

New Discoveries

Flying to and touring New River Gorge National Park

by Matthew McDaniel

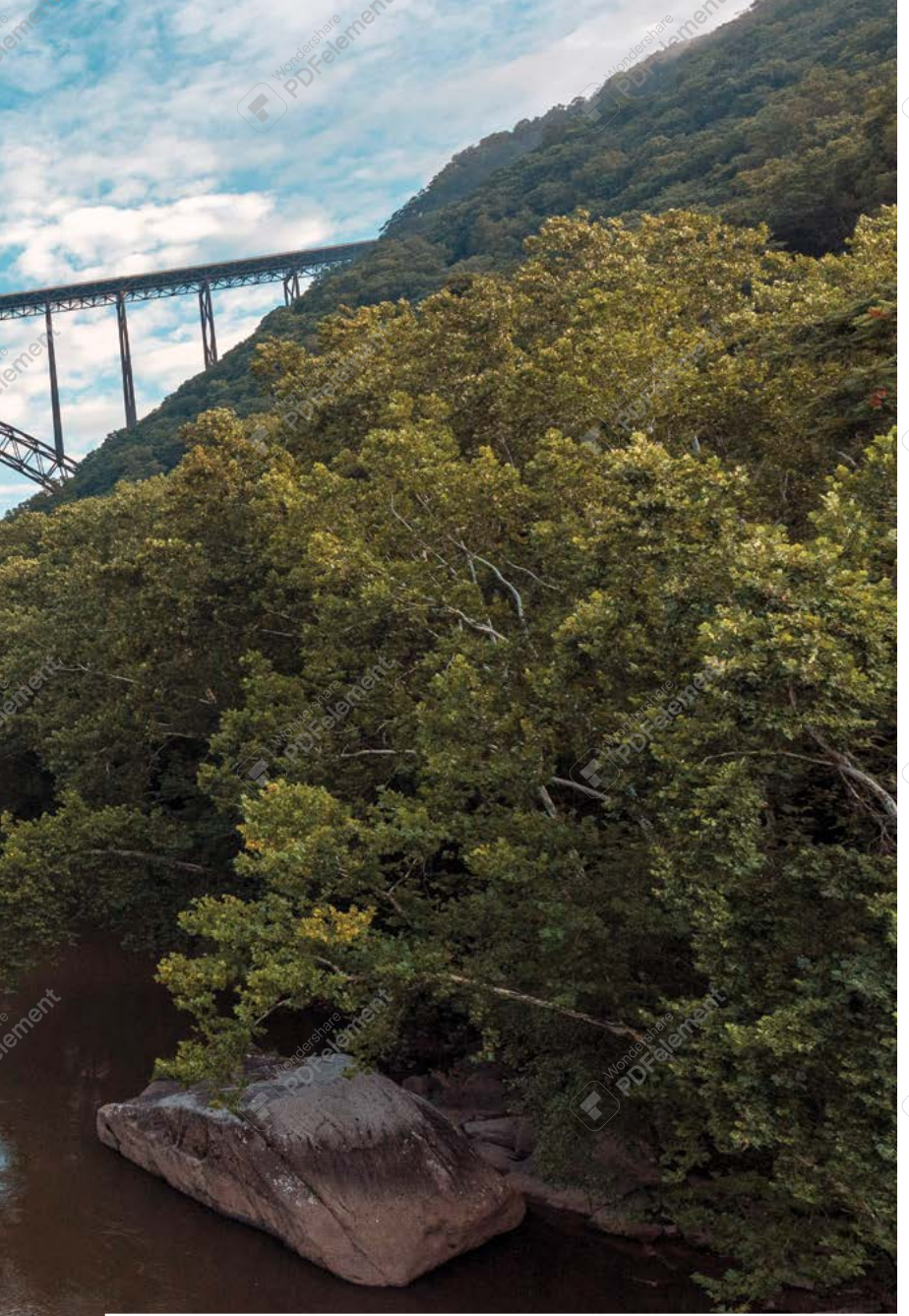


PHOTO COURTESY: WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM

As we approached the first stretch of whitewater rapids, our youthful rafting guide was positively giddy with excitement. Since launching our nine-person raft, we had glided sedately down an entirely genteel portion of the New River in West Virginia. Introductions had been made all around and we had learned of our adrenaline junkie guide's nomadic lifestyle, traveling across the U.S. and abroad, chasing seasonal guide work. He routinely led unsuspecting tourists through skiing, surfing, rafting, trekking, kayaking, climbing and even ultra-marathon adventures.

On the surface, he was the quintessential surfer dude/ski bum whose demeanor was filled with swagger and slang-filled language. Nonetheless, he was hilarious and put everyone aboard at ease. As we dropped into the first rapids, the rubber raft bent and twisted. We all got soaked with warm spray as he screamed, "Five forward,



One of the best ways to enjoy views of New River Gorge National Park in the summer is to raft the river for which the park is named.

PHOTO COURTESY: WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM



Bill Chouinard, who also flies King Airs, gives aerial tours of the New River Gorge National Park & Preserve in this restored 1943 Boeing Stearman biplane through Wild Blue Adventure Co., the company he and his wife own.

PHOTO COURTESY: WILD BLUE ADVENTURE

then get left," commanding our paddle strokes and body positions. Using his terminology, we soon "got spit" from the churning waters and were again serenely drifting downstream within America's newest national park. Only seven sections of rapids to go.

The newest (national park) is one of the oldest (rivers)

The New River Gorge, in southern West Virginia, was established as a national river in 1978 under President Jimmy Carter. In 2020, a portion of it was redesignated and named New River Gorge National Park & Preserve (NRGNP). It became the 63rd U.S. national park and remains the nation's newest designated national park.

The New River, however, is far from new. It is one of the world's oldest rivers and predates the Appalachian Mountains that grew to surround it over many millennia. Where NRGNP cuts through the Appalachia Plateau, its gorge exposes rock up to 330 million years old. This gorge was once so remote that it was essentially inaccessible and unknown. The river was missing from a 1755 map. When the area was remapped in 1764, the newly

discovered waterway was labeled simply, "new river." Initially, it was referred to as "Wood's River," after explorer Col. Abraham Wood. However, that name didn't stick, while New River did.

In the late 1800s, railroads started being built alongside the river and through the isolated valleys. With railroads, the region's rich coal deposits could be transported to the world beyond. That brought coal companies, jobs and money to the area. Boomtowns popped up to support the coal industry and the new populace whose labor it depended on. In the latter half of the 20th century, non-residents became aware of the area's natural attractions. In 50 miles of river, the elevation drops over 750 feet, creating some of the nation's premier whitewater stretches.

In all, New River Gorge National Park & Preserve protects 72,000 acres of land and water among 53 miles of the New River. The national park portion comprises about 7,000 acres within the gorge, where hunting is not permitted; the remaining 65,000 acres make up the national preserve, where traditional activities like hunting and fishing are allowed.

NRGNP welcomes nearly 2 million visitors annually to enjoy the river via swimming, rafting, kayaking, canoeing and more. Vast expanses of the park also offer hiking, biking and horse trails; scenic drives and overlooks; historic districts; and all manner of plant and wildlife viewing. The park's landmark is a colossal bridge that also happens to be irresistible to BASE jumpers.

Bridge experiences

The New River Gorge Bridge is an engineering marvel. As one of the world's highest vehicular bridges, it spans over 3,000 feet and features a 1,700-foot arch. For the first 26 years it was open, it was the world's longest single-span arch bridge. It retains that claim for any bridge outside of China and it is the third-highest bridge in the U.S.

There are several thrilling ways to experience New River Gorge National Park & Preserve's biggest attraction.

On the underside of the bridge is a 2-foot-wide maintenance inspection catwalk, running the full length of the roadway above. Bridge-walk tours click visitors into



See stunning autumn foliage in New River Gorge National Park.

PHOTO COURTESY: WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM

safety rigging, allowing them to walk about a quarter of a mile of the open-air catwalk.

Some travelers arrive from around the world to jump off the bridge and into the New River. This is only allowed on Bridge Day, scheduled on the third Saturday of each October. The bridge closes to vehicular traffic, allowing pedestrians to walk across and qualified BASE jumpers to leap into the 876-foot canyon below legally.

The first known BASE jump from the bridge occurred in 1979 when an Army vet jumped in view of 200 spectators. To deter illegal jumps, Bridge Day began in 1980 as an annual sanctioned and supervised event for BASE jumpers and rappelers. About 400 BASE jumpers participate and there have been three deaths recorded. Bungee jumping ended in 1994, just two years after a New Zealander plunged 823 feet to set the world record for longest bungee jump.

Beckley beckons

Beckley is an unimposing town of only 17,000 residents, though closer to 115,000 people live in the greater metropolitan area, making it the major hub of West Virginia's southern region. With a history heavily tied to the coal industry, the area's tourism has taken root more recently with the added awareness from the national park designation.

The most convenient airport for flying into the NRGNP region is Beckley's Raleigh County Memorial Airport (KBKW). The generally sleepy, pilot-controlled field is surprisingly well suited to host visitors flying turbine and piston aircraft alike.

Approaches into Beckley require terrain awareness regardless of the direction from which you've traveled. While the mountains may not be the proportions of the Rockies, they are equally unforgiving to carelessness or inattention. KBKW's main runway is the 6,750-foot-by-150-foot Runway 01-19. Both the ILS and LPV approaches into 19 offer minimums down to 220 feet AGL, while the LPV into 01 has a slightly higher, terrain-influenced minimum of 315 feet AGL. The shorter crosswind Runway 10-28 (5,001-foot x 100-foot) is relatively unobstructed when landing east, as it crosses the city of Beckley, allowing its LPV guidance to be used down to 200 feet and 3/4-SM visibility. Landing west, on the other hand,



Sandstone Falls is in the southernmost section of New River Gorge National Park.

PHOTO COURTESY: WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM



The author with his wife and daughter at one of many New River Gorge Bridge viewing points along Fayette Station Road. When completed in 1977 (and for 26 years thereafter), it was longest span, single arch bridge in the world.

PHOTO CREDIT: MATTHEW MCDANIEL

is heavily terrain-limited, offering only LP minimums of barely below basic VFR ceilings. Once on the ground, the relatively new, large terminal is easy to spot at the northeast intersection of the runways.

At first, the terminal feels like it's strictly for airline traffic (of which there is minimal Essential Air Service only). Nonetheless, transient and overnight parking is permitted on the terminal apron. The county offers full-service fuel and rental cars can be claimed within the terminal. Caution: Confirm attended hours and availability in advance and be prepared to provide your own tie-down ropes and chocks.

A realistic alternative to KBKW is Greenbrier Valley Airport (KLWB), near Lewisburg. The airport offers a larger variety of airline services and rental cars than Beckley, but it requires about double the driving time to reach the most popular areas of NRGNP or either of the park's two visitor centers. While KLWB offers a slightly longer runway (the 7,003-foot-by-150-foot Runway 04-22), there is no crosswind option available. A single ILS serves Runway 04, while LPV approaches serve both runway ends. As with KBKW, terrain awareness is necessary and none of the approaches get quite down to the minimums of a flat-land airport.

We approached KBKW from the northwest on a VFR day, with a blustery west wind making the descent across the Appalachian foothills slightly bumpy. We were cleared for a visual approach to 28 and flew a standard traffic pattern. Both a helicopter and a training aircraft were departing at the time and coordination was easy

and cordial via the common traffic advisory frequency. A charter flight was loading passengers at the terminal when we arrived. Within 30 minutes, we were unloaded, tied down, refueled and driving away in our rental car. It was fast, easy and affordable.

Day 1: First looks

It was a 30-minute drive to our vacation rental house in Fayetteville, which put us minutes from the park's prominent New River Gorge Bridge and the Canyon Rim Visitor Center. Along the route, we enjoyed a fantastic lunch at The Cathedral Café, a converted church that feels like the beating heart of the quaint downtown. Owned by a former New River raft guide, the café has been hosting locals and tourists alike for 25 years. After a leisurely walk, enjoying the July Fourth festivities and decorations, we headed into the park proper.

Our first glimpse of the gorge was crossing the bridge, an impressive 876 feet above the river. Only moments later, we were enjoying panoramic views of the park via the visitor center's viewing areas. Armed with maps and info from the rangers, we were soon driving the steep and winding Fayette Station Road to the gorge floor. This scenic one-way drive is just 8 miles long – about half on each side of the river – and combined with the single-lane Tunney Hunsaker Bridge (built in 1889) at the bottom, this was the only way to drive down to and across the river until 50 years ago. Today, the drive offers multiple waysides for viewing the gorge and the massive New River Gorge Bridge (completed in 1977) from various perspectives.

At the bottom, riverside beach areas offer recreation, relaxation and commanding views of the old and new bridges. Ascending the other side of the gorge, the Wolf Creek trailhead parking lot intersects a network of trails that include easy 1-mile treks as well as moderate-to-strenuous routes like the 4-mile Fayetteville Trail. After some easy hiking, we continued the drive out of the gorge, bringing us back into Fayetteville.

Unlike many national parks, NRGNP is easy to visit, even without in-depth advanced planning. No season is off limits, though winter is likely the least inviting and often brings seasonal facility closures. Spring offers the exhilaration of fresh growth, crisp air and abundant wildlife viewing. In summer, the New River itself is the perfect escape from the heat. Autumn is optimum for seeing stunning fall colors. We'd chosen a summer holiday weekend and still had no trouble booking lodging or activities with little notice. We ended Day 1 at our rental's pool and grill, recuperating from a busy day flying in and touring the park's northern areas.

Day 2: History and recreation

Learning about local history and riding the rapids were our goals for Day 2, so we set off to the park's central area and the Thurmond Historic District.

Thurmond stands as an example of a classic boomtown, and with more than 20 park-owned structures, it is the best-preserved of the many historic places and structures within NRGNP. Rangers led a fascinating historical walking tour of this once thriving community, beginning at the depot-turned-visitor center.

Founded in 1873, the same year the railroad was completed, Thurmond soon became the epicenter of business in the gorge, thanks to coal exports and the trains that hauled them. The depot peaked in 1910 when 75,000 passengers passed through, along with so much freight and coal tonnage that the tiny village was the highest-revenue station for Chesapeake & Ohio Railway's mainline. The Great Depression and the automobile sealed the fate of Thurmond; the last steam locomotive left the depot in 1958. By 1984, the depot was closed, followed by the post office in 1995.

After a picnic lunch, we signed up for a half-day whitewater rafting excursion from one of the many vendors operating near the park boundaries. Experiencing the New River while afloat is worth the cost and cannot be duplicated from any land-side vantage point. Views of the massive boulders, stone blocks and outcroppings – imagine the size of a house – along the river's edge are breathtaking. The rapids range from Class II to V, but none are long in duration. Several are benign, while a few others are quite exhilarating.

While our guide enjoyed joking that he'd been at zero days since losing a rider into the river all summer, including one ejected during our voyage, the safety briefings and flotation equipment provided comfort levels most riders were happy with. If you did get dunked, the river was bath temperature in July and



Visit Thurmond, West Virginia, a historic boomtown within the national park, to see the preservation of buildings and infrastructure that supported the railroad and coal industries.

PHOTO CREDIT: MATTHEW MCDANIEL

following the guide's instructions put our single man overboard back onboard in a matter of seconds. The whole experience was far more fun than it was scary. The all-day voyages offer about the same amount of river and rapids; they just do so at a more leisurely pace, including stops for lunch, swims and brief shoreline hikes.

Day 3: Completing our tour de gorge

Day 3 began by heading south to the lower park, represented by the Sandstone Visitor Center. First, we stopped at Grandview Overlook on the southwestern edge of NRGNP. There we hiked the Castle Rock, Grandview Rim and Tunnel trails, covering about 2.7 miles of moderate-level hiking. Highlights included sweeping gorge views, sheer stone walls towering above and below the trails, and a commanding view of the bridge from a high, downstream perch. We ran out of time for the popular Turkey Spur Overlook, a ridgeline hike ending with a 160-step climb to three overlook platforms.

We finished our tour at the southeastern finger of the park, where we stopped at many overlooks along the east side of the New River. Just past the Hinton Historic District, a preserved 24-block Victorian-era railroad town, we crossed the river again and proceeded north to Sandstone Falls. There, the largest waterfall anywhere along the New River – spanning 1,500 feet across the river with drops of 10 to 25 feet – is easily accessible via boardwalks and observation decks. A bit of easy rock scrambling can even put you into the river for prime viewing of the many tiers of the falls, all while keeping your feet dry. Before heading back to the car, we completed the Island Loop Trail for a tranquil stroll through farmlands transitioning back to forest.

From there, we were back at Beckley's airport within 30 minutes. Sunday was quiet at the terminal and since I'd refueled and paid upon arrival, we made an easy getaway. KA

Matthew McDaniel is a Master & Gold Seal CFII, ATP, MEI, AGI & IGI and Platinum CSIP. In 35 years of flying, he has logged over 24,000 hours total, over 6,200 hours of instruction-given and over 2,500 hours in various King Airs and the BE-1900D. As owner of Progressive Aviation Services, LLC (progaviation.com), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and Glass Cockpit instruction since 2001. Currently, he is also a Boeing 737-Series Captain for an international airline, holds eight turbine aircraft type ratings and has flown 170 aircraft types. Matt is one of less than 10 instructors in the world to have earned the Master CFI designation for 12 consecutive two-year terms. He can be reached at matt@progaviation.com or 414-339-4990. A resident of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Matt and his wife began visiting national parks when the oldest of their two children was an infant in 2005. The family is now 48 parks into a quest to visit them all.

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