

Waterfalls, hiking, hot tubs are just a day away

BY PAM HOUGHTON
CORRESPONDENT

We recently attended a week-end wedding in the Hocking Hills region of Ohio. Because of our typically busy lives as working parents, we didn't bother to research the area on the Internet so we had no idea what to expect when we got there. We only knew that the bride and groom had reserved a number of cabins for out of town guests and that was good enough for us. Give us directions and we're there.

Ohio is usually a state we pass through on our way to other states farther south. If you are driving along I-75, it doesn't get pleasantly hilly until you reach the outskirts of Cincinnati.

However, since Hocking Hills is located southeast of Columbus, we turned off I-75 and traveled I-270, following a series of subsequent twists and turns until we reached our destination. Little did we know that the "hills" in Hocking are actually foot hills to the Appalachian Mountains. It's easy to mistake the area for West Virginia or eastern Kentucky.

We arrived late Friday night in a torrential rain, unsure what our accommodations would be like. After all, when a cabin is reserved in your name, you don't know if electrical outlets will be available for your hairdryer. But the cabins turned out to be A-Frame chalets, beautifully updated with all the amenities, except cell phone service.

The TV wasn't hooked up to cable either, but the chalet we stayed in at Old Man's Cave Chalets was lovely with a full wraparound porch that looked

down into a forested ravine, complete with a hot tub at the entrance. The chalet was equipped with a full kitchen, gas fireplace, a first floor bedroom and a loft. It even had its own name, The Falls, complete with a leather loose-leaf binder that contained the written sentiments of its previous occupants, all expressing their delight at the restorative nature of the Hills.

There are numerous outdoor activities in the area that rival those of our own Up North. There are all kinds of opportunities for hiking, canoeing and rock climbing, as well as visits to numerous caves and waterfalls. Given our tight schedule, we were able to squeeze in visits to a few caves and some hiking.

Old Man's Cave, located on State Route 664 in a state park, is named after Richard Rowe, a hermit who lived in the cave in the late 1700's. We followed the trail from the Upper Falls area down to the cave, traversing a number of picturesque footbridges and hiking trails as we descended the earth. To access the cave, you have to walk through a couple of perspiring stone tunnels and then walk another path to actually get inside the cave. The access is easy though; there are no treacherous rocks to maneuver around at or inside the cave. The floor is composed of sand. There are beautiful views from all around you as you look up into the foothills and see one giant brush stroke of thick forestry, sharp cliffs and amazing waterfalls.

The other cave we visited, a few miles off Route 664 and also in a state park, was Ash Cave. Tall pine trees accompanied our walk to the cave that is



Caves are a major attraction in the Hocking Hills area of southeast Ohio.

famous for its red sand and engaging waterfall. The cave got its name from the huge pile of ashes that were found there by early settlers of the region. Several theories abound as to

how they got there, one being that they were left over from campfires created by the Indians that inhabited the area for years. This cave was particularly

accessible, and I could easily imagine, on a warmer day, visitors scurrying into the pool of water produced by the rushing waterfall.

You can continue to hike the area if you are willing to ascend the numerous paths leading up to the foothills.

Eventually, it was time for the wedding, with the ceremony held outdoors against another spectacular backdrop. The lodge and its surroundings, accessible only by a long, winding dirt road wide enough for one vehicle, sat atop one of many foothills in the area.

The scene from the hill, overlooking valleys and an endless sea of lush greenery, made us wish we had more time to spend in Hocking Hills, visiting more waterfalls and embarking on more hiking adventures. But, alas, Sunday morning arrived and it was time to

return to real life in Michigan, but not before we added our own entry to the binder, expressing our surprise and delight in the lovely, peaceful surroundings.

Someday, we'd like to return with our children so that they can hike through the caves, gaze at a rushing waterfall, climb a few rocks, and maybe even drive some of the go-carts that are popular with visitors.

If you like the northern peninsula, but are looking for an alternative that is less than six hours away from metro Detroit, I highly recommend this lovely part of southeast Ohio.

For more information, check out the Website, www.HockingHills.com.

Pam Houghton is a Troy resident who occasionally writes about travel for the Observer & Eccentric.

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