



Tourism First Impressions: Upper Valley Region of VT and NH

Overview: The Tourism First Impressions (TFI) program creates an exchange between people from two (or more) destination regions. A visitor group provides feedback to representatives from the host region regarding perceptions of tourism strengths and opportunities. In May 2025, a team of four professionals from West Virginia spent 5 days/4 nights touring a variety of communities in and near the Upper Valley region of New Hampshire and Vermont.



Woodstock, VT

Itinerary:

Day 1: Burlington, VT, Airport (VA) to Woodstock, VT.

Day 2: Enfield, Canaan, Grafton, Grantham

Day 3: Lebanon, Hanover, Lyme

Day 4: Norwich, White River Junction/Hartford, Quechee, Windsor, Cornish, Plainfield

Day 5: Norwich to Burlington Airport.

Summary: Visitors left the Upper Valley with a strong sense of its *authenticity, charm, and community pride*. The region's blend of small-town atmosphere, cultural depth, outdoor recreation, and local food created a well-rounded and memorable experience. Encounters with local residents and passionate local champions stood out. Visitors appreciated the *diverse and accessible attractions* that could suit a range of interests, from history and heritage to dining and family-friendly recreation. While no major negatives were reported, some noted that while the dual-state geography, bisected by the Connecticut River, provided a very interesting and unique experience, the region seemed to lack a unifying identity or clear brand, making it harder for tourists to immediately understand what ties the Upper Valley together. Additionally, the burden of discovery was placed on the traveler, and the region's appeal often became fully apparent only after arrival – both a positive and negative. Despite this, travelers expressed a desire to return and explore the region further.



The group visited several outdoor recreation assets, including a wildlife management area, a rail trail, and a section of the Appalachian Trail. Credit: Lisa Chase and Doug Arbogast

Trip Planning:

Respondents exploring the Upper Valley region relied on a mix of institutional websites, tourism pages, and social media platforms to gather information. Formal websites such as those from Dartmouth College, the Upper Valley Business Alliance, and Uppervalleyfun.com provide structured overviews of the region’s offerings. Dartmouth’s “Life in the Upper Valley” page appeals to visitors interested in rural culture, featuring categories like arts, farms, and outdoor recreation. In contrast, the Upper Valley Business Alliance emphasized business relocation and outdoor activities, offering less tourist-centric content, though resources like the LUV gift card program and itinerary suggestions add practical value.

More visitor-friendly were sites like Uppervalleyfun.com, which organized attractions by season and activity type which is helpful for itinerary planning. Trail-specific resources like the Upper Valley Trail Alliance and Trailforks were used by one visitor and cited as useful for finding hiking and mountain biking opportunities.

For at least one reviewer, social media platforms, particularly Reddit, emerged as a key source for authentic, crowdsourced recommendations. A simple Reddit search yielded locally endorsed spots—like scenic drives, eateries, and off-the-beaten-path trails—that were absent from formal tourism sites and revealed regional activities that traditional platforms might miss.



Credit: Doug Arbogast

Visitor Perceptions of the Region Prior to Visiting:

Prior to visiting, travelers perceived the Upper Valley as a picturesque and refined New England destination that was rich in small-town charm, arts and culture, and anchored by institutions like Dartmouth College. While outdoor recreation was noted, it was generally seen as moderate or secondary compared to more adventure-focused areas in the surrounding region like the White and Green Mountains. Instead, the Upper Valley promised a more well-rounded experience—calm, cultured, and authentic. The region appeared best suited for *affluent retirees, Gen X and older millennial families*, and *low-adventure travelers* seeking an immersive but relaxed experience.

Lasting Impressions:

Visitors noted that the **region's strengths lie in its authenticity, accessibility, and quality of experience**. Interstate access via I-91 and I-89 makes the region easy to reach, and the variety of unique local products, general walkability, and welcoming atmosphere were consistent themes. Visitors remarked on *good road conditions, low crime, and clean public spaces*, and appreciated the preservation of historic architecture in residential areas. While *cell service could be patchy* in rural zones, it was generally manageable.

Cultural and nature-based attractions—like the Hood Museum, Montshire Museum, VINS Nature Center, and Billings Farm—were highlights. While adventure offerings like skiing and biking exist, they cater more to casual recreation than thrill-seekers. Dining and lodging were well-regarded, with a range of allergy-conscious (appreciated!), locally sourced options and unique accommodations like the Shaker Museum and Norwich Inn.



Credit: Jada Lindblom

While visitors encountered a number of very passionate local ambassadors for the region, visitors observed **a lack of coordinated tourism promotion or development with no local organization responsible for destination marketing or management**. Signage was strong in Vermont but less so in New Hampshire, and tourism promotion appeared fragmented, placing the burden on visitors to research and plan independently.

The Upper Valley is seen as a region rich with potential, offering a broad range of experiences. However, visitors felt it was still in need of a *cohesive and coordinated* tourism strategy to boost its visibility for both locals and visitors and competitiveness. As one visitor noted: “I’m not sure what would get me here, but once you’re here, there are plenty of interesting things to see and do.” Visitors perceived that local residents may not be fully aware of the depth and breadth of leisure and recreation activities available within the region.

Overall Experience and Character:

Visitors appreciated the Upper Valley’s *small-town charm, scenic beauty, and cultural richness*. The



Credit: Doug Arbogast

region stood out as a place where *authentic local experiences* are still possible. The dual-state geography, bisected by the Connecticut River, added a layer of interest and uniqueness, with Hanover often viewed as the cultural and civic center. While the region doesn’t yet have a clearly defined brand, guests remarked on how each town held unexpected and well-maintained assets—creating a sense of discovery that made the visit feel personal and rewarding.

The region appeals particularly to history buffs, *arts and culture tourists*, *small-town explorers*, and those drawn to a sense of authenticity rather than tourist gloss. Visitors praised the abundance of local businesses, general stores, and historic downtowns. Visitors specifically commented (positively) on the lack of intrusion from chain retailers, aside from a small commercial zone in West Lebanon.

Hospitality and Community Connection:

Perhaps the strongest and most enduring impression was the *warmth and enthusiasm of local residents*. Across towns and encounters, visitors consistently described the people they met as *welcoming, knowledgeable, and proud of their communities*. Informal conversations (breakfast at Lou's, with a local historian, business owners, a resident who lived across from a rail trail access point) were frequently described by visitors. This strong sense of place and local ownership made the Upper Valley feel more than just a collection of attractions but of real places and communities.

Strengths That Stood Out:

Guests cited a *surprising variety of activities* packed into a compact area. From art, culture, and history to accessible outdoor recreation and family-friendly amenities, the region caters to a wide range of interests and ability levels. Dining and lodging were seen as high-quality and distinctly local. The proximity and diversity of offerings were perceived as especially valuable for visitors like multigenerational families or mixed-interest groups, allowing everyone to find something appealing within a short drive or walk.

Challenges and Missed Opportunities:

Despite its many assets, visitors noted that the Upper Valley *lacks a cohesive identity or centralized destination narrative*. Without a unifying message or point of entry, travelers often had to “connect the dots” themselves across multiple sources—formal websites, social media, or local advice. There was also a sense that local champions and community efforts were strong but fragmented, with limited shared infrastructure to coordinate tourism branding, visitor services, or itinerary-building across the multi-state region. Several respondents remarked that they weren't sure what made the region “the Upper Valley,” even after a positive visit. Certain assets, like the river, seemed underutilized. Several local residents also commented on concerns of overtourism they have witnessed in other more prominent tourism destinations recognizing the need for a balanced approach to tourism development and promotion.



Credit: Jada Lindblom

Future Potential and Takeaways:

Rather than calling for more attractions, visitors suggested better *wayfinding, trail connectivity, and cross-town/state/region navigation tools* to help showcase what's already there while remaining

cognizant of the potential for overtourism and intrusion on local residents' quality of life by attracting too many visitors to the region. Overall, guests expressed a strong desire to return—driven by the region's welcoming people, scenic towns, and the sense that there was *still more to discover*. The most memorable elements were those that combined authenticity with connection: *real conversations, preserved heritage, walkable downtowns, and the feeling of being part of a place that values its identity*. Sustainable destination marketing and management requires committed local leadership and a balanced approach that puts local residents first and recognizes the positive and negative impacts tourism can bring to a community. This region seems committed to achieving this.



From left: Lisa Chase, Doug Arbogast, Jessica Sutton, Daniel Eades.

Report date October 2025. Prepared by: Doug Arbogast, Daniel Eades, Jessica Sutton, and Lisa Chase. This report is part of a larger project between West Virginia University, Penn State University, University of Vermont, University of New Hampshire, and the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development. FMI: Douglas.Arbogast@mail.wvu.edu. Funding sources include USDA AFRI (2022-68006-3645), USDA McIntire Stennis Program (WVA00803), USDA Hatch Program (TEX0-8077), USDA Multistate Hatch Project (NE2251) and USDA NIFA (2023-51150-41113). Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and should not be construed to represent any official USDA or U.S. Government determination or policy.

