

16 PERFECT PLACES TO LIVE NOW

# Outside<sup>®</sup>

LIVE BRAVELY

AND THE WINNER IS...

# CHATTANOOGA 48 HOURS IN THE ULTIMATE RIVER CITY

UNDISCOVERED  
BEACH  
HIDEOUTS

BON IVER'S  
GUIDE TO  
WISCONSIN

OUTSIDE EXCLUSIVE  
PARADISE LOST  
How to Save Your Dream  
Town from Transplants





WHERE TO LIVE NOW

# DESTINATIONS 09.15

## HOMETOWN HEROES

WE BEGAN OUR 2015 BEST TOWNS COMPETITION WITH A BRACKET OF 64 FAVORITES, THEN LET YOU VOTE UNTIL ONE DREAM BURG EMERGED. HERE, WE PRESENT THE 16 FINALISTS—THE PLACES YOU SAY ARE THE TOP SPOTS IN THE COUNTRY TO WORK, RUN, EAT, SAIL, PADDLE, DRINK, RIDE, AND CLIMB. THE WINNER? A SOUTHERN GEM THAT SURPRISED US ONCE AGAIN.

BEST TOWNS 2015

Climbing Beech Mountain, near Boone, North Carolina (page 64)





In flight over Chattanooga



The Farmer's Daughter



Hunter Museum of American Art

## THE WINNER CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE IT'S THE TOP CITY IN AMERICA—AGAIN!

When I was growing up an hour south of Chattanooga in the eighties and nineties, the city was best known for MoonPies, those sinfully delicious chocolate, graham cracker, and marshmallow hockey pucks. Fast-forward a couple of decades and I'm standing in a juice bar on the edge of downtown, wondering what happened to the corny place I once knew. Now it's all nitro cold brew and tech startups, like the love child of Nashville and Silicon Valley, but with

more singletrack.

The city of 173,000, built in the belly of the rocky Tennessee River Gorge, always had the potential to be a great adventure town. Climbers have been sending routes on the nearby sandstone cliffs for more than 30 years. A decade ago, the local mountain-bike club set out to build 100 miles of singletrack within ten miles of the city. They're up to 120 miles, and there's a midweek enduro series where you can rip dirt after work and be home in time for dinner. Competition is fierce, and the winner takes a growler of home brew.

So Chattanooga's outdoor cred isn't

really news. The quantity and quality of adventure playgrounds—including the Tennessee River, which wraps around the city, and a bevy of Class IV–V rapids on the nearby Ocoee—helped it win our Best Towns contest four years ago. But now the city itself has caught up with the surrounding action. Neighborhoods are filling up with record stores, coffeehouses, and restaurants, and breweries are opening that offer the perfect nightcaps to days spent on the trails, creeks, and crags.

Locals tell me that the transformation started in

2010, when Chattanooga got the Gig—one-gigabit-per-second fiber-optic Internet service that's tax-

payer owned and available to every home and business at affordable rates. That's around 50 times faster than

most of the rest of the Western Hemisphere. (A feature-length movie downloads in about 30 seconds.) But it's

## THE LONG ROAD TO GLORY

Chattanooga conquered six worthy opponents in our 64-town bracket. And with more than 1.5 million total votes cast, participation was higher—and competition steeper—than ever before.

Round of 64		
41%	ROANOKE, VIRGINIA	CHATTANOOGA 59%
Round of 32		
43%	RALEIGH-DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA	CHATTANOOGA 57%
Sweet 16		
37%	BEAUFORT, SOUTH CAROLINA	CHATTANOOGA 63%
Elite Eight		
49%	BOONE, NORTH CAROLINA	CHATTANOOGA 51%
Final Four		
46%	EAU CLAIRE, WISCONSIN	CHATTANOOGA 54%
Final		
48%	PORT ANGELES, WASHINGTON	CHATTANOOGA 52%

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: DIANNE BLANKENBAKER; BEN LEHMAN; HOLLIS BENNETT

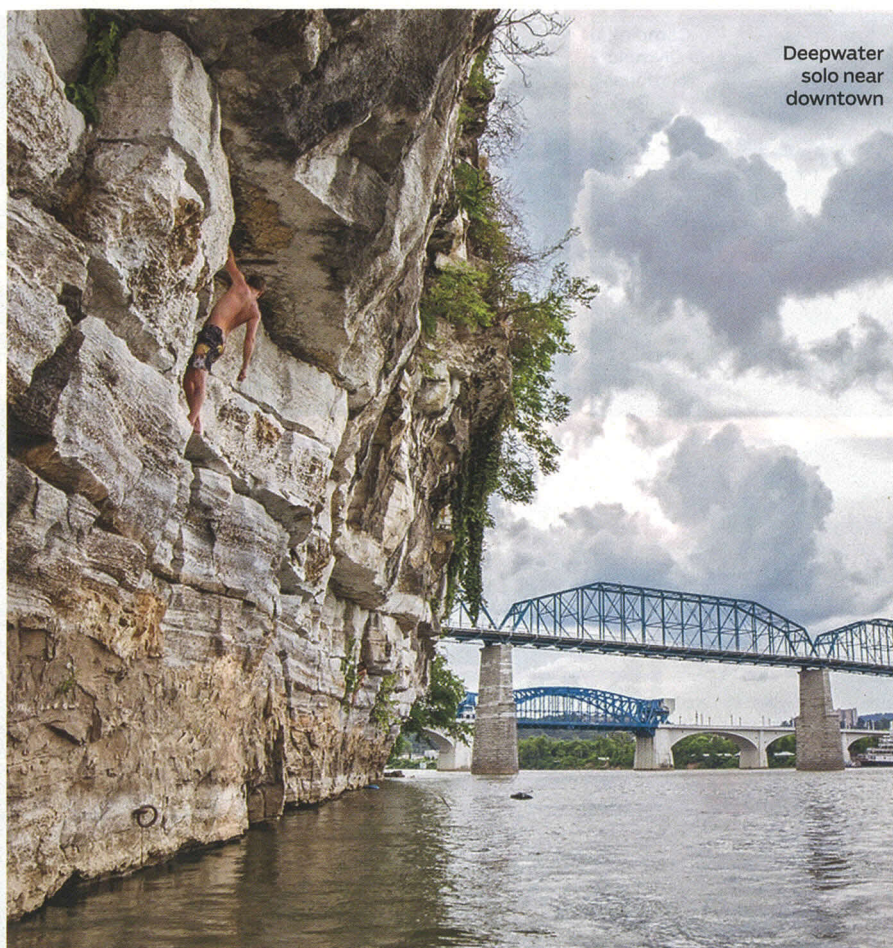




Skewers  
at Two  
Ten Jack



Tennessee  
River Gorge  
perch



Deepwater  
solo near  
downtown

not just for surfing. "The Gig showed that Chattanooga was committed to developing business," says Joda Thongnopnua, communications director of Lamp Post, a venture fund that invests in local startups. He estimates that some \$50 million has been pumped into new businesses over the past five years, funding companies like Roots Rated, which developed an app that recommends adventures.

It might be too early to start calling it Silicon Gorge, but people are relocating to Chattanooga because it has something that many other recreation meccas don't: opportunity. Take

brothers Kelsey and Conner Scott, who moved down from Nashville two years ago to climb and to grow Granola, their small backpack company. "There's a huge startup scene and a great outdoor community," Kelsey says. Add to the mix reasonably priced homes—the median price is \$138,000—and you get a uniquely diverse adventure hub where you can have a rising career and a comfortable, balanced life. "We were already driving down here every weekend to climb," says Kelsey. "Moving to Chattanooga just made sense." —GRAHAM AVERILL

## WEEKEND PLAN: CHATTANOOGA

Two days in the city should be enough to convince you to make the move —G.A.

### DAY ONE

**7:30 A.M.** Start with a Nightrider Nitro (nitrogenated cold brew) at Velo, a coffee roaster with vintage bikes on the wall.

**9 A.M.** Raccoon Mountain is the crown jewel of the local trail system, with 30 miles of singletrack just eight miles from downtown. Be sure to hit High Voltage, a 3.5-mile cliffside enduro course with crazy-tight switchbacks.

**12:30 P.M.** Head to Taqueria Jalisco, a brick-and-mortar restaurant built around a food truck. Show up early for the mole: it's made fresh on Saturdays and gone before the lunch rush ends.

**2 P.M.** Paddleboarding the Tennessee River is a citywide obsession. Rent a SUP at L2 and launch in the heart of downtown to spend a couple of hours exploring the sandstone bluffs beneath the super-mod Hunter Museum.

**7 P.M.** Two Ten Jack is an upscale ramen joint in the

basement of renovated Warehouse Row. Get the house cold sake and ramen with chicken, greens, and soft-boiled egg.

**9 P.M.** Finish the night at the Flying Squirrel, a climber-owned bar next door to your digs for the night—the Crash Pad, a boutique hostel that caters to adventure travelers. (It actually rents bouldering crash pads.) Snag a private room and finish the night with a slackline session in the backyard (from \$79; [crashpadchattanooga.com](http://crashpadchattanooga.com)).

### DAY TWO

**8 A.M.** Fuel up with eggs scrambled with home fries and bacon at the down-home Bluegrass Grill.

**10 A.M.** Knock out a three-mile run on Bluff Trail, hugging the edge of Lookout Mountain. You'll need to watch your footing on the rocky singletrack, but don't forget to look up occasionally to take in the views of the valley 1,000 feet below.

**12 P.M.** Lunch is at the Farmer's Daughter, a spot in a renovated gas station across the river on the north side of town that's healthy without the preachy asceticism. Get the Power Salad—a big bowl of quinoa, lentils, roasted veggies, cranberries, sunflower seeds, and Parmesan.

**3 P.M.** Spend the afternoon working your way up the cracks of Tennessee Wall, a storied crag that defines the rim of the Tennessee River Gorge 20 minutes from downtown. The cooler months are prime time here, but with several hundred routes to choose from, you'll always find some real estate to call your own.

**8:30 P.M.** The Urban Stack has the best burger in town. You're in the South, so you're obligated to add a fried green tomato. And Benton's bacon. Pair with glasses of Cumberland Cask whiskey until another slackline session sounds like a good idea.