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Autumn fills the senses in this state park nestled in south-central Indiana.

On cover: A brilliant blaze of color paints an autumn sky over Patoka Lake at sunset in south-central Indiana. ©Visit French Lick West Baden photo

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Kevin Frank photo

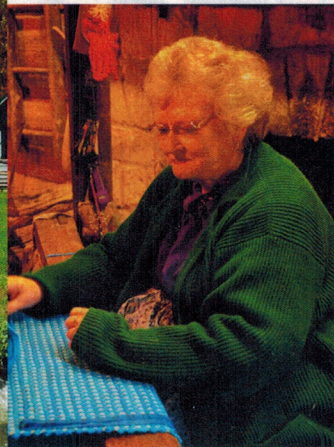
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Autumn fills the senses in this park nestled in south-central Indiana.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER



Above: Interpreters demonstrate 19th-century crafts inside the log buildings of Pioneer Village.

Left: The gristmill, which dates to 1817, is the centerpiece of Pioneer Village at Spring Mill State Park.

LIMESTONE ROOTS

Established in 1927, Spring Mill State Park is small by some standards, but it packs a weekend full of experiences in its 1,358 acres.

Located near Mitchell in Indiana's Limestone Country, the natural springs streaming from limestone caves drew settlers in the early 1800s who saw profit in the year-round flow of water. They created an industrial village, building a sawmill, wool mill, and a three-story limestone gristmill that's stood on the same spot since 1817. Once the property became part of the state park, the Civilian Conservation Corps stepped in to restore the structures. More than 20 buildings now stand in the park's Pioneer Village, some original, some of the same period moved from other locations.

The centerpiece of the village, the gristmill, still grinds cornmeal, and in several buildings, historical interpreters demonstrate 19th-century crafts. The weaver's cabin dates from 1816, the leather

shop from 1830, and the Granny White House with its dogtrot, a "carport" for wagons, dates from 1844.

The Montgomery family, merchants from Philadelphia, built a tavern in 1824 and charged travelers 25 cents for a meal and 12.5 cents for a "space" in a bed. Labels on glass jars on the shelves of the apothecary shop hint at medicines of the day: tansy, yarrow, and lady's bedstraw. Plants popular in the 19th century grow in the village garden, but fade by mid-October. No matter. The surrounding fall foliage more than compensates in brilliance.

WALK WITH NATURE AND AN ASTRONAUT

Autumn really shows off its hues to hikers on the park's marked trails. Some pass the pioneer cemetery with its limestone

Fall at Spring Mill

The sound of the mill wheel starting prompts heads to turn. Eyes that had been scanning the brilliant fall foliage framing the weathered log buildings of the Pioneer Village focus on the old mill as its wheel picks up speed, sending a stream of spring water cascading over its blades.

Autumn in southern Indiana's Spring Mill State Park puts all five senses to work. Along with autumn leaves and 19th-century structures, a memorial to one of America's first astronauts begs to be seen. Hikers listen to a naturalist along trails and touch the textured bark of a tree as they reach out to steady themselves on a fallen log. As the sun sets, diners gather at Spring Mill Inn where the aroma of home cooking wafts from its restaurant. Mouths water for a taste of the region's signature dessert, persimmon pudding.

tombstones, while others lead to Donaldson Cave where blind cave fish linger in its dark, watery depths. The gold, orange, and russet leaves are particularly stunning in Donaldson Woods, a rare tract of virgin timber once owned by an eccentric Scotsman who forbade the cutting of trees on his land. Some specimens are more than 300 years old.

The park's Nature Center schedules hikes led by naturalists who might point out beaver dams and river otters swimming in Mill Creek. On the path around Spring Mill Lake, hikers might spot blue heron and turtles sunning themselves on logs. A wheelchair-accessible trail loops behind the Grissom Memorial, a museum honoring hometown hero Virgil I. "Gus" Grissom.

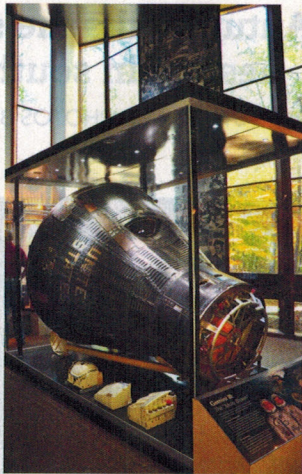
Born in Mitchell in 1926, Grissom was a small-town boy who made good as a fighter pilot in Korea, an Air Force test pilot, and one of the Mercury 7, America's first astronauts. Displays in the museum depict his accomplishments as the second man in space in 1961 and commander of Gemini III that completed three orbits of the earth in 1965. That space capsule and Grissom's spacesuit rank high among the memorial's original artifacts.

Grissom and his Apollo I crewmates died in a fire during a test launch in 1967 at the Kennedy Space Center. He was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

HISTORICAL INN AND TASTES OF THE SEASONS

While the Grissom Memorial stays open year round, some features of the park are seasonal. The Twin Caves Boat Tour, which travels 500 feet inside a cave aboard a flat-bottomed boat, ends around mid-October, as do programs at Pioneer Village and the Nature Center. Spring Mill Inn, however, welcomes guests all year.

The four-story limestone inn, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s, boasts an indoor/outdoor pool and game room for family fun. Its Millrose Dining Room sets out a dinner buffet of down-home comfort foods, including cornbread made with cornmeal ground at the old mill. Persimmons, the region's beloved fruit, figure into persimmon pudding, the inn's most popular dessert.



Above: The weaver's cabin is one of the 20 restored 19th-century buildings located in Pioneer Village.

Left: The Gemini III space capsule that carried Gus Grissom to space is one of the artifacts inside the Virgil I. Grissom Memorial inside the park.

Mitchell's annual Persimmon Festival (Sept. 19–26) mixes a week of craft and car shows with a parade, concerts, carnival, pancake breakfasts, and a persimmon dessert contest. There's a candlelight tour of Spring Mill State Park's Pioneer Village, too, but the park has its own calendar of fall fests: Harvest Days (Oct. 3 and 4), Scarecrow Weekend (Oct. 10 and 11), and 1800's Music Weekend (Oct. 17 and 18).

The inn often fills its 73 rooms when fall colors peak around mid-October and tables in its dining room can be tough to come by. Bedford, Ind., just a few miles north, has more lodging options, including Holiday Inn Express. Stone Cutters Café on the Courthouse Square serves breakfast and lunch, as well as gourmet ice cream made in nearby Paoli, Ind. The Limestone Café opens Thursday nights and occasionally on Saturday nights with a limited fine-dining menu. Photos and artwork in both cafés play up the region's rock-solid limestone heritage. ●

Katherine Rodeghier is a contributor from Western Springs, Ill.

BEFORE YOU GO

Indiana State Parks' daily entry fee is \$7 for residents, \$9 for nonresidents. Entry to the Grissom Memorial is free.

Visitor information can be found through Lawrence County Tourism, www.limestonecountry.com or (800) 798-0769, and Spring Mill State Park, www.in.gov/dnr/parklake/2968.htm.

To visit southern Indiana, first stop by your nearest AAA service office for maps, reservations, TripTiks® and TourBook® guides. A list of offices to serve you is on page 6 in this issue or visit AAA.com.



An easy hiking trail circles Spring Mill Lake at the park.