

Escapes

Get Your Craft On

A W. Va. Foundation Keeps Mountain Arts Alive

By MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN
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Last year, I threw a pumpkin-carving party, painted flowerpots, sewed baby clothes and built some folk-artsy picnic benches. I admit it: I'm crafty. Throw in some painted pine cones and a little obstruction of justice, and you've got a mini-Martha here.

I blame my mother, a public school art teacher who kept plastic drawers of pipe cleaners and plastic beads in our basement. And here I am, a thirtysomething urbanite, still peeling Elmer's glue off my fingers.

So I liked the idea of immersion crafting when I heard about a new series of weekend workshops offered by the MountainMade foundation in West Virginia. The nonprofit organization preserves Appalachian artisanship with a gorgeous 3,000-square-foot gallery, where \$975 quilts hang on the walls and brilliant pieces of blown glass are on display in the windows.

The how-to offerings include jewelrymaking, stained-glass work and printmaking. All those sounded fun and familiar; but "needle-felting?" Never heard of it. Turns out it's a decorative art in which you fashion wool into 3-D figures. But even if I were too cool for felt, I still liked the sound of a weekend in Thomas, a mountain town with a hippie vibe between Deep Creek Lake, Md., and Canaan Valley, W. Va. So I lined up a traveling party of friends and went a-felting.

With the foundation's new downtown studios overlooking the Blackwater River, a weekend in Thomas proved to be filled with craftsmanship, beautiful mountain scenery and live music. And a beagle made of felt.

"Don't get frustrated if you decide what you want to make and it doesn't turn out like you want," our instructor, Susie Slider, warned us on a recent Saturday morning, as three other students and I sat pondering the bundles of raw, colored fiber piled in front of us. "Wool tends to have a mind of its own."

Slider turns the stuff into cool, whimsical sculptures such as the gargoyle and granny that sat on a table. I launched into a caricature of the creature I knew best: my beagle, Darwin.

Slider showed us how to use long, notched needles to tangle and compress the fibers, then pull them into sculpted shapes. The demo took 30 seconds. Getting the hang of it took forever. I spent all morning just shaping the head of my hound.

"Is that a chew toy?" asked my friend Brandon when I took it outside during the lunch break. As I hotly defended my tricolored orb, I knew I had been sucked into felting.



DOG PHOTO BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN; OTHERS BY KARL BADGLEY / MOUNTAINMADE STUDIOS



We ate at the Purple Fiddle, a sort of bohemian roadhouse on the main street that is the best-known business in Thomas. Music lovers drive for miles to catch the live acts and good food there. Floral sofas and church pews sit in rows by the music stage, and the lunch counter serves sarsaparilla and huge sandwiches. (We went back that night for the band, Muskrat Family BBQ.)

Heading back to the workshop, I detoured through the other studios, vowing to return one day for glass beadmaking just so I could fire up that cool dual-flame torch.

The locals say the foundation is partially responsible for the revitalization of a town that hasn't seen much action (except for a lot of kayaking and mountain biking) since its coal-mining heyday in the late 1800s. It

employs master craftspeople who otherwise might not have jobs and attracts out-of-towners to classes — which were held in the local library or school until the new studios opened in November.

"There's nothing like this in the entire region," said MountainMade Executive Director Kate McComas. The foundation received a \$124,000 grant from the West Virginia Commission of the Arts to build state-of-the-art studios, which now provide places for local artists to work and teach. "We have a great artists' community, and a lot of people wanted to teach."

I met my friends back at the lakefront house we had rented in Canaan Valley, about seven miles away, where we had hot chocolate before heading to dinner at the White Grass Cafe in Davis. White Grass, a ski-buff friend had told us, is the mid-Atlantic's mec-



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The MountainMade Foundation in Thomas, W. Va., preserves Appalachian artisanship. Weekend workshops include, clockwise from bottom left, basket weaving, glass beadmaking and needle-felting. Below, the author's needle-felted beagle.



ca for cross-country skiing; during the winter, its dinners trump anything in the area. As we entered the low-ceilinged ski lodge, which doubles as an ad hoc dining room, I felt as if we had stepped into Vermont. We sat at a fire-engine-red picnic table sandwiched between the ski rental area and a live band. The cafe had such a relaxed, campy feel that we expected to be called for KP duty.

The next morning, back in craft land, Slider helped me experiment with various rolled shapes until I had a couple of beaglelike haunches. As a finishing touch, she showed me how a speck of white wool fiber inside the eye mimics a flicker of light. Just like that, the eyes seemed to twinkle with life.

Not even Brandon could tease my felt puppy when we met for a late lunch at Sirianni's Cafe, a rustic pizza shop in Davis that used to be an old steamship office.

And then we started our drive back to Washington, my woolly beagle on the dash, me leaving town a humbled craftster and a heart-felt convert.

ESCAPE KEYS

GETTING THERE: Thomas, W. Va., is about 180 miles from Washington. From the Beltway, take I-270 to I-70 west to I-68 west at Hancock, Md. Follow I-68 to Route 220 south at Cumberland. Take Route 220 to Route 50 west at New Creek, W. Va., and follow Route 50 to the junction of Route 93 west to Davis, then Route 32 north to Thomas.

MOUNTAINMADE WORKSHOPS: Weekend classes are offered year-round at the MountainMade studios (Front Street, Thomas, 877-686-6233, www.mountainmade.com). Upcoming workshops include an introduction to glass beadmaking, white pine bark basketry, copper and sterling silver bangle-bracelet-making and stained-glassmaking. Reservations suggested. The cost of a two-day class ranges from \$80 to \$90; materials are an additional \$20 to \$50.

WHERE TO STAY: If you want to walk to the studios, **Stone Garden Inn** (Route 32, Thomas, 304-463-4400, www.stonegardeninn.com) overlooks the Blackwater River, provides mountain bikes and canoes for its guests. Rates start at \$99. **Bright Morning Inn** (Route 32, Davis, 866-537-5731, www.brightmorninginn.com) is in the next town over and offers a full country breakfast and free Wi-Fi; a double room is \$85 April 1 through Dec. 25, \$95 in high season. And if you bring a crowd along, **MountainTop Realty & Rentals** (800-624-4341, www.mountaintoprealty.com) rents houses and condominiums in Canaan Valley. Properties range from \$560 to \$1,600 for a three-night weekend in a house, \$320 to \$700 for a condo. Prices are at least \$100 less after the winter season ends March 24.

WHERE TO EAT: Start your day at **Lena's Bakery and Cafe** in Thomas (Front Street, 304-463-4200), which serves underpriced, oversized pastries and quiches in the morning and terrific sandwiches in the afternoon; closed Sundays. Order a pie, hero or pasta at **Sirianni's Cafe** (William Avenue, Davis, 304-259-5454). The **Purple Fiddle Coffeehouse and Mountain Market** (21 East Ave., Thomas, 304-463-4040, www.purplefiddle.com) rocks the town with live music every weekend; it offers a hefty breakfast and lunch menu. Opens at 9 a.m. daily. For dinner, don't miss crunchy (but definitely not vegan) **White Grass Cafe** (Freeland Road, Davis, 304-866-4114). The cafe is open through March daily for lunch, and Friday through Sunday for dinner. Call to reserve a 6 or 8 p.m. seating.

INFO: Tucker County Convention and Visitors Bureau, 800-782-2775, www.canaanvalley.org.