



A panoramic view from Petit Jean Mountain, with the Arkansas River seen on the left.

Arkansas' Petit Jean State Park offers rugged beauty and a romantic getaway

BY SEAN CHAFFIN

ROCK STORY

We had been hiking for almost an hour down the mountainside into the shady canyon. Jagged rock formations surrounded us and seemed out of place here in northwest Arkansas. After trudging down a steep slope, the trail dropped down to a shallow creek, quickly flowing over small rocks before Cedar Falls plunged 90 feet into the canyon.



Cedar Falls at Petit Jean State Park.

It was early June, and my wife Kathy, 4-year-old daughter Marie, and I were seeking outdoor adventure, scenery, and great camping. At Petit Jean State Park in west central Arkansas, we had found all three. The park lies between the better known Ozark and Ouachita Mountains, but this park's unspoiled beauty shouldn't be overlooked.

Our first trail was a perfect hike for our suburbanite speed and agility. As we hiked along the creek, water trickled along the slick-rock bottom swooshing downstream in every direction. Vast numbers of towering oak, hickory, pine, sycamore, and dogwood trees shaded us from the hot sun. But after an afternoon on the trail we are all sweat-soaked and ready for a break.

A respite came in the form of a stream running down a natural rock ledge into the awaiting creek below. Marie and I slowly climbed the slick rocks toward the water streaming off the ledge. Our bare feet tingled from the cold water, and we dipped our heads under the stream for a quick cool down. Our hair and shirts now wet, all three of us moved to the creek's edge and dipped our feet into the running water. The water felt great, and this was a great start to our trip through Cedar Creek Canyon.

Canyon Country

Petit Jean State Park lies approximately 65 miles northwest of Little Rock, and almost 1100 feet above the Arkansas River Valley. Its 2658 acres feature pristine beauty and rock formations, caves, and outcroppings that

seem like they belong in Utah rather than Arkansas. The state park's natural beauty made *Camping Life's* Top 10 State Parks list in 2006 — and for good reason. This pristine mountain paradise offers something for all types of outdoor enthusiasts.

Cedar Falls is one of the park's main attractions. Several mountainside lookouts offer views of the falls, where the Cedar Creek cascades into the canyon below. The expansive forest surrounding the park provides a brilliant backdrop for the plunging falls. A one-and-a-half-hour hike will take you right to the base of the falls where the canyon is widened by years of falling water crashing into the rocky bottom. The hike begins at Pioneer Cabin, originally built in 1845.

For hikers, Petit Jean offers many choices, from shorter family-friendly hikes to longer day-hikes that trek visitors throughout the park. Each is different and offers amazing views of the canyon country and surrounding landscape. The park's 20 miles of interconnected trails feature paths to the falls as well to Rock House Cave and through the Seven Hollows and other geological and geographic wonders. The Cedar Falls, Seven Hollows, and Cedar Creek Trails have been given the distinction of being named National Recreation Trails because of their history and scenery. Trail maps and other information on the trail system are available at the Visitor's Center.

Just upstream from the falls, Lake Bailey offers 100 acres of outdoor recreation — perfect for canoeing, kayaking, or casting a line in hopes of landing a

fish. The lake has several community areas including a boathouse and meeting hall. One of the park's more unique camping areas is also located on the scenic lake — the Rent-a-Teepee area. As the name implies, campers rent large teepees for the night. No need to pitch that tent, just throw your gear in the car and get going — perfect.

The park's rangers offer nature programs and shows at the park's amphitheater. Rangers also offer guided hikes and special events are held throughout the year. Two group pavilions are available for rent for large gatherings and a swimming pool, tennis courts, and playgrounds are also available.

Back on the Trail

Our second day included a short hike on the Bear Cave trail. As we set off from the trailhead, we are amazed at the magnificent rock formations that cover the mountainside. The trail meanders through the narrow cracks and paths through ancient boulders. We stare and photograph the massive rocks

CAMPING AND LODGING

Lodging in Petit Jean offers campers a wonderful back-to-nature feel, with campsites surrounded by extremely tall trees providing wonderful shade, clean facilities and plenty of space. The park has 125 campsites, including 35 Class AAA and 90 Class B. Sites feature electricity, water and fire pits. We stayed in a Class B site and were pleased with the amount of room and the amazingly clean restrooms and showers. Other camping options include a group-camping area, rally-style area, rent-a-camp and rent-a-teepee. Picnic and pavilion areas are also available. Campsite prices begin at \$17, but are lower during winter months.

The park also offers other lodging options including Mather Lodge, built on a mountainous bluff with sweeping views of Cedar Creek Canyon. The lodge offers 24 guest rooms, a restaurant, meeting room and swimming pool. Near the lodge are also 33 cabins (21 with kitchens) and amazing views off the bluff. Cabin and lodge prices begin at \$65 depending on size and time of year. **Petit Jean State Park, 1285 Petit Jean Mountain Road, Morrilton, Arkansas 72110. 501/727-5441; petitjeanstatepark.com.**



Entrance to Mather Lodge.

that look like something out of a movie.

Looking out over the canyon below, the stress of the work-a-day world melted away. As we walked, rock fragments crackled underfoot and soon the trail widened out to a cliff overlooking the canyon. We walked along the ledge — the natural

world around us in full display.

As we hiked, more and more rock formations amazed us. Boulders were sliced in two by deep cracks, each side shielding the path from the sun and providing shade that eerily cooled the air by a few degrees. We stood inside

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the cave-like pathways staring up at the high walls and rock faces. We made our way through the crevices in the rock leading to high cliffs on the other side. Vegetation even managed to grow on these cliffs and boulders, green grasses and plants sporadically sprouted out of the hard surface.

We wriggled our way through even smaller cracks and jagged rocks, explored dead ends and wandered among the pathways. My 4-year-old was fearless and ready to see what was around the next turn. As we made our way back on the trail, an overhanging rock formation created a dark cave. Marie climbed inside and gave a wide smile. I snapped a photo and we moved on, enraptured by the hike's rugged beauty.

The trail sloped up and we passed by more formations, the cracks squirming and bending through the boulders like snakes. We trudged on as exposed tree roots created natural steps up the trail. After a few minutes, we were back at the trailhead — a bit sweaty, but deeply fascinated.

Legend of Petit Jean

Created in 1933, Petit Jean State Park was first in the Arkansas State Park system and has perfectly preserved the area's rugged scenery and forested landscape. Many of the park's structures were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. The work has been preserved and adds to the park's natural ambience.

The park's name derives from the legend of Petit Jean. According to legend, a French nobleman named Chavet was given permission to explore a section of the Louisiana Territory. The Frenchman was engaged to a young girl in Paris, but decided against marrying her before he left for the New World. Instead, after his exploration he planned to return and marry her and then they could return to the land he explored to live.

The girl did not take this plan well. She then disguised herself as a boy and took a position aboard Chavet's ship. Sailors nicknamed the "boy" Petit Jean, and she stayed aboard as

the boat traveled up the Mississippi and Arkansas River to the mountain that now bears Petit Jean's name. Chavet and his men encountered friendly Indians and spent the summer there where Petit Jean fished and hunted the countryside with Chavet.

As fall approached, Chavet prepared his men for the return to France. However, the trip was delayed when Petit Jean became seriously ill and eventually lapsed into a coma. During the sickness her secret was discovered. She asked Chavet for forgiveness. She knew she would not live through the trip to see her homeland. She asked Chavet that she be taken to the mountaintop to live out her remaining days.

Visitors to the park can now visit what is believed to be her rocky grave on the east point of the mountain. Her spirit is said to still hover over this mountainous area that she loved so much. On our three-day trip camping excursion, like Petit Jean, we also fell in love with this stretch of rugged beauty. We can't wait to get back. ▲