

# New River Gorge earns huge accolade

## Outdoors publication names it 'Best Family Trip in U.S.'

**N**ew River Gorge sure knows how to build on a good thing. Named a national park in December of 2020, West Virginia's naturalists' nirvana received another honor.

This time: "Best Family Trip in the U.S." The accolade comes from Outside Magazine, a national publication that has been publishing since 1977.

"We chose the park as the winner for best family adventure in the U.S. because it has so many recreational opportunities for every age and expertise," said Outside Magazine's travel director Mary Turner.

The award shouldn't be surprising. New River Gorge represents acres of land that define the cliché "God's country." The area is historic and oozing with enough stories to fill a novel.

Located in the city of Thurmond – population: 5 – New River Gorge National Park and Preserve sits in the heart of a ghost town that more than a century ago produced mountains of coal. It boomed; even had a red-light district.

The coal industry may have faded, but New River Gorge's beauty only grows deeper and stronger. Its loveliness has served as a playground for sightseers and adventurers for centuries. Its river is the second oldest in the world. Its proximity is difficult to match, as it sits less than a day's drive from half the U.S.'s



**PIECE OF HEAVEN** – Fall foliage lights up a ravine at New River Gorge National Park and Reserve in West Virginia. Image: SeanPavonePhoto. Adobe Stock.

population.

The Appalachian Mountains rest in the backdrop, waiting to be explored, photographed and appreciated for their natural beauty. New River Gorge is 360 miles in length and flows from West Virginia through Virginia and North Carolina. The waterway is home to some of the best whitewater rafting and

kayaking in the U.S.

New River Gorge Bridge is the manufactured centerpiece of the park. Opened in 1977, it's 876-feet high and 1,700-feet long, making it the world's fifth-longest, single-span arch bridge in the world. The majestic views of the valley create a natural Picasso, while serving as a stage for extreme sports.

Fayette County's "Bridge Day" is held the third Saturday in October. The festival includes demonstrations of rappelling, ascending and BASE jumping. Bungee jumping has been banned nearly three decades. A two-foot wide, steel catwalk runs beneath the roadway and is opened for guided "Bridge Walk" tours.

Park rangers are available to lead hikes, speak about the territory and join in activities. They provide an opportunity to experience a piece of our country's rich cultural history, try something new or just explore the U.S.'s 63rd national park.

Perhaps New River Gorge's most popular attraction is its whitewater rafting. Hop into a raft or kayak and tackle the raging rapids. Paddle your way through the intense white-capped waves, as your adrenalin reaches new heights. Guests can choose level of difficulty, depending on their experience.

Open-air ziplining soars 200 feet above the ground at its highest point, taking riders on a nearly two-mile tour that zigzags across the ridgeline of a mountain bowl and offers amazing views of three counties and the changing foliage in the fall.

New River Gorge didn't need to become a national park to justify its impeccable reputation.

It's a masterpiece that soaks in well-deserved recognitions.

# Gazers yearn for spots to see the sky light up

## 5 places destined to open gateways to constellations, cosmic sights

**S**tar gazing often is associated with celebrities. But the term has another meaning, and it's as simple as looking into a clear nighttime sky.

Stars illuminate dark skies. They sparkle like lights on a Christmas tree, while shining brightest in locations that have little to no light pollution.

Whether you're an amateur astronomer or just looking to get lost in the stars, these are some of the best places to search deeper into the cosmos:

**Cherry Springs State Park, Pa.** – It's not easy finding dark skies in densely populated areas on the eastern side of the U.S., but this park offers some of the best, surrounded by dense forest on the Allegheny Plateau. The International Dark Sky Association designated it an International Dark Sky Park in 2008 – a distinction earned by places that have an "exceptional and distinguished quality of starry nights and a nocturnal environment that is specifically protected."

**Enchanted Rock State Natural Area, Texas** – Centrally located in the Lone Star State, this International Dark Sky Park is less than a two-hour drive from Austin or San Antonio. Enchanted Rock's pink granite dome is visible for miles during the day. Trails on the rock and other elevated areas close at night, but stars can be seen from the rest of the area.

**Buffalo National River, Ark.** – The U.S.'s first national river is the closest



**SHOOTING STARS** – Star gazers can view the milky way galaxy from Cherry Springs State Park. Image: Ridall Photography. Adobe Stock.

International Dark Sky Park for Arkansans and many people in Missouri, Kansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. It snakes 135 miles through the Ozarks and offers pristine skies for nearly its entire length. Tyler Bend is a popular view spot.

**Death Valley National Park, Calif.** – The Bortle scale ranks brightness of the night sky on a scale of 1 to 9. Class 1 is as dark as possible, and Class 9 is heavily polluted by light. Death Valley has a Class 1 sky, thanks to its remote location

in the Mojave Desert. These skies are so dark, the Milky Way casts shadows. Visit Ubehebe Crater to ensure a Class 1 experience.

**James River State Park, Va.** – It isn't easy finding truly dark skies in Virginia, but James River State Park is an International Dark Sky Park with a Class 3 sky – one of the state's darkest places. The park is open from dawn to dusk. Guests will need to reserve a spot at a campground or a cabin to gaze at the stars.

### Tips for star gazing

1. Check the weather forecast: The darkest skies won't show anything if clouds are blocking views. Make sure the weather will be clear. A few clouds won't ruin the experience.
2. Plan around the moon's phases: In a dark sky, the moon is bright enough to spoil night vision. Even a half-moon can obscure thousands of stars. For ideal viewing conditions, time visits between the waning half-moon and the new moon.
3. Protect your night vision: It can take a half hour or more for the naked eye to adjust to the dark, but only a few seconds for an errant flashlight or smartphone screen to wipe that out. Bring a red LED flashlight or tape red cellophane over your smartphone light. Red light doesn't spoil night vision.
4. Bring a star map and/or stargazing apps: Physical star charts are a way to navigate the sky. One can be downloaded from Skymaps.com. Apps like Sky Guide and Sky Walk 2 offer more interactive experiences, allowing you to easily find constellations and other points of interest.