

A winding journey around America's first national river in the Ozarks

By KATHERINE RODEGHIER

CHICAGO TRIBUNE |

NOV 16, 2021 AT 5:00 AM



Hawksbill Crag, one of the most photographed spots in Arkansas, is on the Whitaker Point Trail. (Katherine Rodeghier / Chicago Tribune)



Hawksbill Crag, one of the most photographed spots in Arkansas, is on the Whitaker Point Trail. (Katherine Rodeghier / Chicago Tribune)



Elk graze at dusk in the Boxley Valley along Arkansas' Buffalo National River. (Katherine Rodeghier / Chicago Tribune)



A rock overhang draws the attention of hikers on the Lost Valley Trail in the Buffalo National River region. (Katherine Rodeghier / Chicago Tribune)



Archeologists uncovered signs of human habitation 2,000 years ago inside Cob Cave on the Lost Valley Trail in the Buffalo National River region. (Katherine Rodeghier / Chicago Tribune)



Boulders line the bluff line along the Whitaker Point Trail overlooking the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests in northwest Arkansas. (Katherine Rodeghier / Chicago Tribune)

Awed and annoyed.

I felt both when my husband, a faster hiker, disappeared down the trail. Why hadn't he waited for me to catch up so we could enjoy this gorgeous vista together? From my rock perch, I admired the valley unfolding before me until

he reappeared. With a gesture that said, “You ain’t seen nothing yet,” he beckoned me onward.

Miffed, I trudged on another quarter-mile when, in a brilliant moment, I saw it through a break in the trees.

Hawksbill Crag, the terminus of the Whitaker Point Trail, ranks among the most photographed spots in Arkansas. Jutting from a bluff over steep, wooded valley walls, it forms a rock pulpit from which visitors can come to praise the gods of the Ozarks.

Seeing it ranks among the most memorable experiences of traveling around the Buffalo National River, a remote region slicing across northwest Arkansas about nine hours southwest of Chicago. The Buffalo joined the National Park Service as America’s first national river in 1972, but the region offers more than on-water experiences.

The Ozark Mountains flank the river, harboring a network of hiking and mountain biking trails. Serpentine roads connect rural hamlets, dropping from mountain summits to broad valleys where herds of elk graze at dawn and dusk. And in autumn, forests blaze with reds and golds prompting motorists to repeatedly pull over for one more Instagram-worthy shot.

Road-tripping along the river



Scenic drives crisscross the Arkansas Ozarks and Buffalo National River region. (Katherine Rodeghier / Chicago Tribune)

As we drove south from Branson, Missouri, and crossed the Arkansas border, the calendar flipped from October to November, still time for peak fall colors. From March into June, the Buffalo River delights canoeists and kayakers with Class I and II rapids, but by fall, low water levels make much of the river impassable. That's when leaf peepers come out for scenic drives. Arkansas Highway 43 didn't disappoint. This two-lane ribbon of asphalt took us on a roller-coaster ride down 11% grades and around curves curtained with trees dappled in fiery foliage.

Highway 43 was just a dirt road when the [Buffalo Outdoor Center](#), our base camp, was founded in 1976 by outdoorsman Mike Mills, who later became director of the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism. The national park designation brought improvements and more visitors, but staved off development. Ponca, Arkansas, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it town where Buffalo Outdoor Center runs its office, remains a rural enclave, as a sign next to its gas station attests: population 9.

We settled into one of the center's two dozen cabins (from \$149 per night), rustic on the outside, modern on the inside and perched on a ridge with a

mountain view best enjoyed from the porch swings. We spread maps on a rough-hewn dining table and plotted our next few days.



The Buffalo Outdoor Center has 26 cabins sleeping up to 12 guests. (Katherine Rodeghier / Chicago Tribune)

While the river flows about 150 miles east, we confined our stay to the Upper Buffalo on its west end. Scenic routes crisscross the national park and adjacent Ozark-St. Francis National Forest. We covered part of the Ozark Highlands Scenic Byway on Arkansas Highway 21 and looped around to Highway 7, Arkansas' first scenic byway. One stunning vista after another unfolded. At the Buffalo River Canyon, we peered down 1,414 feet into the deepest canyon in the Ozarks.

On Arkansas Highway 74, we stopped for a meal at the Low Gap Cafe. A hole-in-the-wall place with taxidermy animal heads on the walls, we wondered if the person who so highly recommended it was playing a joke on us. Nope. Chef Nick Bottini worked in fine-dining establishments around the United States before he and his wife chose to settle in what some might call the middle of nowhere. From a small kitchen, he turns out pan-seared duck in a port wine reduction, lobster francese, steak Diane. He makes burgers and po'boys too.

Cars lined the grassy shoulder of Highway 21 as we entered Boxley Valley, just as the sun dipped behind a ridge. A bull elk with an impressive rack of antlers grazed 50 yards away. He raised his head to stare in our direction while keeping an eye on the cows trailing close behind. We'd passed the peak of the fall mating season, so we didn't hear the eerie sound of elk bugling. Calves born in June weigh about 35 pounds; bulls grow to 800 pounds; cows 500. At the Elk Education Center in Ponca, we learned the native Eastern elk disappeared long ago, so the more than 500 animals now roaming this wilderness descended from Rocky Mountain elk introduced in the 1980s.

Hitting the hiking trails



A family picnics on a rock ledge on the Lost Valley Trail in the Buffalo National River region. (Katherine Rodeghier / Chicago Tribune)

To experience the forests' fall colors from a different perspective, we parked at the [Lost Valley trailhead](#) for a 2.2-mile hike. Neither lost nor a valley, the topography resembles a leafy hollow or box canyon with two waterfalls and Clark Creek disappearing and popping up again through porous limestone beds.

The wheelchair-accessible first half-mile turned more rugged as we scrambled around boulders and passed a family picnicking on a rock ledge. At Cob Cave, where University of Arkansas archaeologists found corn cobs and fragments of baskets 2,000 years old, we exchanged phones with another couple to pose for photos.



Waterfalls are among the natural features drawing hikers to the Lost Valley Trail in the Buffalo National River region. (Katherine Rodeghier / Chicago Tribune)

On the way back, a father and his adult son paused their hike to chat, telling us they lived north of Arkansas' capital, Little Rock. Been there, I said, but hadn't realized the state has such natural beauty too. The older man nodded. "Folks not from around here," he said, looking pointedly at us, "think Arkansas is just a bunch of hillbillies. It has everything it needs: farms, cities, wilderness. We could fence it off and be our own country."

We'd been told not to miss the moderate 3-mile hike on the Whitaker Point Trail, but had failed to grasp the difficulty in getting there. From Boxley Bridge on Highway 21, a steep, rutted and narrow gravel road leads 6 miles to the trailhead. The 40-minute drive had me wishing we'd traded in our low-slung sedan for an SUV and envying the dusty pickups parked next to us.

But it was worth it. We picked our way over jutting stones and trickling streams, passing under oaks, hickories and maples still hanging onto leaves tinged scarlet and amber. Careful to avoid a deadly plunge off the bluff line, we peered over one rock outcropping after another at the abyss below, until we came to the end of the trail, Hawksbill Crag.

Disney filmed scenes from "Tuck Everlasting" on this pointy ledge, where weddings and marriage proposals have been known to occur. We hung around, watching groups of hikers tiptoeing onto the crag, laughing and posing for photos, but didn't spot a white dress or anyone down on their knees. Maybe next time.

Buffalo National River, [nps.gov/buff](https://www.nps.gov/buff)

Buffalo Outdoor Center, cabins, lodges, RV park, zip lines, canoe and kayak rentals, [buffaloriver.com](https://www.buffaloriver.com)

[\[Most read\] Daily horoscope for November 16, 2021 »](#)

Low Gap Cafe, [lowgapcafe.com](https://www.lowgapcafe.com)

Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage, and Tourism, [arkansas.com](https://www.arkansas.com)

Katherine Rodeghier is a freelance writer.

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/travel/ct-travel-buffalo-national-river-arkansas-hiking-20211116-robjk4khkzfxdbubecyeo3gia-story.html>