



A hermit made his home under the massive overhang of Old Man's Cave, giving the popular feature in Ohio's Hocking Hills State Park its name.

# Head for the Hocking Hills

Great hiking, country cookin' and moonshine not far from Columbus, Ohio

STORY AND PHOTOS BY  
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The skyscrapers of cosmopolitan Columbus, Ohio, fade from the rearview mirror as we drive southeast. In half an hour, the landscape changes from urban to country.

Deep country. Hillbilly country.

Ma and pa diners where flannel-shirted regulars speak in a slow, folksy drawl between bites of cornbread, sweet potato fries and homemade pie. Log cabin lodgings, some romantic retreats for two, others big enough for a Walton family reunion — but with amenities their kinfolk never imagined.

Attractions tend to be a bit odd: a museum devoted to pencil sharpeners, tours of America's last washboard factory. A blacksmith gives lessons to city folk who've never wielded a hammer or singed their knuckles at a forge. And moonshine, the legal kind, gets poured in a tasting room at a storefront distillery in a strip mall.

The biggest change, the landscape itself, defines the Hocking Hills. Flat farmland gives way to hills and hollows, curvy scenic highways thread through forests framing caves and cliffs of blackhand sandstone in the Allegheny Plateau. You can hike to waterfalls and zip line through treetops. If you dare, don a harness to climb a canyon wall and rappel down rock faces.



Ash Cave, the largest recess cave east of the Mississippi River, is a quarter-mile walk from a parking area in Hocking Hills State Park.

## Ohio's No. 1 park

At the heart of the region lies Hocking Hills State Park, comprising six separate beauty spots that draw about 3.5 million visitors a year, none of whom pay an admission or parking fee.

Hiking trails through Ohio's most-visited state park range from a wheelchair-accessible quarter mile into Ash Cave, the largest recess cave east of the Mississippi, to 6 miles of the Buckeye Trail, which loops nearly 1,444 miles around the entire state. A half-mile section leads down into a hemlock-fringed gorge to Cedar Falls. Most popular of all, judging from a jammed parking lot, is the milelong hike into Old Man's Cave named for Richard Rowe, a recluse who camped inside its band-shell shape in the 1800s. The path crosses stone bridges and passes The Sphinx rock formation and the swirling Devil's Bathtub before entering the eerie overhang.

Private land, nature preserves and chunks of Hocking State Forest intersect the park like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. You can fly through the forest on a zip line with Hocking Hills Canopy Tours ([www.hockinghillsstatepark.com](http://www.hockinghillsstatepark.com)) or let Steve Roley introduce you to native flora and fauna on his new Hocking Hills Ecotours High Rock Adventures ([www.highrockadventures.com](http://www.highrockadventures.com)). He'll lend you gear and teach you rock climbing and rappelling too.

## Quirky things to do

What would possess a man to amass a collection of 3,450 pencil sharpeners? The answer died with the Rev. Paul A. Johnson in 2010 after nearly 20 years of acquiring these tiny, whimsical tools. Scan the shelves of his Pencil Sharpener Museum at the Hocking Hills Welcome Center, and you'll see sharpeners shaped like cats, Disney characters, zodiac signs, globes. He has the holidays covered too: Christmas, Easter, Halloween.

A piece of Americana continues to be produced at the Columbus Washboard Factory ([www.columbuswashboard.com](http://www.columbuswashboard.com)) under the slogan "Keeping America



Making moonshine is now a legal activity in the Hocking Hills, which is like a slice of Appalachia in southeast Ohio.

Clean Since 1895." The factory, the last of its kind in the U.S., moved to the Hocking Hills in 1999 and opened its doors for tours. A staple in your great-grandmother's laundry room, washboards continue to be used by campers to scrub their duds, as craft items in home decor and as musical instruments played by Appalachian jug bands and Dixieland groups. You'll hear plenty every Father's Day weekend during the Washboard Music Festival.

Talk about disappearing Americana — when was the last time you needed a blacksmith? But if you're keen to learn this dying art, blacksmith Doug Lockhart offers day-long lessons in hand-forging iron — no horses involved — through his Southern Ohio School of Blacksmithing. It's not just for guys, either. Lockhart's daughter, one of the few female blacksmiths in the country, inspired his DVD, "How to Swing a Hammer Like a Girl."

For a taste of Appalachia, belly up to the counter at Hocking Hills Moonshine ([www.hockinghillsmoonshine.com](http://www.hockinghillsmoonshine.com)). Winning awards since its first run last fall, the potent potable comes in four flavors, but its most popular remains straight-up Buckeye Lightning. Tours of the tiny backroom are free, but the lawman demands a charge for tastings: a dollar for a quarter shot, limit four.



Lisa Jarrell assembles a washboard for visitors taking a tour of the Columbus Washboard Factory in Logan, Ohio.



Cabins at Cedar Grove Lodging, like most area cabin and lodge rentals, come fully furnished with modern amenities.

## Cabin in the woods

The word "rustic" comes to mind when thinking of a log cabin, but luxury would be more accurate in the Hocking Hills. Eighteen years ago, 39 businesses operated cabin rentals here. These days, more than 300 manage multiple cabins and lodges, far outpacing the region's handful of motels and bed-and-breakfasts. And the trend is for large units, five bedrooms or more. Some lodges sleep 20-plus, suitable for family reunions, weddings, friend getaways and corporate retreats. Fully equipped kitchens and log furniture come standard, and some have media rooms, pool tables, outdoor grills and hot tubs.

Cedar Grove Lodging's nine structures tucked in the woods a half-mile from Old Man's Cave sleep two to 26 with its newest lodge overlooking a catch-and-release fishing pond ([www.cedargrovelodging.com](http://www.cedargrovelodging.com)). The Inn & Spa at Cedar Falls has cabins as well as bed-and-breakfast rooms and offers yoga classes, massages and fine dining in its Kindred Spirits restaurant ([www.innatcedarfalls.com](http://www.innatcedarfalls.com)). The chichi Glenlaurel models itself after a Scottish inn with manor house, carriage house, crofts and cottages — no kids allowed. Its eight-hole golf course replicates the experience of playing on an old links course in Scot-

## If you go

Hocking Hills Tourism Association: 800-462-5464, [www.explorehockinghills.com](http://www.explorehockinghills.com)  
Hocking Hills State Park: 740-385-6842, [parks.ohiodnr.gov/hockinghills](http://parks.ohiodnr.gov/hockinghills), [www.thehockinghills.org](http://www.thehockinghills.org)

land. Outside the dining room, a bell rings promptly at 7 p.m., the formal call to dinner ([www.glenlaurel.com](http://www.glenlaurel.com)).

You won't find such formality at the family diners that dot the Hocking Hills. Sandy Sue's Silver Diner occupies a shiny structure reminiscent of an Airstream trailer and is noted for its burgers, sweet potato fries, milkshakes and decor evoking the 1950s and '60s. Pearl's, named for the owner's mother, bills its cuisine as "Cookin' like Granma's," including a sausage link baked inside a tiny loaf of cornbread. M&M Family Diner serves breakfast all day, including homemade sausage and the Starvin' Marvin four-egg omelet. Its Poor Man's Marv is made from a family recipe going back 150 years, when Appalachian folks worked hard to make ends meet as they scraped out a living in these hills and hollows.

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