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# 2022 SPRING COAST MAGAZINE

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# Visit *Southern* West Virginia

An Outdoor Adventures Playground





Entering TreeTops Canopy Tour for ziplining.



Ziplining at Adventures on the Gorge.

## VISIT SOUTHERN WEST VIRGINIA

Story and Photos by Richard Varr

A thin mist shrouds the treetops as the rising sun starts to filter through the dense forest. It's just after 8 a.m. and my pace along the trail begins to hasten as we head to the adventure I've been anticipating all week. The air is fresh; the coolness, crisp and my nerves—well, shaky. That's because I'm going to jump off a treetop canopy high above the forest floor for the first time

Yes, it's my first time ziplining, and it seems that the natural beauty of this Southern West Virginia forest with its towering hemlock, magnolia, silver maple and black birch trees is a great introduction. Strapped in a secure harness, I hear the clinks of the safety gear as my guide hooks me to the two overhead zipline cables between the trees. And then comes the command: "Go!" I take the courageous step and my glide builds speed, with the zipping sound of my pulley wheels quickly intensifying. What seems like only several seconds later, my speed diminishes as I reach the next treetop platform with

what I'm proud to say is a perfect landing.

A beginner no more, I'm now thrilled to do it again and again. That's because my TreeTops Canopy Tour with the Adventures on the Gorge outdoor resort includes traversing 10 ziplines, five treetop rope bridge walks, and three short hikes, all made easy—and safe—thanks to my guides whose first priority is to tether guests to safety cables for each trek. "There's still a sense of adventure even after all these times," says guide Matthew Cook. "Every trip is different."

Adventures on the Gorge skirts the edges of the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve, the country's newest national park established in December 2020 with the redesignation of what was the New River Gorge National River. Located near Fayetteville, the park and preserve's total area stretches 53 miles along the New River (despite the name, one of the world's oldest rivers) while encompassing more than 70,000 acres of forested canopy within its dramatically sloping river valley. With tranquil lakes, challenging whitewater rapids, and crisscrossing trails leading to commanding views, the park has become one of the state's premier recreational spots for hiking, fishing, rock climbing, rafting, kayaking, horseback riding and, yes, ziplining.





*Rhododendron, the state flower of West Virginia, adds color to the green mountains.*



*Overlooking the New River Valley and Gorge is a great place to meditate.*

Yet one activity unique to this park is the walk underneath the spectacular New River Gorge Bridge, one of the highest and longest single-span arch bridges in the world. Completed in 1977, the bridge stretches 3,030 feet, extending U.S. Route 19 over the New River. The Bridge Walk is a mile-and-a-quarter trek including trails to reach the bridge and a more than half-mile jaunt on a two-foot-wide catwalk just below the roadway. Linked to a safety cable, walkers have a breathtaking view of the river more than 870 feet below.

Many of the hikes within the park lead to exceptional bridge and river views. At Adventures on the Gorge, I join a hike along the Endless Wall Trail as light rain pitter-patters against the leafy canopy, making the trail slippery and muddy. “The tall conifers around you are Eastern Hemlocks, considered the redwoods of the east,” points out hiking guide Brenna Craig. “They grow one inch in diameter every 10 years, so it takes quite a while to get this tall.”

Along the way, we pass rhododendrons, the State Flower of West Virginia, with their pink and white blooms. We also see metal tags on trees indicating their age, some more than 200 years old. The hike’s highlight comes when we reach a clearing with views of the New River below, where rapids peak over rocky stretches and wispy

clouds dip deep into the valley. “On rainy days you can see the fog coming over the gorge,” points out guide Rocky McDonald. “Sometimes you can see isolated thunderstorms with it raining on that side of the gorge, but not on this side.”

What makes the New River even more unique is, like Egypt’s Nile River, it flows from south to north. Thus, to reach one of its more turbulent waterfalls from the landmark New River Gorge Bridge, we drive in a direction that’s upriver, or south, for an hour and a half to Sandstone Falls. The drive includes an eight-mile stretch along River Road, the park’s only scenic riverside roadway. I’m surprised to see the falls are not tall, but instead more than 1,500 feet wide where the river drops from 10 to 25 feet, with cascading torrents crashing against rock islands.

On the southern edge of the national park, the town of Hinton, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is further upstream along sloping riverside hills. I notice the distinctive late 19th-century and early 20th-century neoclassical Gothic Revival and Victorian churches and buildings, but what catches my eye is a brightly-colored wall mural with a smoke-spewing locomotive. The mural hints at Hinton’s historic past, founded when the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Company laid track





*The statue serves as a tribute to West Virginia coal miners at the State Capitol Complex in Charleston.*



*Miner's house at the Exhibition Coal Mine in Beckley.*



*Log house and barn at the Exhibition Coal Mine in Beckley.*

snaking along the New River and built a depot at Hinton's location in the early 1870s. Trains opened the region to commerce and development, transporting incoming residents, lumber and coal as mining developed.

This history comes to life at the Hinton Railroad Museum with displays of photos, train logs, and other memorabilia donated by area families of former railroad workers. The most notable exhibit is an extraordinary wooden railroad model and figurines display running the length of the museum. The lead figure, a strongman wielding two hammers, represents local legend John Henry who challenged his ability to dig tunnels through rock against the new steam drill.

"The railroad was building a tunnel through the mountain and wanted to introduce a steam drill for efficiency, which meant a lot of people would have probably been laid off," explains Hinton tour guide Gayle Vest. "John Henry said I can do it faster and better than the steam drill." With a 10-pound hammer in each hand, Henry was victorious, but with a sad twist. "He was able to drill a hole 14 feet in the same time the steam drill could only go nine feet," continues Vest. "John Henry won the contest, but he died soon thereafter of exhaustion."

West of the National Park, the Exhibition Coal Mine in

Beckley offers a detailed look into West Virginia's coal mining history. Pickaxes and other digging tools hang from the walls of the central museum, and visitors can tour relocated 1920's buildings from mining communities. A cramped, three-room house on the property was typical for miners' families. The church with its varnished wooden floors and pews served the community not only for worship, but for social and business gatherings.

The highlight of my visit, however, was the underground tour of an actual coal mine open from around 1890 to 1910. We boarded a tram that chugged amidst dimly lit chipped rock walls with wooden cross beams above us. "All the work in this mine was done by hand. There was never electricity in this mine when it was working," says Don Barrett, a former miner who now leads tours. "Miners were expected to load 10 tons a day, paid 20 cents a ton. That was \$2 a day. They used animals to pull the coal outside on wooden rails."

"Everything we owned came from the company store. That's why they owned our souls in the company store," Barrett laments of the hardships. "We were raised in a four-room house—eight kids, mom and dad in four rooms. My dad worked in the mine for over 50 years. I worked 23 years and that was enough for me."





*A dramatic view of the New River Gorge Bridge.*



*The main street of Hinton.*





*Lincoln statue at the West Virginia State Capitol in Charleston.*



*Outside the beautiful Greenbrier Hotel.*

The complex also features the Youth Museum with interactive exhibits and a planetarium, while the Mountain Homestead showcases 19th-century Appalachian frontier life with eight reconstructed log cabins including a general store, weaver shed with a giant loom, and blacksmith shop. “All their time and energy went into survival,” explains an exhibit attendant.

The circular Tamarack Market—a Beckley landmark with its red roof and spires—is a shopper’s dream for those wanting authentic West Virginia arts and crafts. In fact, more than 2,800 artisans from the state’s 55 counties sell their goods there—cutting boards in the shape of the state, for example, jewelry, t-shirts, pocketknives, crafted chairs, furniture, and food products. Fine art galleries and workshops featuring artisan demonstrations are also within the facility standing just a few miles from where Interstate 64 and Interstate 77 merge.

East of the National Park and beyond Lewisburg sits The Greenbrier, a colossal 710-room world-class resort with its plush lobbies and lounges. But what may be the most interesting highlight of this National Historic Landmark is what’s buried deep below the hotel’s West Virginia Wing—what was one of the country’s best-kept secrets during the Cold War. Built from 1958-61 during the Eisenhower Administration, the so-called U.S.

Government Relocation Facility remains a remarkably well-preserved maze of tunnels and rooms and is open for tours. Dug 720 feet deep, the facility’s 153 rooms on two floors are where Congress would have slipped away in the event of a real nuclear threat or blast in nearby Washington, D.C.

Rooms include 18 dormitories with original bunk beds, a power plant to meet the needs of 1,100 people for 40 days, a 12-bed clinic with an operating room, and a kitchen with a 60-day supply of food. A somewhat cramped auditorium-like chamber is where Congress would have met if an actual nuclear event did occur. The tour, which emphasizes the basic accommodations with little privacy and no luxury, begins by entering through an 18-ton blast door on the hotel’s lower level. Other entrances are secured with massive 25- and 30-ton blast doors.

What amazes me most about the Relocation Facility, however, is how it was kept a secret for more than 30 years until the *Washington Post* exposed the truth in 1992. Employees were sworn to secrecy and, except for congressional leaders, most members of Congress didn’t know about the bunker, says tour guide Ernestine Atkinson. “We’re mountain people and we know how to keep secrets,” she admits. “We’ve been doing this for years.”





*Check out where the miners had dinner while working in a coal mine.*



*Railroad figurines at the Hinton Railroad Museum.*



*More railroad figurines at the Hinton Railroad Museum.*



*Shop at Tamarack Market in Beckley for West Virginia treasures.*

If traveling to Charleston, just over an hour's drive west of the New River Gorge Bridge, a stop at the State Capitol complex is worth a visit. Off the shores of the Kanawha River, the Capitol's copper and gold leaf dome is a glittering landmark reaching even higher than the U.S. Capitol.

Outside the front entrance stands a statue known as Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight, depicting a somber 16th president cloaked in a long robe. It's suggested his humble look might be symbolic of the country's strife during the Civil War. In fact, it was during Lincoln's term when West Virginia became a state in 1863, formed in part when northern counties broke off from secessionist Virginia and remained loyal to the U.S.

A must see within the Capitol complex is the West Virginia State Museum, its 26 discovery rooms highlighting prehistoric through modern-day history. Exhibits range from stone arrowheads and weapons and uniforms from two world wars to a recreated coal mine and diorama of the New River Gorge Bridge at twilight. Catching my attention are frontiersman Daniel Boone's late 18th-century musket and walking stick, as does what the museum believes could possibly be the noose used to hang abolitionist John Brown for his pre-Civil War siege at Harpers Ferry.

History buffs might also like to see South Charleston's Criel Mound, a Native American burial site dating back to the second century B.C. and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It's now part of a municipal park often used for community fairs and carnivals.

My visit was a great opportunity to learn more about West Virginia's natural beauty, history and culture, recalling a quick lesson from Adventure on the Gorge's hiking guide Brenna Craig. "To get the Appalachian accent correct, you have to say Appalachia (ap-a-latch-a)," she told me. "We don't say Appalachia (ap-a-lay-cha"). If you say that, we'll throw an apple at ya!"

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**  
<https://wvtourism.com> • <https://adventuresonthegorge.com/>