

TRAVEL

Traveling side roads of the Mountain State almost heaven

Almost heaven...
Country roads take me home
To the place I belong
West Virginia...
— lyrics from a John Denver
hit song of 1971

BY DOUG JOHNSON
STAFF WRITER

Take mountainous State Highway 20 south and east of Beckley, West Virginia, to the railroad/river town of Hinton, cross the New River and follow the narrow half-paved, half-dirt National Park Service Road up to Sandstone Falls.

Here you are at one of the few waterfalls in the world where you can walk out to the middle of the river to get a better look. The falls only tumble about 30 feet but at this point the river is five football fields wide. Anglers stand in the deep pools at the falls' base. Youngsters brave the cool waters to perch on the falls' edge.

It's just one of many spectacular views in the Mountain State.

As you crisscross the state you are struck by West Virginia's rugged beauty, its well-maintained roads, and the wondrous state parks, but most of all it's the state's rural nature that highlights the sharpest contrast for those of us who live in southeastern Michigan.

Two of the state's biggest cities: the capital, Charleston, and nearby Huntington are each less than half the population of Livonia.

And the state's violent history echoes down through the years: the raid at Harpers Ferry; the split with Virginia that led to the creation of the non-slave state at the height of the Civil War; the bloody Hatfield and McCoy feud; the coal field wars recently depicted in the film "Matewan," the coming to prominence of such labor figures as John L. Lewis and "Mother" Jones, the angel of the coal fields; the horrible mine and flood disasters.

Back at Beckley you can get a feel for what it was — and is — like to work the coal mines if you stop at the Beckley Exhibition

Hitting the road

- For an interesting but brief history of the state try "West Virginia" by John Alexander Williams, W. W. Norton, publisher.
- For a list of white water runners, go to www.vwhtw.com. The main West Virginia site is www.vwonline.com. Also, www.parks.com. The main state site is www.state.wv.us/tourism. The National Park Service's Web site for the New River is www.nps.gov/norl. A very complete list of links to almost every Web site in the state can be found at www.polsi.wvu.edu/wv/wvlinks.
- The state's toll free phone is (800) 847-4898.
- You may find cheaper motel rates at places like Oak Hill and Fayetteville than at Beckley.
- It takes less than one day to get to the Ohio/West Virginia border; most people take the Ohio Turnpike in Toledo over to southbound Interstate 77.

Coal Mine.

The hourlong tour takes you on a ride inside an authentic coal mine on "man trip" cars. Real miners take you through the history of coal mines and you see the rich seams of coal.

The mine is open April 1 to Nov. 1; tours run from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Also at the site are a gift shop, small museum, campground, coal company house, and superintendent's house.

North from Beckley near Fayetteville you cross the famous New River Gorge bridge. Once a year (in October) B.A.S.E. jumpers leap off the span and drop the 900 feet to the river below.

B.A.S.E. stands for building, antenna, span, earth, fixed objects from which jumpers leap or rappel.

If you're not interested in

extreme sports chose any other day. Stop by the Park Service's visitor center and pick up the official map for the New River Gorge National River. Many side roads are clearly marked and with some care you can take a narrow, dirt one-way road to the bottom of the gorge.

Above looms the impressive 3,000-foot steel span. At your feet is a tranquil spot in the river. A brief but tricky hike across a boulder field upstream leads you to a patch of whitewater. In early April wet suits are worn by river runners despite 80 degree air temperatures.

Other roads wind down into the river gorge; at one point you cross the New River on a one-way bridge that also contains a set of railroad tracks. It's river-running the New, the Gauley and the Cheat rivers that has helped boost tourism in West Virginia.

If you want you can take jet-boats in the summer on a portion of the New River near Hawks Nest State Park (504 469-2828).

A swing up from the big bridge on U.S. 19 to U.S. 60 then south to Babcock State Park brings you to another scenic gem. With some hyperbole they say the Glade Creek Mill and water falls in the park are the "most photographed mill (and water falls) in the United States." True or not, the mill and falls are a photographer's delight and are easily accessible.

Another surprise is the impressive waterfalls at Blackwater Falls State Park on the eastern edge of the state. Numerous stairs lead to the falls on the west side of the river, but an easy walk gives you a high view from the east side. A quick run over to the eerie Seneca Rocks monoliths yields yet another facet of the state.

Here are some other routes or destinations to consider:

■ The drive down State Highway 55 from Elkins south to Interstate 64; beautiful valleys, rivers and mountains can only be matched in the American west.

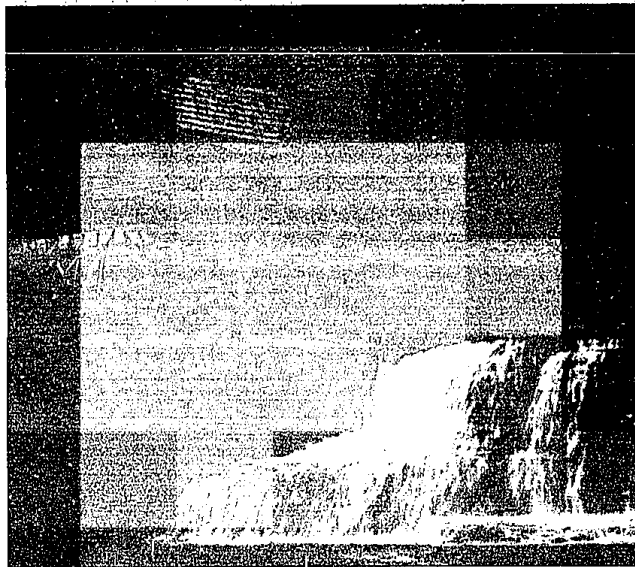


Photo by Doug Johnson

Most photographed: A grist mill and waterfalls make a picture-perfect scene at Babcock State Park.

■ A stop at Tamarack near Beckley where the "Best of West Virginia" is showcased is highly recommended. Fine arts and crafts are featured, but the best part is a superb food service operation run by the folks from The Greenbrier, a noted five-star resort at White Sulphur Springs.

■ A trip south of Beckley to Twin Falls will take you deep into coal country; railroad cars loaded with the black rocks chug alongside quiet rivers, roadways taking you through small towns

filled with frame houses and the ever-present house trailer.

■ On the return trip home stop at Parkersburg along the Ohio River and check out the flood walls. Drop in for a meal at the restored Blennerhassett Hotel where they have been taking care of visitors for 102 years.

■ Nearby, Williamstown and the home of Fenton Glass where they offer tours and demonstrations. West Virginia is noted for glass. One of the more famous plants is in Milton west of

Charleston on I-64. Blenko Glass and their artisans were featured on a recent PBS show.

A bloody history and a daunting terrain have combined to create West Virginia.

Mary Harris (Mother) Jones called the place "medieval." It wasn't "almost heaven" to her but it drew her back many times over a period of 40 years — much as it draws visitors today.

Doug Johnson is a retired Livonia teacher who lives with his wife in Plymouth.

Celebrate Mardi Gras

Indulgence is...
Shopping!

Shop Laurel Park Place once each week
from February 14 through Mardi Gras (March 7)
and we'll reimburse one of your shopping trips!

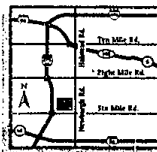
In celebration of Mardi Gras, Laurel Park Place is helping you indulge in shopping! Shop each of the three weeks designated below and you will receive a Laurel Park Place gift certificate worth the value of your lowest weekly receipt! Plus, you can enter to win a trip for two to New Orleans including airfare, accommodations in the historic French Quarter, a shopping spree and more!

Here's how it works. Simply make a purchase of \$35.00 or more each of the following weeks and you will receive a strand of Mardi Gras beads:

- February 14 — February 20: purple beads
- February 21 — February 28: green beads
- February 29 — March 7: gold beads

Bring the beads and your receipt to the Mardi Gras cart near Center Court to redeem them. When you have one strand of beads, you'll be eligible to enter to win the trip to New Orleans. Two strands of different colored beads: you'll be eligible to enter to win the New Orleans trip and receive a coupon for a free jerked shrimp appetizer at the Real Seafood Grill with the purchase of an entree. Three strands of beads (one of each color): you'll be eligible to enter to win the New Orleans trip and you'll receive a Laurel Park Place gift certificate worth the value of your lowest weekly receipt!

*Theater, hotel purchases and Laurel Park Place gift certificate sales excluded. Only one receipt allowed from a department store. Receipts cannot be combined. All beads must be accompanied by a receipt. Additional rules and regulations also apply and are available at the Mardi Gras carts or the Management Office.



Laurel Park Place
Shop the difference.

Over 70 exceptional stores, services and restaurants conveniently located in Livonia on Six Mile, just one-quarter mile east of I-275.

SP-000000

Co-sponsored by

Observer & Eccentric
NEWSPAPERS