

The New River Gorge Bridge looms nearly 900 feet above the New River, which alternates in places between nearly still waters to thrilling whitewater rapids.





NEW RIVER GORGE CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

# Wild and Truly Wonderful

## West Virginia's New River Gorge is a Playground for All Ages

★  
BY KATE McDERMOTT



**MY HUSBAND ONCE TOLD ME THAT MY IDEA OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY WAS TAKING AN EXIT RAMP AT 25 MPH. So imagine his surprise when I suggested that we go whitewater rafting on West Virginia's relentless New River.**

Located only five hours from Frederick County, the New and Gauley rivers snake their way through southern West Virginia near the convergence of U.S. Interstates 77 and 64, about 55 miles southeast of Charleston.

The New River Gorge is known for its iconic steel arch bridge and the legions that flock to its railings each year to make the 876-foot-plunge toward the gorge's depths during the annual Bridge Jumping Day. But the

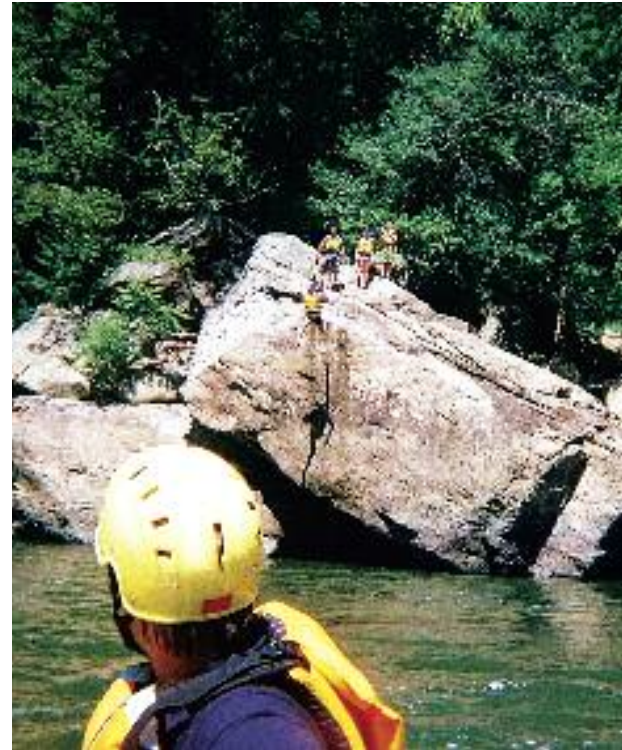
area beckons adventure-seekers of all ages with its variety of outdoor activities that range from mountain biking and hiking to rock climbing and horseback riding—and of course, whitewater rafting.

One of the oldest rivers in the world, the New River winds its way through a 1,000-foot-deep sandstone gorge that drops 240 feet over a 14-mile stretch. Its sister river, the Gauley, is known as “the beast of the East” and is considered by whitewater enthusiasts





WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE



From the overlook at Hawks Nest State Park, you can see the tree-covered walls of the New River Gorge. The area is home to many abandoned coal mines and is part of the National Coal Heritage Trail that runs through 13 counties in the heart of the Appalachian Mountains. **Right:** Thrill seekers taking a break from their whitewater rafts jump off 20-foot rock formations into the New River.

to offer some of the best runs in the world. The Gauley drops more than 668 feet over 28 miles, consistently offering anywhere from Class III to Class V-plus rapids. (See p.112 to learn how rapids are classified.)

### SPIN CYCLE

For our whitewater fun, we took a half-day excursion on the New River. In another testament as to why you should *always* read the fine print carefully, what I thought would be a fun family outing spent dodging the occasional swirling eddy and whitewater spray turned out to be much more. Think more along the lines of a ride in a giant washing machine stuck on the spin cycle.

We found that out after our almost 30-minute bus ride to the base of the canyon and were preparing to “put in” as they say in river parlance. Outfitted with our life jackets, helmets and paddles, I thought we were all set. Then our guide started

saying things like, “We will encounter a few Class V rapids on this run,” and, “You need to know what to do if you fall out of the raft or you may get stuck in a hydraulic you will not get out of,” or the topper, “If you want to opt out, you need to speak now. The bus will take you back up.”

I surveyed the faces of my husband and three boys. Some of them seemed completely clueless (not necessarily an uncommon look, mind you) as to the dangers we were about to face, while our 11-year-old was looking at me like, *Are you kidding me?! We are really going to do this?* The reporter in me had headlines spinning in my head: “Frederick Family’s Vacation Takes Tragic Turn” or “Mother Takes Family on Death Outing.”

But since no one else was chickening out, I succumbed to peer pressure and held on to the belief that if we got caught in one of those dreaded hydraulics certainly my husband would heroically jump out and save me or the

boys. Thankfully, we never needed to test the degree of his loyalty.

What did happen, however, was four hours and eight miles of some of the biggest thrills and fun we’ve had together as a family. Yes, there were definitely some white-knuckle moments on the whitewater, but we managed to navigate the biggest rapids and eddies with surprising ability. And in one of the most lasting memories of the adventure, after we survived some of the wildest moments—rapids with names like “Surprise,” “Double Z,” “Miller’s Folly,” and “Thread the Needle”—we would encounter bathwater-calm stretches of the river, at which point our guide would invite everyone to jump out of the raft and simply float, allowing the river’s gentle current to carry us downstream a ways before it was time to re-board for more rapid excitement.

Along the way, we chatted with other outfitters in their rafts as we waited to make our way through some



During the annual Bridge Jumping Day festivities, hundreds of jumpers take a heart-stopping plunge toward the bottom of the New River Gorge. **Right:** After four hours of dodging and maneuvering the New River's rapids, Danny McDermott was happy to find *terra firma* right beneath the bridge.

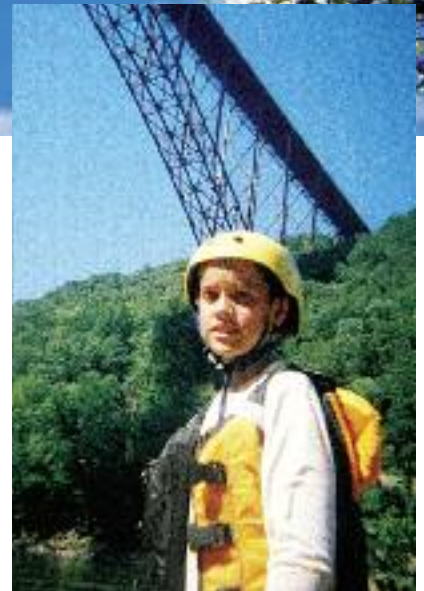
of the narrowest (and therefore most harrowing) parts of the trip. We watched some groups as they jumped off the 20-foot rock formations into the river and held our breath as kayakers got tossed around like corks as they hurtled their way through the rapids—always managing to come out right side up. But we got a thrill of a different sort when our journey wound down and the majestic New River Gorge Bridge loomed above us. We ended our adventure right beneath the bridge, giving us an altogether new perspective on just how deep the gorge is.

### BRIDGE TO ADVENTURE

Before our river outing we'd actually seen the bridge from a different perspective. The National Park Service operates the Canyon Rim Visitors Center which offers an amazing aerial view of the gorge, the river and the bridge. You can watch a brief video about the construction of the bridge, which was the longest steel arch span in the world

when it was completed in 1977. (It is still the longest bridge of its kind in the Western Hemisphere.) Then you should take a stroll along a wooden boardwalk that leads from the visitors' center to two observation decks which offer unobstructed views of the bridge. If you want to get really up-close-and-personal with this engineering marvel, several outfitters offer tours of the 24-inch wide catwalk beneath the bridge roadway.

Without a doubt, however, the structure is probably best known as the spot where people take the ultimate leap of faith. On the third Saturday of October (Oct. 20 this year), as many as 80,000 people descend on the New River Gorge Bridge to watch hundreds of BASE (Building, Antenna, Span and Earth) jumpers parachute or rappel—legally—off the bridge toward the canyon nearly 900 feet below. Billed as the largest extreme sports event in the world, the jumpers have given birth to an entire festival that features a parade, live music, a giant pancake breakfast



and a chili and corn bread cook-off in nearby Fayetteville.

Even the less adventurous will find a wealth of thrills in the New River area. The region is home to scores of licensed outfitters, who in addition to offering whitewater tours, cater to adrenaline junkies of all abilities and ages with everything from rock climbing and rappelling the cliff walls of the gorge to zip line canopy tours that provide amazing views of the area's majestic scenery.

### ACE IN THE HOLE

Having far surpassed my thrill quota with our whitewater outing, I was





Adventure Lake at Ace Resort in Oak Hill offers big fun in the form of giant inflatables, including water trampolines, catapults and gyro-balls.

content to limit myself to the fun offered at Adventure Lake at ACE Adventure Resort in nearby Oak Hill. Giant inflatable toys, including an iceberg, catapult, water trampolines and gyro-balls, provided plenty of fun for all of us. I even tried the lake's zip line, jumping off a three-story tower and gliding down for a graceful water landing just like a loon—or at least that's what I hoped. I probably just looked and sounded like a lunatic. The guys also spent a morning playing mountain-top paint ball at ACE, armed with 500 paintballs each and enough testosterone to rival an NFL locker room.

Afterward, we stopped to eat at a New River institution, Dirty Ernie's Rib Pit. The restaurant is named after a legendary local who made a great deal of money selling food and drink to miners in the area. Ernie was an old man with a dirty beard who always looked a bit unkempt and who was less than proper with the women, thus earning the moniker "Dirty Ernie." The eatery, while not white-linen dining, is not dirty and offers a delicious and large menu with a variety of barbeque pit treats that are sure to please.

Dirty Ernie's is just one of several fun and unique dining options in the area. The same variety is available in lodging options, with everything from campgrounds and cabins to chain hotels to full resorts like ACE. We opted to stay at the lodge at Hawks Nest State Park. Located about 15 miles from the New River Gorge Bridge, the lodge offers standard rooms plus suites, an outdoor pool and a continental breakfast. But the best part is the views. Located on the northeast side of the New River Gorge, Hawks Nest State Park offers several hiking trails, an aerial tram to the base of the gorge, a nature center and jet boat rides along the New River. The park even has a golf course.

In fact, you'd be hard-pressed to take in all there is to do in just this one part of the state. There are Civil War sites, a celebration of the state's thriving arts scene at the Tamarack Cultural Center, and even a glimpse of American lore in the Cold War-era underground bunker at the Greenbrier Resort. West Virginia has long been the brunt of many jokes, but after a trip to the New River area you'll undoubtedly see it in a different, and positively memorable, light. **FM**

## BEFORE YOU GO

### New River Gorge Convention & Visitors Bureau

[www.newrivergorgecvb.com](http://www.newrivergorgecvb.com)

### New River Gorge Bridge

[www.nps.gov/neri/planyourvisit](http://www.nps.gov/neri/planyourvisit)

### ACE Adventure Resort

[www.aceraft.com](http://www.aceraft.com)

### Hawks Nest State Park

[www.hawksnestsp.com](http://www.hawksnestsp.com)

### Tamarack Cultural Center

[www.tamarackwv.com](http://www.tamarackwv.com)

## WHITewater RAFTING RAPIDS

**Rating Scale: Class I—V**

**CLASS I:** Moving water with a few riffles and small waves. Few or no obstructions.

**CLASS II:** Easy rapids with smaller waves, clear channels that are obvious without scouting. Some maneuvering might be required.

**CLASS III:** Rapids with high, irregular waves. Narrow passages that often require precise maneuvering.

**CLASS IV:** Long, difficult rapids with constricted passages that often require complex maneuvering in turbulent water. The course may be hard to determine and scouting is often necessary.

**CLASS V:** Extremely difficult, long and very violent rapids with highly congested routes, which should be scouted from shore. Rescue conditions are difficult, and there is a significant hazard to life in the event of a mishap. The upper limit of what is possible in a commercial raft.

Source: International Scale of River Difficulty