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Tennessee's Fall Creek Falls is a gem in an emerald landscape

03:02 PM CDT on Saturday, October 17, 2009

By ANNE Z. COOKE and STEVE HAGGERTY / Special to The Dallas Morning News

PIKEVILLE, Tenn. – We'd come to see the waterfall. And not just any waterfall.

Tennessee, famous for country music, is even better known for its profusion of forest waterways, from cascades and cataracts to rapids and rivulets. Creeks gurgle through every valley; drops trickle down every cliff.

Except for Fall Creek Falls. A frothy veil of water, this 256-foot-long torrent is one of a kind, the tallest single-drop waterfall east of the Rocky Mountains. It's the pride of the Cumberland Plateau and centerpiece of the 25,000-acre state park of the same name. But where was it? From where we stood at the Visitors' Center, a Robin Hood's forest stretched away over the top of the plateau, a swath of leafy maples and oaks, graceful dogwood and tulip poplars, towering hemlock and hickory as far as the eye could see.

"You can't miss it," said Stuart Carroll, a Fall Creek Falls State Park naturalist who stopped to answer my question. He was leading a nature walk into the gorge and to the base of the falls. "C'mon and join us," he said. "The trail is a series of steep switchbacks, but it's short, less than a half-mile."

We followed Carroll into the forest, past leafy rhododendrons and mountain laurel. Then, without warning, the trees separated, the sun broke through and we saw why in the 1930s, the Department of the Interior proposed turning the area and the falls into a national park.

Below, and safely behind a sturdy metal railing, mist billowed up out of a yawning gorge. And at eye level, on the far side, Fall Creek plunged over a sandstone rim, dropping in sheets to the river below. Ferns and flowers grew in rocky crevices in the gorge, and mist-drenched moss clung to the walls. A pleasant, earthy aroma mingled with the odor of damp leaves.

In the distance, troughs in the forest canopy marked other river gorges where some of the nation's last stands of virgin timber remain undisturbed. Miles of trails led to more waterfalls, sculpted caves and arches, each shaped and carved as water bubbled through ancient fissures and faults.

"It's beautiful, and it's secluded," said John Fonville, manager of the Inn, in the park village. "But waterfalls and wilderness hikes are just part of what's here," he said, ticking off the list of available recreation: tennis, basketball and volleyball courts; riding stables and a 350-acre fishing lake with canoes and skiffs to rent; the nature center with exhibits and educational programs; the Olympic-size swimming pool; 50 miles of bike trails; and a 6,669-yard golf course open to the public.

Most appealing are the lodging prices. For \$115 a night, eight of us shared a furnished cabin on the lake, complete with an over-water deck. (Two other friends stayed at the Inn in a standard, motel-style double room for \$64 a night.)

"Between the Inn and the cabins, we have enough beds to sleep 1,000 guests," said Fonville. "That's not counting guests in the 250 campsites, group lodges or the group campsites."

Because the water level varies, you can't swim in the lake, created in 1966 when the river was dammed.

"But some of the old-timers around here swim in the George Hole, on Cane Creek by the nature center," said Fonville. You can also swim in the pool at the bottom of Fall Creek Falls.

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STEVE HAGGERTY/Special Contributor
One of the highest waterfalls east of the Rockies, the main falls drop 256 feet into a deep gorge.

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the bottom of Fall Creek Falls.

The park's most unusual features are its stands of virgin timber, never-cut forests in the steepest remote valleys. Settlers who moved onto the Cumberland Plateau in the early 1800s logged and sold most of the best timber. But the so-called gulfs were too steep and inaccessible to make timbering worthwhile.

By the early 1930s, the forests had recovered. But the Great Depression left the region among the nation's poorest. To spur the economy and protect the forests, the federal government proposed a national park. A surprise, however, was in store.

During the park approval process, someone noticed that Fall Creek Falls was seasonal. In the spring, Fall Creek roared into the gorge, but by October, the flow had dried up. Withdrawing the proposal, the federal government deeded the land to the state in 1944.

Twenty-two years later, Tennessee solved the problem, building a dam above the falls and creating the lake. From then on, the falls flowed year-round. Later park improvements added the seven-mile Scenic Gorge Loop, a highway with parking pullouts and vista points. Existing hunting trails were linked to form a 25-mile network of back-country hiking trails.

After hiking to the bottom of the canyon and back, we drove along the rim to the confluence of Fall and Cane creeks, and from there along Piney Creek, to the Piney Falls overlook. From there, the road looped back across the dam, passing the tennis and basketball courts, the boat dock, campgrounds and stables.

Our last stop was at Cane Creek Falls, near the Betty Dunn Nature Center, where a swinging bridge crosses Cane Creek. The bridge, which bounced and swayed as we stepped on each plank, looks upstream at Cascade Falls.

To preserve a contiguous band of wilderness, state, county and city agencies have created parks with shared borders. Burgess Falls State Natural Area, near Sparta, preserves lush woodlands and an unusual number of flower and tree species. Cumberland Mountain Park, at 2,000 feet, provides lakeside recreation, with rental cabins and hiking trails.

Big South Fork National Recreation Area, straddling the Tennessee-Kentucky border, protects a watershed covered with new and old-growth forests, remote caves and arches and many rare plant species. Pickett State Park, adjacent to Big South Fork, shares similar features but is more accessible via a network of hiking trails.

Rare, indeed, is Colditz Cove Natural Area, one of very few small gulfs close enough for visitors to reach. Despite the location, biologists believe that the cove was rarely explored and that today's forest is a direct descendant of species that colonized the area 10,000 years ago, after the last ice age.

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are freelance writers in California.

WHEN YOU GO

Getting there

Fall Creek Falls State Park is 144 miles from Atlanta and 18 miles west of Pikeville off State Highway 30. State Highway 284 bisects the park from north to south. Contact: www.myfallcreekfalls.com and www.state.tn.us/environment/parks/FallCreekFalls

Events

Fall Creek Falls State Park hosts a half-dozen events during the year. Most notable is the Wildflower Pilgrimage, the first weekend in April. Others include Fall Colors Weekend, third weekend in October; Wild Foods Day, late October; Christmas on the Mountain, first week in December; rock-climbing workshops, May through September; and Mountaineer Folk Festival, the weekend after Labor Day.

Where to stay

- Double rooms at the Inn start at \$68 per night. Two- and three-bedroom cabins sleep eight and 10 (from \$115). The Inn has a cafeteria-style dining room. For the Inn, cabins or camping: 423-881-5298, 1-800-250-8610 and 1-800-250-8611.

- Three campgrounds have 250 sites with tables, grills and water. Some have electricity and hookups. Rent bicycles at the Village Green.

Resource

For a copy of the Tennessee State Vacation magazine, call 1-800-462-8366.

