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AJC TRAVEL NEWS

# Tennessee's Cumberland Plateau highlights lovely 'plunge waterfall'

By ANNE Z. COOKE and STEVE HAGGERTY  
For The Atlanta Journal-Constitution  
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Pikeville, Tenn. — We'd come to see the waterfall, but not just any waterfall. This one, claimed the pamphlet we picked up in Nashville, was the tallest waterfall east of the Rocky Mountains.

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Fall Creek Falls State Park  
Spring runoff swells the main waterfall of Fall Creek Falls State Park. Waterfalls and wilderness are the centerpiece of the park.

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Steve Haggerty / AJC Special  
In addition to hiking on the Cumberland Plateau, there are riding stables, tennis courts, golf, a lake with trophy fishing and more.

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Steve Haggerty / AJC Special  
A park ranger points out the features of the Cumberland Plateau, which boasts stands of virgin timber.

Fall Creek Falls, a frothy curtain of water dropping

256 feet from the rim to the rocks below, is actually one of the East's tallest "plunge waterfalls," but that is one of the most spectacular types. It very nearly wound up as the centerpiece of a great national park, one to rival Yosemite or Yellowstone or Great Smoky Mountains. Instead, it became a 25,000-acre state park.

But where was it? From where we stood, at 1,800 feet above sea level on the flat top of the Cumberland Plateau, the forest crowded around; tall maples and oaks, dogwood and tulip poplars, hemlock and hickory as far as the eye could see, stretching away to the horizon.

"You can't miss it," said state park staffer Stuart Carroll, chuckling at my question. An interpretive specialist, he was leading a group of hikers to the base of the falls. "C'mon and join us," he said. "The trail is steep with a series of switchbacks, but it's short, less than a half-mile." Slipping into the forest we followed Carroll past leafy rhododendrons and mountain laurel. Then, without warning, the trees separated, the sun broke through, and we saw why federal park planners in Washington thought the region deserved special attention.

At our feet — and behind a sturdy metal railing — mist billowed out of a yawning gorge. On the far side, at eye level, Fall Creek plunged over the rim, dropping in sheets to the river below. Around us, ferns and flowers grew in rocky crevices, and mist-drenched moss clung to the walls. A pleasant earthy smell mingled with the odor of damp leaves.

In the distance, rumped troughs in the forest canopy marked other river gorges, deep valleys harboring some of the country's last stands of virgin timber. Also present but unseen and waiting to be discovered were myriad caves and arches, carved as running water bubbled through the plateau's fissures and faults.

Waterfalls and wilderness hikes are the centerpiece of Fall Creek Falls State Park. It also has tennis, basketball and volleyball courts, riding stables, a lake with trophy fishing, canoes and fishing skiffs to rent, and a nature center. There are 20 miles of bike trails and a top-rated 6,669-yard golf course with greens fees starting at \$22.

And the price is right. For \$115 a night, eight of us shared a furnished cabin on the lake, complete with an over-water deck. We found clean linens, a fully equipped modern kitchen with a toaster, coffee maker and microwave and tableware to serve eight. Fishing off the deck, we caught a couple of largemouth bass and grilled them right there. (Two other friends stayed at the inn in a simple but comfortable double room for \$64 a night.)

You can't swim in the lake, created in 1966 when the river was dammed, but you can rent fishing boats, canoes and pedal boats. The park's most distinctive feature is its rare stands of virgin timber, never-cut forests tucked in the steepest remote valleys, or "gulfs," as they're called. The settlers who moved onto the Cumberland Plateau in the 1800s lived by logging, but the gulfs were too steep and inaccessible to make timbering there worthwhile.

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