

CAROLINA CRAFTED

PADDLING GEAR, MADE IN ASHEVILLE, N.C., BY AND FOR PEOPLE WHO PADDLE

BY EUGENE BUCHANAN

Why have so many outdoor gear companies settled in Asheville, North Carolina? Ask longtime local paddler and Liquidlogic Kayaks Brand Manager Shane Benedict. “Not only is the paddling great, but the mountain biking is world-class,” says Benedict. “It’s also named Beer City USA almost every year, the food scene is ridiculous and there is tons of great live music. What’s not to like?”

The gear is pretty great too. Here are a few of our favorites.



▣ **Astral Designs:** “Asheville has year-round whitewater and beautiful, pristine trails,” says Astral founder Phil Curry, whose 25 employees make life vests and river shoes in a converted tobacco barn on the French Broad River. “And it’s an open-minded, creative community.” The creativity shows in the **Greenjacket** rescue PFD (\$249, astraldesigns.com) featuring Astral’s trademark foam tectonics construction, reinforced shoulders, integrated chest harness, and a big clamshell pocket we can’t stop raving about. Add fleece hand warmers, and this vest is the ultimate package to keep you safe and comfy on the river. Get there in comfort and style with the **Rassler** (\$119), a classic hike-to-huck river shoe with enhanced foot support, draining uppers, and its new sticky G Rubber soles.



▣ **Liquidlogic/Native Watercraft:** Liquidlogic started in 2000 as a dream on the banks of the nearby Green River Narrows. Together with sister brand Native Watercraft, the company now offers a full range of kayaks for everything from fishing to whitewater. This year Liquidlogic debuts the **Flying Squirrel** (\$900 plus shipping, liquidlogickayaks.com), a new creekboat model named for the signature move in the entrance to the Green’s best-known rapid, Gorilla. The design builds off the speedy hull profile of the company’s popular **Remix** creeker, with extra bow rocker and deck volume. For paddlers who fish, Native’s **Redfish 12 Angler** (\$740, nativewatercraft.com) combines stability and easy handling with a fish-ready deck layout. Sixty-five employees, most of them paddlers, fuel Native and Liquidlogic’s new production facility just south of Asheville.

TO FLETCHER, N.C., 10 MILES



▣ **Watershed:** Founded in the 1980s by river guides bent on building a better drybag, Watershed’s patented ZipDry closure and polyurethane-coated fabrics have become the gold standard for video boaters and anyone else who needs a quick-entry drybag that won’t leak, period. The 900-cubic-inch **Ocoee** (\$120, drybags.com) is a photographer’s favorite, while the 8,400-cubic-inch **Mississippi** (\$200) will keep a river wardrobe fresh, no matter how big and muddy your trip. Whatever river name goes on your duffel, rest assured it is made in Watershed’s production facility on the banks of the French Broad.



▣ **Eagles Nest Outfitters:** Brothers Peter and Paul Pinholster started ENO out of their minivan in 1999, crafting ultra-light hammocks out of old parachutes and selling them at music festivals. What a long, strange trip it’s been since. Led by their best-selling, two-person **DoubleNest Hammock** (\$70, eaglesnestoutfittersinc.com), which packs down to the size of a grapefruit and deploys in seconds, ENO now employs 28 people in the heart of Asheville’s South Slope district. “The community is relaxed, outdoor-loving and incredibly inspirational,” says ENO’s Natalie DeRatt. Plus, the factory is within a Frisbee toss of no less than six microbreweries.



▣ **Blue Ridge Chair Works:** After guiding rafts for years on the Cheat, Youghiogheny and Gauley rivers, Alan Davis eventually settled down in Asheville to make handcrafted canoe paddles and furniture. His two-piece **Blue Ridge Chair** (\$113, blueridgechair.com) is a model of sustainability, comfort and Appalachian craftsmanship. It’s also true to the raft-guide aesthetic—it folds flat, dries fast, and comes with a bottle opener.

WATERSHED

ASTRAL

EAGLES NEST
OUTFITTERS

BLUE RIDGE CHAIR WORKS

The Asheville Map

Best Local Map