- Enrichers:** prefer to experience the culture of the destination thru educational experiences, local cuisine, and living like a local. 17%



## Top States

North Carolina is the #1 origin state with over **110k trips** to Blowing Rock. NC visitors stay an average of 1.2 nights. The top 10 origin states for FY 23-24 by volume are:

- North Carolina
  - South Carolina
  - Florida
  - Georgia
  - Virginia
  - Tennessee
  - Texas
  - New York
  - Maryland
  - Ohio
- The top 6 make up about 90% of visits
- The last four are less stable markets; LA, KY, PA, and AL held these places in the previous year.

Sources: Arrivalist, SmarInsights

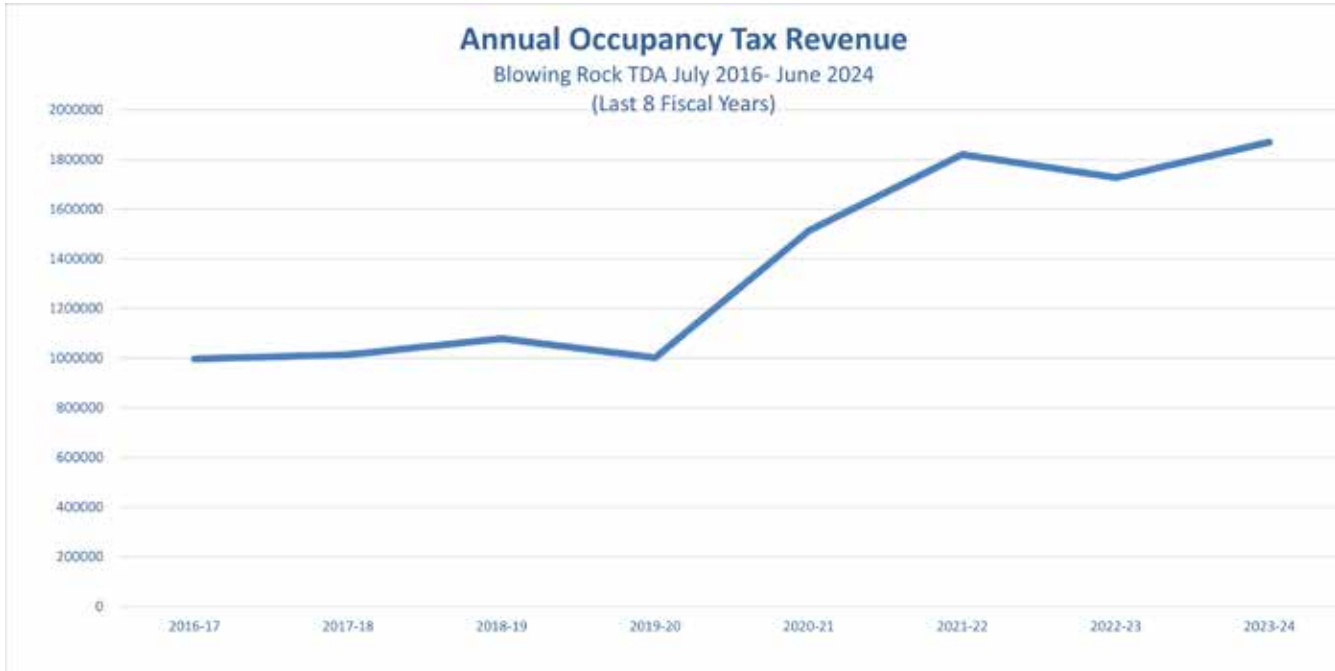
# Occupancy Tax Revenues

The Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority is funded by a 6% occupancy tax **paid by overnight visitors** staying in hotels, inns, and other short-term rentals in Blowing Rock town limits. The Town of Blowing Rock collects this tax.

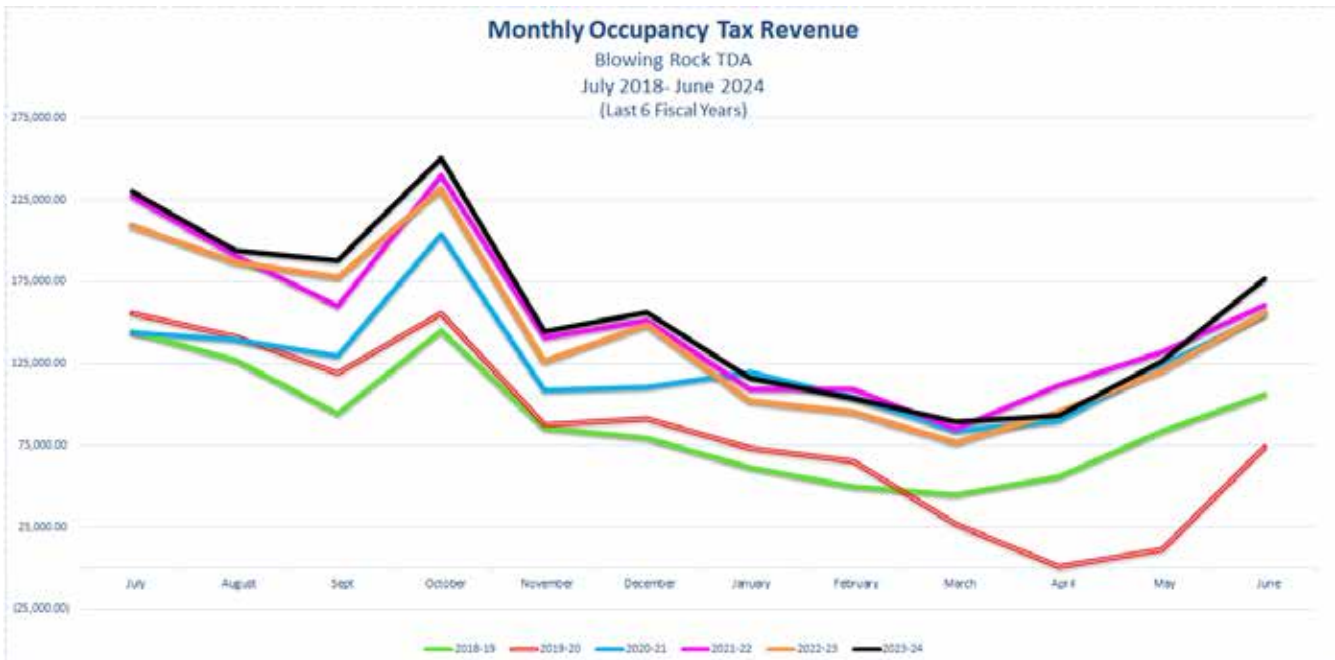
**\$1,870,092**  
Occupancy tax revenues in FY 23-24  
(+8.14% over 22-23)

}

**\$31,168,200**  
in direct revenues at Blowing  
Rock lodging businesses

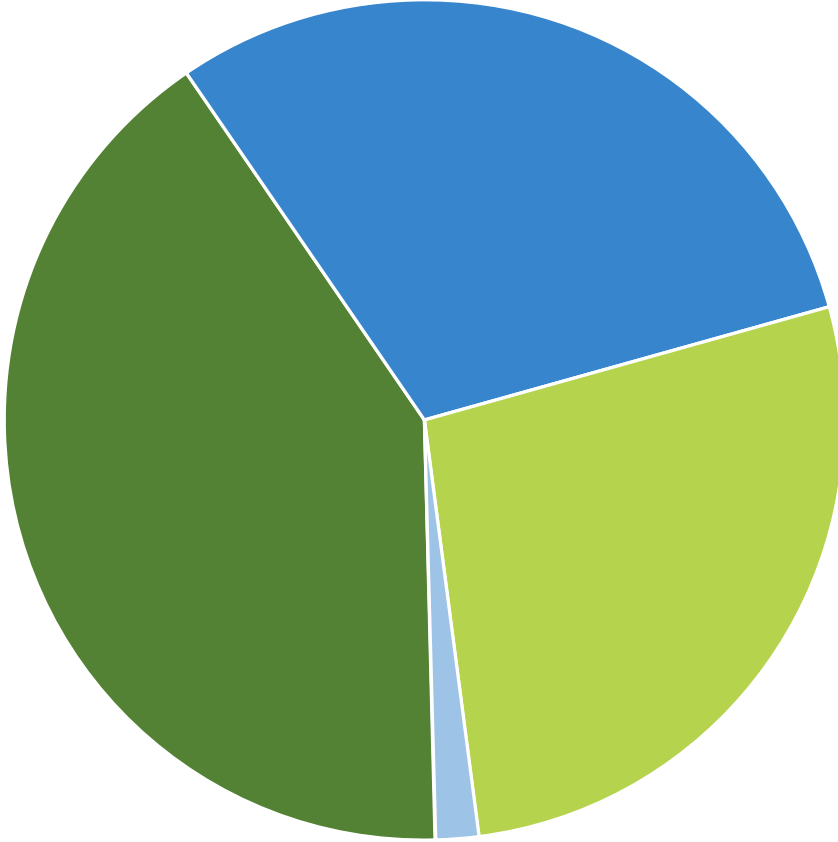


Occupancy tax revenues consistently follow an established pattern that illustrates changes in visitation volume throughout the year.



# Budgeted Expenditures

In TDA expenses in 2023-2024, a total of \$1,599,983 was spent in four main categories.



*2/3* of the budget funds the promotion of travel and tourism in Blowing Rock.

## Direct Tourism Promotion

includes advertising, website, public/media relations, Parks & Rec & BRAHM support, educational programs, printed materials, etc.

**\$497,838**

## Administrative

includes staff employment & development, insurance, etc.

**\$447,466**

## Central Services

items like audits and Town overhead

**\$38,087**

*1/3* of the budget is spent on tourism-related infrastructure.

## Tourism Infrastructure

includes expenditures like parking decks, Christmas decor, HWY 321 lighting, landscaping, etc. **\$616,591**



*A full audit of the Blowing Rock TDA budget is available as an addendum to this report.*



## Funded by Tourism

### Tourism-related infrastructure TDA expenditures totaled over \$616k in FY 2024 and included:

- American Legion Parking Structure
- Street Lighting
- Hwy. 321 Landscaping
- Parks & Recreation Event Support
- Memorial Park Directional Signage
- Christmas Decorations



- Blowing Rock History Walk
- Town Sidewalks
- Town Street Maintenance
- Memorial Park Restroom Attendant
- Town Center Beautification



These contributions help keep taxes lower for residents by offsetting the investments needed for these projects.

**\$50k+**  
in marketing sponsorships to BRAHM, WinterFest & Horse Show

**220+**  
local businesses & parks recieved free promotion via BRTDA channels

 **BLOWING ROCK, NORTH CAROLINA**  
2024 COMMUNITY CALENDAR



*Hometown Spirit*

Blowing Rock Community Calendar compiled, printed and distributed for free as a resident & business resource.

New wayfinding and directory maps were installed in the downtown kiosks. Inclusion is free for businesses.



Design of phase 1 of the Wayfinding Signage project finished in FY23-24. Production & placement will begin early 2025.



# Partners & Programs

The Blowing Rock TDA maintains strong ties with many organizations, including:



Plus: Blue Ridge Rising, Boone Area Chamber of Commerce, Boone Tourism Development Authority, Appalachian State University, Grandfather Mountain, Tweetsie Railroad, Appalachian Ski Mountain, The Blowing Rock, and Blowing Rock Charity Horse Show Foundation.

## Advocacy



*Blowing Rock was represented in the NC Delegation as part of the Southeast Tourism Society Congressional Summit on Travel and Tourism.*

# 600+ contacts

receive **weekly partner communications** on tourism news, promotional opportunities, and local events in our Village Tattler newsletter.

## Tour Programs



New for 2024, the BRTDA launched **Local Employee FAM Tours!** This spring tour familiarizes service employees with activities and visitation drivers across the High Country.

The **Student Tour Program** with Appalachian State University is designed to help connect hospitality & tourism students to employers while showing them around successful hospitality businesses.

Blowing Rock TDA partners with businesses regularly for hosting media, creating content, campaigns like Holiday Glow Time and Our Favorite Things, as well as promotions for themed getaways.

### How do we partner?

- \*board positions
- \*promoting events
- \*contributing time & skills
- \*funding special projects
- \*collaboration on programs
- \*hosting tours

### We network with partners through events like:

- \*Organization meetings
- \*Educational programs
- \*Visit NC 365 Conference
- \*Outdoor Economy Conference
- \*Southeast Tourism Conference

# Promotions & Advertising

The Blowing Rock TDA touts Blowing Rock's top attractions & hidden gems and celebrates its small businesses. We promote our town's unhurried, adventurous, and creative personality so like-minded visitors can imagine themselves here. We tell Blowing Rock's stories across our website, email marketing, guides, social media, advertising, and public relations.

**13.83 million**  
Total Advertising  
Impressions

**167,139**  
Clicks to Blowing  
Rock Content

**829,500**  
Promotional  
Emails Sent

**493,000**  
Unique Website  
Users  
(+20.7% yoy)

**1.2 million**  
Webpage Views  
(+10% yoy)

**75,000**  
Blowing Rock  
Guides Printed

Blowing Rock participated as an inaugural partner in Visit NC's Trail Town program. The destinations featured in the Outdoor NC Trail Town Guide guide are championing destination stewardship, accessible outdoors and responsible recreation to sustain NC towns and trails for future generations.



Shop.  
Gather.  
Celebrate.

Join us in Blowing Rock for  
Choose & Cut Christmas Trees,  
Tweetie Christmas, Mystery  
Hill's Crazy Christmas,  
Christmas in Blowing Rock,  
skiing at Appalachian Ski Mtn,  
unique shopping, arts & history,  
award-winning restaurants and  
so much more! Visit mid-week  
to avoid crowds.

877.750.4636  
BlowingRock.com



Media campaigns, primarily digital, included NC Year of the Trail, Outdoor NC and Leave No Trace features, Winter and Spring seasonals, and events like Art in the Park, WinterFest and Blowing Rock Charity Horse Show.

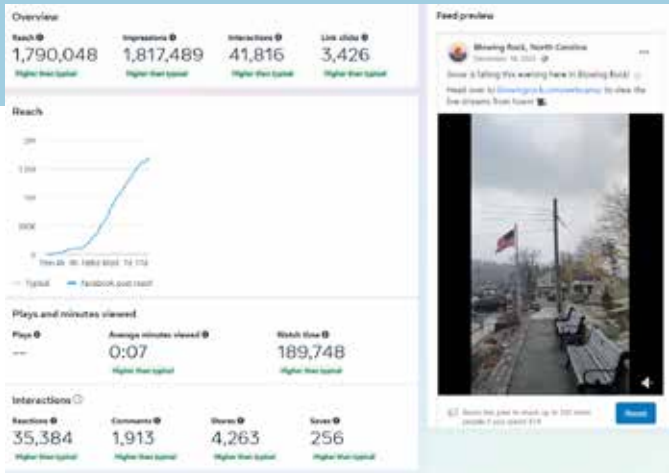
*A detailed media plan is provided as an addendum to this report.*



## Public Relations Highlights

The Blowing Rock TDA prioritizes efficient and timely responses to all media inquiries. We also value authentic, timely, and original content on our social media platforms. This special attention leads to more engaging Blowing Rock stories and accuracy in current news reporting.

Most popular social post:  
**1.7M reach & 41K engagements**  
 (Facebook & Instagram combined)  
 Directing views to our website is a priority for our social media, and this post prompted over 3,000 clicks to blowingrock.com.



**52**  
Media Assists  
& Direct Pitches

**13**  
Must-visit &  
Best-of Lists

Voted Top Tiny Town for Adventure in **Top Adventure Towns** by readers of Blue Ridge Outdoors in Fall 2023!



Voted Best Small Town in NC in **The Best Small Town in Every Southern State** by readers of Southern Living Magazine in Spring 2024!



**4.75 million**  
Social Media  
Reach

**128,200**  
Followers  
(+8.6% yoy)

**346K**  
Interactions  
across all  
platforms



**The mission of the Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority is to provide leadership and primary funding for promoting, developing, and supporting year-round travel and tourism to and within the Town of Blowing Rock to increase lodging sales, extend overnight stays, and boost visitor spending.**

**Blowing Rock TDA Board Members  
2023-24 Fiscal Year:**

**Dean Bullis** - Chairman, Tourism seat  
**Zika Rea** - Vice Chair, At-large seat  
**Kevin Walker** - Lodging seat  
**Pete Gherini** - Town Council seat  
**Greg Tarbutton** - Lodging seat

Ex-Officio Members:  
Tasha Brown- Finance Officer  
Shane Fox- Town Manager

**Blowing Rock TDA Staff:**



Tracy Brown  
Executive Director



Amanda Lugenbell  
Assistant Director



Lindsay Garcia  
Content Manager



Tyler Graves  
Digital Community  
Manager



blowingrock.com



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For more details on the information provided, please contact Tracy Brown or Amanda Lugenbell in the TDA office.