



# UNDER THE RADAR

**Brevard, North Carolina, is home to some of the best riding in the country, but the miles don't come easy**

BY VERNON FELTON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN BARHAM

**BACK IN 2000, 23-YEAR-OLD WES DICKSON** walked into a bank with a brilliant idea: Open a bike shop in Brevard, North Carolina. He just needed a loan to get things rolling. The loan officer thought it over. No dice. Bad idea. No future in that kind of thing around here.

Dickson went home and pondered his own future. It was a bike shop or nothing at all. He went back to the bank with a promising proposal: *"How about you lend me some money for, um, some new furniture for my apartment?"* This sounded like a smart investment to the bank representative, who promptly extended Dickson a loan for \$8,000, which Dickson, in turn, promptly used to start a bike shop.

On one hand, this story sounds preposterous because, as anyone who's visited Brevard will tell you, the small town sits on the back porch of one of America's greatest mountain-biking playgrounds. You couldn't dream of a better town in which to base a bike shop. Half-a-million acres laced with 400 miles of trail (Pisgah National Forest) stands on one side of Brevard. On the other side sits another 10,000 acres and 90 miles of trail in DuPont State Forest.

In this veritable mountain-bike utopia is a bank that wouldn't give a guy a dime to start a bike shop, but would happily fork over nearly 10 grand to help the same guy pimp his crib. The math doesn't add up.

Eco-tourism simply wasn't on most peoples' radar in Brevard.

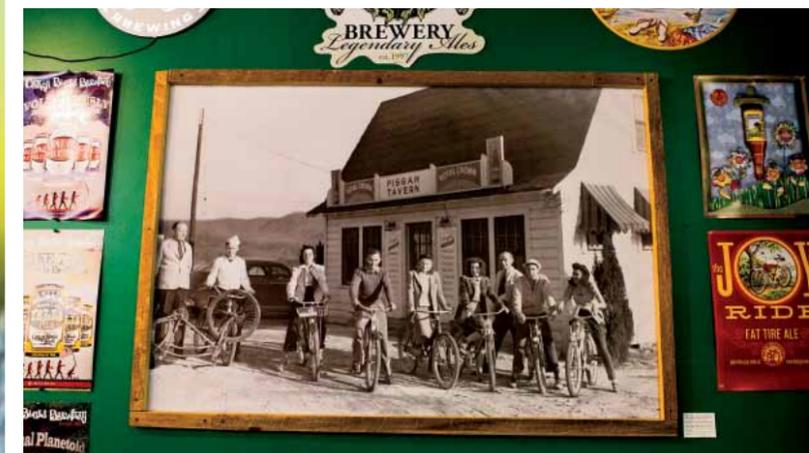
"Brevard," explains Dickson, who was born and raised there, "was always a factory town—pure and simple."

Three factories, to be exact, kept Brevard's economy afloat: the Ecusta Paper Mill, the DuPont X-Ray film plant and the Coats American textile factory. Then, in 2002, each of those factories closed. Nearly a tenth of the entire county's workforce—2,200 people in all—was suddenly unemployed.

Brevard's mayor, Jimmy Harris, never saw it coming. "There I was," Harris recalls 10 years later, "the mayor of this town, and people are predicting that I was about to see tumbleweeds rolling up and down Main Street." >



Clockwise from left: Seb Kemp finds a little air on the Big Rock Trail. The crew gets the spins at The Hub's Pisgah Tavern. It's all about white rodents. The Pisgah Tavern has always been about the bike. Good ol' hipsters.



## NEW DAY RISING

If you stand on Main Street today, you'll notice that it is, in fact, blessedly free of tumbleweeds. What you'll see instead is the sizeable peak of Mount Bracken looming above town. Groups of volunteers are building trails on Bracken—trails that will eventually connect downtown Brevard to all that singletrack in Pisgah.

"That's going to be a game-changer for us," says Harris, now in his fifth term as mayor. "We'll be the only place on the East Coast where you can ride from downtown, on a trail system, right into a national forest."

As you might have guessed, eco-tourism has finally taken root in Brevard.

A few miles down the road, Wes Dickson's bike shop, Sycamore Cycles, brims with new bikes and a rental fleet of 32 full-suspension rigs and

hardtails. Business is good. So good that Dickson recently opened a second store in nearby Hendersonville.

Across the street from Sycamore Cycles sits yet another bike shop, The Hub, which is home to not only bikes and outdoor gear, but also a tavern—six taps strong. We know this because we are hunkered around those six taps of bubbling, malty goodness. We are wet, muddy and as someone notes, about four days removed from anyone's last encounter with a bar of soap. One, or maybe all, of us smells of old feet.

It's been a good day. Just a few hours earlier we were picking our way down Pisgah's Farlow Gap trail. Note the verb selection here: We were 'picking' not 'barreling' nor 'ripping' nor 'shredding'. That is because few people actually rip, barrel or shred this particular trail. Farlow Gap is, in

common parlance, a real motherfucker.

Picture a good half-mile of rock garden. Not small rocks, but rocks the size of basketballs. None of these rocks are rooted in the ground; they just tumble along at horrifying speeds, smacking frames, gouging shins and wreaking mayhem. This is because the trail itself is steep. Oh, and it's wet, and muddy—let's not forget muddy. In fact, it's as if someone has slathered the entire trail in peanut butter—and then spread about 10,000 gallons of Vaseline over the whole mess. Finally, toss in hundreds of roots criss-crossing the trail in every direction. That's Farlow Gap.

Of course, there's more to the infamous trail than sheer white-knuckle carnage. Farlow also swoops and dips for miles, crosses tumbling, gurgling creeks and, at times, just

about stops your heart, because this is maybe the most beautiful place on earth that you've ever seen. And right about then—when your mind has gone silly-putty-soft with the whole grandeur of the place—your front wheel jams itself between a root and a hatchet-shaped rock and sends you flying.

Half the beauty of Farlow Gap is riding it. The other half is finishing it. We've tasted both ends and we want more. All this despite the fact that we are knackered after two weeks of riding trails that absolutely blew our minds. We came to Brevard with an inkling that the trails were good, but we underestimated them.

Just how *do* Pisgah's trails stack up? Adam Craig, Giant Bicycles' racing honch and veteran world traveler, finished the five-day-long Pisgah Stage Race the day we arrived in town and

summed it up this way: "I'm going to have to say Pisgah is definitely one of the top three places in the universe that I've ever ridden—and maybe the very best one."

## ZOMBIE-SQUIRELS AND MOSH PITS

Awesome trails? Check. Brevard has that angle covered. To truly be a world-class ride destination, however, a town also needs to be home to a supportive riding community.

"You know what surprises me?" Seb Kemp asks as we pedal through downtown Brevard one night. "No one is flipping us off or yelling at us. In fact," he says as he lifts a hand from his handlebar to return a wave from an older gentleman in a Buick, "people are just so friendly around here."

It's worth noting that Seb is riding his bike dressed as a giant chicken and that we are weav-

ing through the streets of Brevard in an unruly peloton that includes dozens of zombies, a mountain gorilla, a flying squirrel, Gumby and Pokey. Our immediate destination? A backwoods pump track—the next stop in tonight's Zombie-Squirrel Alleycat Race.

For a town of only 7,000 people, a staggering portion of Brevard's population seems to have shown up to this combination scavenger hunt/bike race covered in fake blood, smudged mascara and the ruined funeral-parlor attire favored by the undead.

The Zombie-Squirrel involved, among other things, the generous consumption of malted barley and Maker's Mark, a foot race between a 7-foot-tall banana and a gorilla (our managing editor), several costumed laps on a pump track, what seemed like an eternity of required danc-



Clockwise from upper left: A keen can collection. Fall colors in full effect. An undead starting line. Squirrel rolls big in DuPont State Forest. It's true, man, this is Sycamore Cycles' Carlos Galarza. Essential supplies are top priority.

TRACY TURPEN/TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY TOURISM



ing to Michael Jackson's *Thriller* in Wes Dickson's front yard and, finally, a couple hours spent accumulating injuries in the mosh pit at a thrash-metal concert downtown.

Note to self: If you're going to slam dance, it's probably best to remove the Gumby costume before diving in the pit. Hours later, we found ourselves back at base camp, exhausted and exhilarated, though now with several bruises, scrapes and no small amount of damage to the Gumby suit—which I'm still at a loss to explain.

The next morning downtown Brevard is full of seemingly ordinary, law-abiding citizens, walking the streets, filling up at the gas station and shopping at the market—many with traces of fake blood on their chins.

So, yeah, that thing about a supportive cycling culture? Check that one too.

### THE GREAT UNKNOWN

If Brevard is such an amazing place to ride, why haven't more people heard of it? While the trails of Pisgah are no secret, this corner of western North Carolina rarely receives the same recognition accorded 'meccas' such as Moab, Crested Butte or Whistler. Why is that?

"Why? Hmm...that's a good question," muses Jimi Megonnel as he tunes a customer's bike at The Hub. Megonnel is in a position to know. He's spent the past 25 years in one famous mountain-biking town or another, wrenching on bikes at renowned shops including both Chili Pepper Bike Shop and Poison Spider Bicycles in Moab, as well as Alternative Ski and Sport and The Alpinier in Crested Butte.

"The riding here is definitely on scale with all those places," says Megonnel. "Pisgah, though,

isn't simple-and-easy fun. There's plenty of fun to be had here, don't get me wrong, but it's not one of those places where you just ride up and it's all given to you on a platter. You have to work for it a bit."

Jeff Baucom, a longtime bike-industry veteran and fixture of the Pisgah scene, agrees. "The terrain around here definitely weeds folks out. A lot of riders come here and love it, but a lot of other riders come here and find it a bit tougher than what they're used to."

There's also another factor at play.

"I think it's just the whole Southeast thing," explains Chris Herndon, 2007 dual slalom national champion and local boy done good. "The whole region is just sort of under the radar, probably because we're so laid-back. We have some of the best trails in the country; we just don't make a big enough fuss about it."

### BANG THE DRUM

That part about keeping a low profile? That's going to change. For starters, Brevard has begun to bang the drum about all the riding that's a stone's throw away from its former factories. The town is advertising in nearby markets such as Charlotte and Atlanta, and is looking beyond the South's major metro areas. And, as evidenced on Mount Bracken, they're investing in the trails.

Can a city that's been tied to factory jobs for nearly a hundred years turn around and make the transition to mountain-bike mecca?

"Eco-tourism is going to be a strong part of our economy from here on out," says Mayor Harris. "That may not be easy for everyone to accept, but change is like a horse pill going down sideways—you know it's good for you; you know you've got

to do it; but it's just never easy."

Change, indeed, is afoot. There are those trails cropping up on Bracken Mountain, plus a new trail (the Ecusta), which you can ride from both Sycamore Cycles and the Hub to Pisgah's popular Davidson River trailhead. And to top it all off, Wes Dickson was elected to the Brevard city council just weeks after finishing fifth in the pro division of the Pisgah Stage Race—against the likes of Adam Craig and Jeremiah Bishop, no less.

He ran, no surprise, on a pro-mountain-biking platform.

"When I started riding Pisgah back in 1989, you almost never saw other riders, and when you did, it was a big deal. It was definitely *not* the norm. Now, we're just this huge community of people riding bikes out here. *We* are the norm." ☐

### GET WRENCHED

There are two great shops in town: SYCAMORE CYCLES ([sycamorecycles.com/828-877-5790](http://sycamorecycles.com/828-877-5790)) and THE HUB ([hubbicycles.com/828-884-8670](http://hubbicycles.com/828-884-8670)). Both bike shops boast excellent mechanics and staff who are happy to give you the lowdown on the local goods. Grab a beer at The Hub, hang out and talk with Sam and his staff, then walk across the street and hit up Wes and company at Sycamore Cycles. Both crews will take good care of you.

### SUPERIOR SQUIRELS

Five cities in the United States, including Brevard, claim to be the original home of the white squirrel. Who's right? What, do we look like squirrel experts? Let's just say there's a ton of the snow-white critters running around Brevard, which takes its melanin-challenged rodents very seriously. The town is home to a White Squirrel Research Center, a White Squirrel Festival and in 2005 Mayor Harris got ballsy and officially crowned Brevard the "White Squirrel Capitol of the World." Take that, Olney, Illinois!

### RIDE

#### START AT DUPONT STATE FOREST

DuPont is the kinder, softer side of mountain biking in the Brevard area. There's truly something here for everyone, from beginners to advanced riders. It has 90 miles of trail that scale massive expanses of granite slickrock and burrow through rhododendron tunnels. Highlights include Ridge-line, Big Rock and Cedar Rock trails. [dupontforest.com](http://dupontforest.com)

#### FINISH WITH PISGAH NATIONAL FOREST

First, buy a map at either The Hub or Sycamore Cycles. You're looking at half a million acres in Pisgah—there's a lot of territory to cover. The Big M, Sycamore Cove and Daniel Ridge are close to both bike shops (access at the Davidson River trailhead, off Hwy. 276). Farlow Gap, Pilot Rock, Squirrel Gap and countless other Pisgah greats require a lot of pedaling, which brings us back to that bit about maps. [mtbikewnc.com](http://mtbikewnc.com)

### EAT

- BRACKEN MOUNTAIN BAKERY  
*A bit of flour-and-butter heaven on earth.*  
[bracknmountainbakery.com](http://bracknmountainbakery.com)
- GATEKEEPER'S TABLE  
*Shrimp and grits for breakfast? Hell yes!*  
[gatekeeperstable.com](http://gatekeeperstable.com)  
828-877-2200
- JORDAN STREET CAFE  
*Excellent food of all persuasions.*  
828-883-2558

#### • CIELITO LINDO

*Outstanding chicken molé and school bus-sized margaritas.*  
828-884-5757

#### • PAD THAI

*Tasty curries and noodle dishes.*  
828-883-9299

### STAY

The Red House Inn: 828-884-9349  
[brevardbedandbreakfast.com](http://brevardbedandbreakfast.com)

Hampton Inn: 828-883-4800  
[hamptoninnbrevard.com](http://hamptoninnbrevard.com)

Ash Grove Mountain Cabins & Camping:  
828-885-7126

### GET THE INFO

Transylvania County Tourism Development Authority for general info: 800-648-4523  
[visitwaterfalls.com](http://visitwaterfalls.com)