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Mountain State Getaway

Big-city attractions quickly become overrated when exploring West Virginia's backwoods.

By Nancy Dickinson



Today's Cass Scenic Railroad follows the same route as the Shay locomotives did in 1901 to haul lumber downhill to Cass.
West Virginia Division of Natural Resources

A train meandering through countryside dotted with small towns immersed in coal mining. Hundreds of private and public hiking trails showing the best the state has to offer. Dozens of stocked lakes, streams and rivers with trout so large one would swear they couldn't get any bigger, until the next one is reeled in. This is but a little of the best West Virginia has to offer.

Those who pay a visit to the eastern side of the Mountain State should prepare to be awed, amazed and enchanted because the region is an overlooked gem.

Living the History

Some would say West Virginia was created under slightly cunning means. Residents of Virginia's western counties

were generally unhappy with preference shown to the eastern counties from the approval of the state's constitution in 1776 onward. When those same eastern counties voted to secede from the Union in 1861, the delegates for the western counties stormed out of the convention, vowing to form a pro-Union government. A delegation subsequently headed to Washington for Congressional approval as a new state.

Although the U.S. Constitution says a new state must gain approval from the original state, and the West Virginia del-egation had no such endorsement, Congress eventually approved the legislation, President Lincoln gladly signed the bill into law and West Virginia entered statehood in 1863.

Today's West Virginians celebrate being a state steeped in historical significance, from coal mines dating to the 19th century to state parks devoted to Civil War history, at every turn. It's difficult to find a location that isn't reminiscent of times gone by.

The Cass Scenic Railroad State Park, in Cass, is a particular favorite of both residents and visitors alike. Snaking its way up Cheat Mountain, the historical railroad takes people to the former lumber town of Whittaker Station, active until the early 1900s, and Bald Knob, the state's third-highest elevation. The lonesome cry of the train's whistle fills the air along with the puffing and chugging of the steam engine. Back at ground level, restored company houses are available for vacation rental, while caboose rentals, complete with bunk beds for the kids, are available at Whittaker Station and Bald Knob.

Visitors looking for coal-mining history will find it by heading south to Beckley, where they can become immersed in life at a typical coal camp at the Beckley Exhibition Coal Mine. Tours with guides who worked the mines in the area for decades are available. A walk through historical buildings lets visitors imagine life in the 1920s and '30s, complete with a doctor's office and barber shop.

Some of West Virginia's state parks are built around the history of the Civil War and shouldn't be overlooked. Roanoke's AAA Four Diamond-rated Stonewall Resort is located near the childhood home of Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson and sits on 26-mile-long Stonewall Jackson Lake, the state's second largest. Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park, near Cass, was the site of a Civil War battle and includes a small cemetery with several graves of unknown Confederate soldiers left behind when their unit was routed. Near Summersville, north of Beckley, is Carnifex Ferry Battlefield State Park, which still has artillery used in the battle on display.

A Hiker's Dream

With more than 800 miles of hiking trails in state parks and forests, the decision on where to go adventuring will be a difficult one. Threading their way through the state, the hiking trails of West Virginia are available in a range of difficulty ratings. The options include a section of the Appalachian Trail in the eastern panhandle, near Harper's Ferry. No matter the time of year, there is sure to be a trail to accommodate any enthusiast's style of hiking.

In the winter months, when snow can become deep in the mountains, hikers can strap on snowshoes or cross-country skis and relish the beauty of the state's 12 million acres of forestland, perhaps coming across a herd of white-tailed deer or a flock of wild turkeys. Carrying a camera everywhere is the best idea for those looking to capture wildlife shots. In the fall, days are warm and wildlife is in abundance, but nights can cool off, so travelers should bring a jacket.

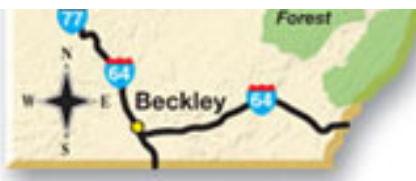


Stonewall Resort boasts an Arnold Palmer-designed golf course that was ranked 23rd in Golf Week's 2007 list of America's Top 100 Courses.

Stonewall Resort

The Angler in All of Us

The state's Department of Natural Resources is devoted to making sure every guest goes home with a lifetime supply of memories by trying to catch the largest fish he or she has ever caught. Some streams and small lakes are stocked annually with warm-water fish such as channel catfish and muskie, while rainbow, brown and brook trout—cold-water fish—are stocked from January through April. Anglers may catch up to 50-inch muskie at Stonewall Resort.



A few of the state's lakes, rivers and streams are catch-and-release only; at Stonewall Resort, it's catch-and-release for the trophy-size bass, but the rest are there for the taking. West Virginia, like all states, has strict laws regarding fishing, so being familiar with the laws before visiting may save

guests an expensive ticket later.

But West Virginia has so much to offer those in pursuit of an array of activities that the only restrictions in the Mountain State are self-imposed.

Planning Your Trip

For more information, contact the West Virginia Department of Tourism at (800) 225-5982 or www.wvtourism.com. For travel-planning assistance, visit a AAA Travel agent or AAA.com/travel.

NANCY M. DICKINSON is a freelance writer based in Palominas, Ariz.

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