



**Sandal Saga**  
How high-style collaborations have helped Birkenstocks endure **D3**

# OFF DUTY

**Ride 'Em Bronco**  
Ford saddles the latest iteration with a Wild West theme **D11**



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**Most hikers stop once they reach Grotto Falls, leaving the trail beyond typically empty.**

**On weekends the Charles Bunion Trail sees brisk foot traffic. Go midweek, and you may have the views to yourself.**

**The Junior Ranger Program is designed for kids but curious adults can earn a badge too.**

**The closer you stay to the park, the easier it is to catch the misty sunrises and glowing sunsets.**

## How to Make the Great Smokies Even Greater

On a return trip to America's most popular national park, a traveler learns from past mistakes and finds her own patch of euphoric solitude

BY CHELSEA BRASTED

**I** WAS STANDING near my husband, both of us perched carefully on the edge of Twentymile Creek Cascades, while a half-dozen light blue butterflies the size of nickels fluttered around our boots. We could hear the water rushing over rocks below us, the creek swollen from a late-summer storm we'd just barely missed. Around us, it felt as though the forest was breathing, and finally I realized we were, too. Deeply, fully breathing.

Maybe it was because we'd just driven down "The Tail of the Dragon," a stretch of scenic highway with 318 turns in 11 miles, or maybe it was because this was our first real vacation since the Covid pandemic turned the world upside down, but the calm that settled on us was almost palpable. In this part of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, there are no crowds, no choked parking lots, not even cellphone service. In that moment, it became clear: This is how America's most popular national park deserves to be experienced.

Look at the numbers, and it's obvious the term "popular" barely covers it: The Great Smoky Mountains received more than three times as many visitors in 2020 as Yellowstone, last year's second most-visited national park. And now, over the past year, even more people have headed to this park that straddles the boundary line between eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina, encompassing more than a half-million acres of old-growth forests and some of the tallest mountains in Appalachia. In this stretch of land, more than 85 inches of rain falls a year, supporting more than 20,000 species.

When many consider the Smoky Mountains, their first thoughts often edge toward wildly popular family vacation spots in Gatlinburg, Tenn., and nearby Pigeon Forge, Tenn. There you'll find a plethora of attractions and distractions from the natural beauty on display,

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**IF SO INCLINED**  
How a garden designer turned a backyard of barren hills into beauty **D10**

**LIGHTER TRAVEL**  
Sporty outings—like running in Morocco—to help shed lockdown pounds **D5**

**WHERE THERE'S FIRE...**  
...there's usually smoke. Not so with these innovative outdoor flame pits **D11**

**A BRIE-FREE EXISTENCE**  
Your guide to British farmhouse cheeses, a lovely alternative to Gallic goop **D6**



# DESIGN & DECORATING



**GROWN-UP CRIB** Eclectic décor from a variety of sources, as in this flat by Berlin designer Frank Stueve, beats an all-IKEA scheme.

ERROR, ERROR ON THE WALL

## A Sharp First Flat

Avoid the decorating gaffes common to new apartment renters

By Rachel Wolfe

**AFTER 16 MONTHS** cooped up with roommates or parents, young (and not-so-young) people have had enough. Those who can afford it are increasingly moving into their own first places when their leases end this summer and fall, said a spokesman for real-estate rental site StreetEasy. Searches that specified studio apartments are up 69% year-over-year.

When it comes to decorating these solo nests, however, designers say first timers’ greenness leads to errors: from cramming oafish sofas through doors they failed to measure to living sans civilities like curtains

and rugs. As New York City designer Phillip Thomas said, “Just because it’s your first apartment doesn’t mean it can’t have a sense of sophistication.”

Here, design pros highlight the five flubs that novice renters most frequently make on their way to, as millennials call it, “adulting.” Plus: chic alternatives.

**The Unconquered Divide**

Generations of squished people have passed down various methods to separate a studio apartment into living and sleeping spaces: curtains, free-standing screens, bookshelves, even a delineating row of jungle-y plants. They all can make a space feel smaller, said Francesca Bucci, founder of BG Studio in

Manhattan. Mr. Thomas noted that such barriers frequently cut off window light, creating a murky cave. “There is nothing more awful than living in a space without light,” he said.

**Instead** Rather than placing your bed’s headboard against a wall, Ms. Bucci directed, “float” the bed, with the foot facing a window and leaving at least two feet of circulation at the bottom. A medium-height headboard will act as a divider without depriving the rest of the studio of natural light. Arrange your seating area on the other side of it, backing your couch against it. This way you won’t subject guests to your rumpled pillows or that stuffed animal from which you haven’t managed to brutally sever ties just yet.

**Helter-Skelter Inheritances**

Beware a hodgepodge of hand-me-down furniture relatives have cast off. Manasquan, N.J., designer Christina Kim warned that, “the scale of such furniture is usually off, and a mix of too many styles can feel chaotic.”

**Instead** “Do not feel obligated to accept every piece that comes your way,” said Mr. Thomas. If a donation doesn’t work with your décor, politely decline it or modify the offering so it suits your style. In his first rental, in Washington, D.C., Mr. Thomas draped quilts and tossed cut-velvet pillows to align random sofas with his aesthetic.

‘Do not feel obligated to accept every hand-me-down piece that comes your way.’

**Place-Holder Art**

Worried about forfeiting security deposits, renters often settle for a few posters hung with adhesive strips, complained New York City designer Young Huh. Even with more ambitious prints or paintings, noted fellow Manhattan designer Starrett Ringbom, newbies tend to hang them too high, mounted in cheap plastic frames.

**Instead** Invest in some spackle. “Patching and painting at the end of the lease—even if only a year—is a small price to pay for an inviting and collected home,” Ms. Huh said. Hang art at eye level for comfortable viewing, advised Ms. Ringdom, who also contends that having art professionally framed is a worthwhile investment. “A silver-leaf frame instantly elevates a poster from your last museum visit into art worthy of the living room wall,” she said.

**Single-Source Sameness**

“It’s so exciting getting your first place, and often you’ll shop for everything at once from the same big-box store,” said Lauren Wall, co-founder of Principle Faucets, in Santa Cruz, Calif. But can a single retailer really represent your many-faceted personality?

**Instead** “Invest some time in searching for killer, high-quality resale pieces to mix with budget-friendly new items,” Ms. Wall suggested. Your space will have “more intention and character” than if you buy everything at once. Mr. Thomas recommended searching estate sales and online auctions. And don’t just fixate on how a particular piece looks in



ODD SQUAD / PROS RECALL WEIRD FIRST-TIME DECORATING MOVES

**Beach chairs as lounge chairs.** Keep the outdoor furniture outside!”  
—Marc Bacher, founder, Stuga, Austin, Texas

**Beer cans** stacked to create a base and a piece of glass on top. Creative way to recycle but not a good look when you are trying to look grown-up. I’ve also seen bed sheets nailed to the window frame as curtains.”  
—Amanda Thompson designer, New York City

**A shelf of glass** bottles filled with high-lighter-infused water to display with black lights. Actually, just say no to black lights to begin with.”  
—Lauren Wall, co-founder, Principle Faucets, Santa Cruz, Calif.

**A contractor’s work** light, with the plastic cage, draped over a bookcase.”  
—Annie Elliot, interior designer, Washington, D.C.

“**Furniture fashioned** out of cinder blocks. It was ominous.”  
—Christina Kim, interior designer, Manasquan, N.J.

the context of a catalog photo: Catalina Echavarria, co-founder of Miami furniture and interior design firm CEU Studio, suggested you shop in person, if possible, and think about how you’ll use the item. “If I sit on a couch, I want to feel hugged and nurtured...if I step on a rug, I want to love it barefoot and feel its texture,” she said.

**Casting a Bad Light**

If you think you’re all set with your landlord’s flush-mounted ceiling lights (aka “boob lights,” so christened because they often take the form of hemispheres of milky glass with nipple-like finials), think again. “Overhead lighting is unflattering and ineffective for tasks such as reading,” said Washington, D.C., designer Annie Elliott, who pointed out that these fixtures often use bulbs that cast white walls in eerie, blue-ish, hospital-like glows.

**Instead:** Buy a cheerful table lamp to add color, style and, of course, light, said Ms. Elliott. “It will elevate the entire room.” Warm, yellow-toned lightbulbs will help create a homey feeling. Swap out your landlord’s ceiling bulbs and store them so you can replace them when you move out.

### FLOWER SCHOOL

## Ka-Bloomy!

Floral designer **Lindsey Taylor** captures a painting’s Big Bang energy in a spacey bouquet

**FOR JULY’S ARRANGEMENT** I looked to an exhibit at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art (through Aug. 8) dedicated to the work of painter Julie Mehretu, born in 1970 in Ethiopia and now based in New York. I was struck by her 2001 mural-like canvas “Retopistics: A Renegade Excavation,” about 17 feet by 8 feet and rendered in ink and acrylic. Against its monumental off-white background, a colorful explosion of lines, drips, ribbons and geometric shapes swirls over architectural drawings. Her work is multilayered and dynamic, and I set about figuring out a way to depict this energy with flowers.

The ceramic vase I chose, whose matte black shape could have jumped off the canvas, helped set the mood. So the blooms could dance about in an airy arrangement, I secured a floral frog inside the vessel to hold up each stem. Various flower types performed versions of the colorful gestures in Ms. Mehretu’s work. The curving purple alliums I selected are cultivated to grow that way by innovative Japanese farmers. To represent shades of blues, I cut hyacinth, echinops, and muscari to different lengths and inserted them, careful to leave ample gaps. Next came bell-shaped white leucojum from my garden and a single strong yellow ranunculus. I cut punchy orange tulips and playful pink carnations short so they’d just break the rim of the vase and unite the vessel and blossoms into one tableau. Through careful arranging, I was able to emulate the horizontality of the painting. It brought back memories of playing the game of pickup sticks as a child, a game where each move matters and each stick affects the others. I sometimes wonder if, by obsessively playing that game, I was already honing my floral skills.



### THE ARRANGEMENT

A floral frog inside the vase (above) helps separate stems of allium, globe thistle, tulips and ranunculus to leave negative space like that found in the 2001 painting ‘Retopistics: A Renegade Excavation’ by Julie Mehretu, Ink and Acrylic on Canvas, (left).

Vessel: Medium Kado Vase in Matte Black, \$158, bloomist.com



### THE INSPIRATION