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# Country Roads: The Power of Rural Travel

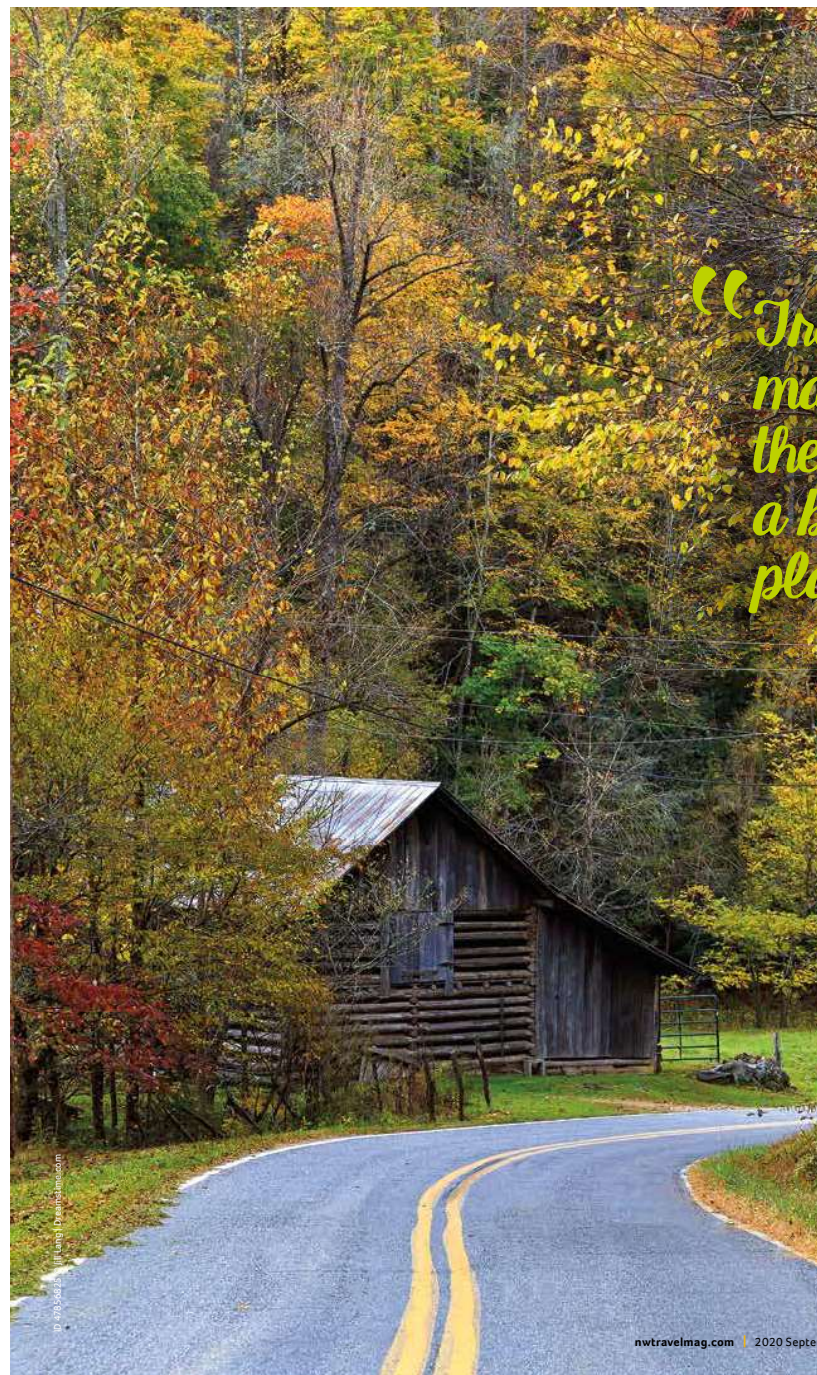
BY ADAM SAWYER

As things begin to slowly open back up and we look forward to dipping our toes into the shallow end of the travel pool, many of us are asking ourselves the same questions. “Can we travel? If so, where should we go and how do we do it safely?” As these words are being penned, some communities that were eagerly anticipating reopening were forced to pump the brakes and reevaluate.

While larger cities across the Northwest are cautious about welcoming back throngs of visitors, many rural areas have been far less impacted. If for some reason you never really considered rural travel before, there are a great many reasons to do so.

Regions with a significantly lower population density are, and have always been, attractive places to travel. You’ll experience less noise, fewer people and calm surroundings. You’ll have fewer distractions, cleaner air, warmer receptions and more space to enjoy your travels, both physically and mentally. You’ll appreciate a landscape and culture that is somehow familiar in its unfamiliarity.

There are also mutual benefits for the tourist and the community being visited. According to Marsha Massey, executive director of Olympic Peninsula Visitor Bureau, “Tourism is a ‘clean’ economy that can provide economic vitality to rural communities. Visitor spending and tax dollars



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Winery on Orcas Island, WA

*The way we interact is evolving.*

generated by visitor spending help support local services and vital infrastructure, as well as employment. Many of the tourism-related businesses in rural communities are small businesses—entrepreneurs, ‘mom and pops,’ small restaurants, lodging establishments and retail shops—that depend on the visitor traffic to be economically viable.”

These independently owned shops, restaurants and attractions, in turn, benefit the local population’s quality of life. Often, these business opportunities are what allow their owners and operators to make lifestyle choices and choose to live in a non-urban setting.

“There’s a saying that ‘tourism is the front door to economic development,’” says Massey, “It has proven time and again to attract relocation both of individuals and of businesses.”

Beyond mutual benefits, rural travel comes with personal ones, too—and they go far beyond just economic.

“Travel makes the world a better place,” says Andi Day, executive director of Long Beach Peninsula Visitors Bureau. “We are all a product of our experiences, and if we limit our

experiences we never grow. Travel is how we build empathy and perspective—how we see, smell, touch, taste and feel traditions and heritage that is different from our own.”

Also, Day agrees with Massey about travel to rural areas being good for local economies and adds that rural travel also informs perspectives and breaks down stereotypes.

“So often rural areas and small towns are perceived as synonymous with backward or narrow-minded or unchanging,” says Day. “A personal experience can change or contextualize that opinion. Travel to rural areas is imperative to bridging the urban-rural divide.

“Rural travel puts us closer to the land, immerses us in the outdoors and gets us to the source of our amazing foods and beverages. It opens our eyes to the fact that innovation is happening all over—in cities and rural areas alike.”

The way we travel and interact is evolving, however. It is of critical importance for us to be respectful to the communities and cognizant of public health recommendations or mandates. While rural areas are looking forward to guests again, there are many who are cautious with regard to visitors. And



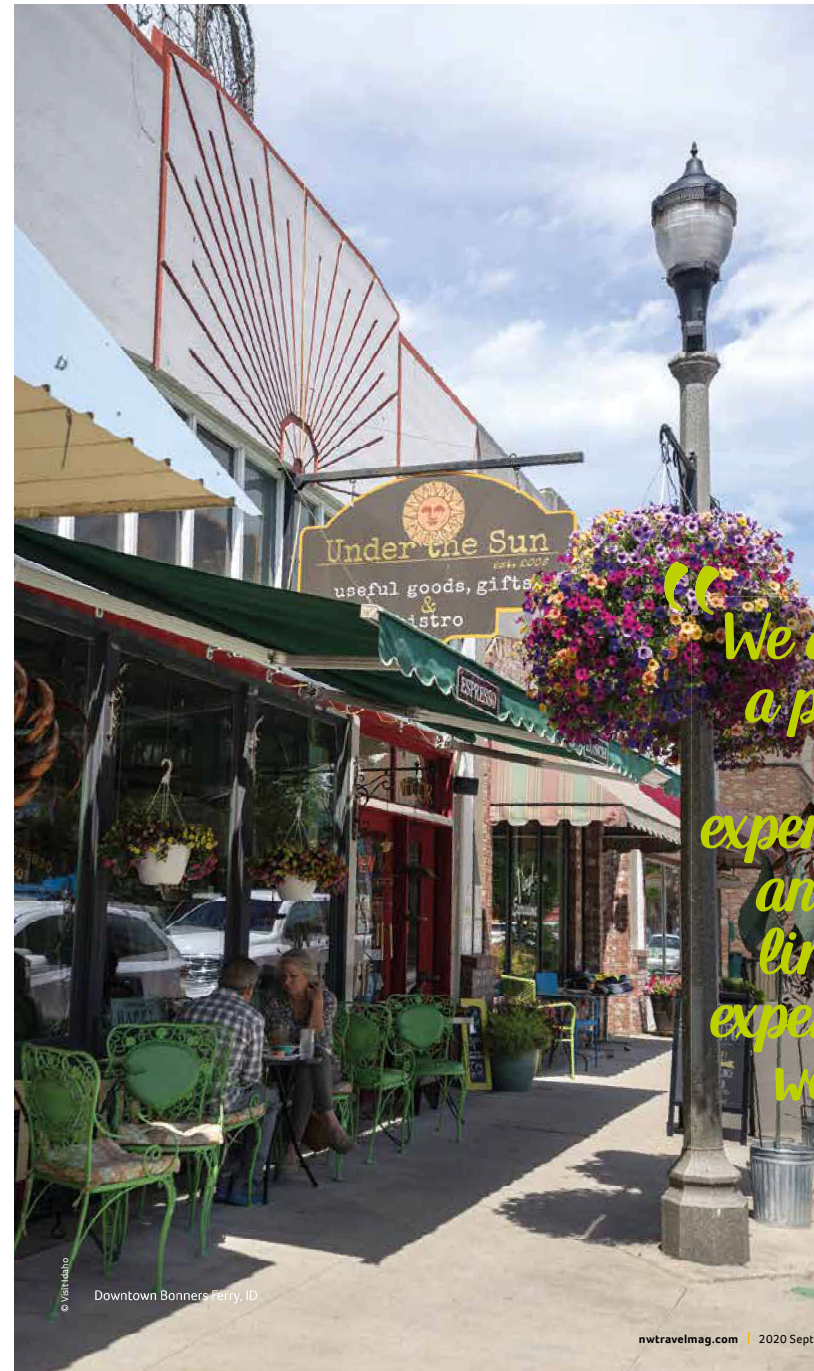
## Tourism is the front door to economic development.

they have every right to be. When traveling, practice social distancing. Wear a face covering when appropriate. Avoid crowds or adding to a potential one. Whether it's a restaurant, trailhead or point of interest, move on to the next activity or destination if it looks like you won't be able to enjoy it safely and respectfully.

Also, consider that the businesses you are visiting and their employees are abiding by prescribed guidelines and, often, the law. Be gracious, understanding and grateful for the opportunity to eat an entree without Netflix blaring in the background and enjoy a craft cocktail you didn't have to make over your sink. Tip. Tip well. And be patient as staff find their legs again and get their chops back.

Yes, we can travel again. And regional rural travel has the ability to power our collective healing process. How? By investing in and bolstering locally owned businesses and smaller economies, by beginning to mend a cultural and political divide that has weakened us all for far too long, and by feeding our souls once more in a way that only new places, people and experiences can.

Andi Day sums up why you should set out on a country road to a rural destination: "It's good for our economy, our environment, our bodies, our communities and our minds." 🍷



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