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The Town They Didn't Want You To Find Lewisburg, W. Va., Steps Out Of the Greenbrier's Shadow

By Steve Hendrix Washington Post Staff Writer Wednesday, September 27, 2006; Page C02

The Greenbrier resort has been keeping secrets again.

And I'm not talking about the super-clandestine bunker built under the hotel as a place to hide Congress in case of nuclear war. That's an old secret. (In fact, the Greenbrier just reopened the decommissioned bunker as a sort of Cold War preserve. More about that later.)

But old habits die hard, and there's something else the Greenbrier hasn't been telling us. Lewisburg, a fabulous visitor-friendly mountain town 10 minutes from the resort's front gate, may be a bigger secret than the bunker.

West Virginia's four-star Greenbrier is famous for being a recreational black hole -- once you go in, there's no breaking free of the all-inclusive pull of prepaid meals, in-house shopping, bars, movie theater, bowling alley, spa, etc. The Greenbrier is a posh world unto itself, the surrounding area just something you have to drive through to get there. I've been twice and never set foot off the property.

They never mentioned Lewisburg.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I went to the Greenbrier last week to take the new bunker tour and for the first time drove eight miles down the road to Lewisburg. Wow. I haven't had such a positive first

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The huge Cold War fallout bunker, below, that just reopened for public tours is the Greenbrier resort's best-known secret. But just eight miles away, the little-known mountain town of Lewisburg, W. Va., above, may be a bigger discovery for tourists. (Greenbrier County Convention And Visitors Bureau)

DETAILS

Lewisburg, W. Va.:

Recommendations for your visit include eating at Julian's, staying at the General Lewis Inn and more.

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impression of a town since hitchhiking into Christchurch, New Zealand, 20 years ago.

Drive the back road in (Route 60, rather than parallel Interstate 64) and you enter the town along a corridor of fine old frame houses, a tidy foyer for the showpiece downtown that appears over the final hill. In a shady little tuck of the mountainside, Lewisburg is built around a stock of intact 19th-century masonry, a Main Street row of banks, courthouses and other hearty architecture from a more civic age.

But this is a Mayberry setting with a Santa Fe soul. Most of it has been given over to a thriving stroll-about tourist quarter of martini bars, coffee shops, Irish pubs, art galleries, funky boutiques, a professional playhouse and the best kind of antiques stores (i.e., those with prices that make us city folk feel we're getting away with something). Heck, the place is home to its own working Carnegie Hall, one of only four left in the world.

Lewisburg may have been news to me, but it's been packing them in lately. A boom in vacation home sales has pumped up the tourist traffic. And judging from the storekeepers you meet, lots of expat New Yorkers and Bostonians have come to satisfy a growing local taste for latte and WiFi.

It has really taken off in the past few years, according to Stephen Jackendoff. A New York native, he has been in Lewisburg since coming for what was meant to be a brief visit 31 years ago. His restaurant, Julian's -- where he serves nightly as owner, chef, maitre d', waiter and sommelier -- has been thriving for 14 years. In that time, he has served a lot of Greenbrier chefs and executives, but not many guests.



"They never really wanted anyone to know about Lewisburg, but Lewisburg forged ahead anyway," Jackendoff says. (That's changing. In January, the resort began allowing customers to opt out of the full meal plan. Greenbrier concierges now call daily to book tables for guests, Jackendoff says.)

The fact is, you can take the Greenbrier out of the equation and still declare this a great hotel town, thanks largely to the delightful General Lewis Inn. It sits just above the cocktail buzz of downtown like an indulgent uncle, a blocky white hotel of mismatched chairs and curiosity-shop clutter.

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The inn and the town make a very appealing base for a weekend in the surrounding outdoors (Monongahela National Forest, Greenbrier State Forest, several limestone caverns) or enjoying the small-scale urban pleasures of Lewisburg itself (chamber concerts, plays, shopping and a darned good margarita at Del Sol Lounge). Oh, and the bunker.

The Greenbrier's new bunker tour is open to the general public every Wednesday and Sunday, the same 90-minute tour (for the same \$30) that Greenbrier guests get.

You probably know the back story: In the jittery early days of the Cold War, President Eisenhower got the ancient and wonderful Greenbrier resort to build a secret 112,000-square-foot fallout shelter to house the entire Congress should Moscow drop the big one on Washington. They concealed the massive project beneath a new hotel convention hall and for 34 years a shadow staff (posing as the resort's TV repair crew) kept it stocked with food and all the documents needed to run a post-apocalypse government. It was a brilliantly executed ruse, though apparently an open secret among locals.

"I'm one of two people in the county who will admit I had no idea it was here," said bunker guide Terry Thompson, whose own neighbor turned out to be one of the secret maintenance crew.

The bunker was outed by an article in The Washington Post Magazine in 1992, after

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intercontinental missiles had rendered obsolete all those plans for a pre-strike evacuation of Capitol Hill. Overnight, it went from top secret to tourist attraction. In 2004, CSX Corp. (the railroad that owns the Greenbrier) closed the bunker and converted most of it into a high-tech document storage company.

But the coolest parts -- the 433-foot entry tunnel, the decontamination showers, the hidden entrance -- reopened to the public in July. Daily tour groups file through the 25-ton blast door that was once camouflaged by a wall of poison ivy. Would-be senatorial bunk beds are on display in the small museum, along with other artifacts of an operation meant to keep 1,100 congressional refugees alive for up to 60 days. A new film on the project by the Virginia Historical Society is a great primer on the bunker and the age that produced it.

In all, the bunker is well worth the money and the time.

But be careful. Once you settle into Lewisburg, you may not ever make it over to the Greenbrier.



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