

Road Trip Guide: Petit Jean State Park

Get to Petit Jean State Park

Location: Petit Jean Mountain, about [40 minutes](#) southeast of Russellville in Arkansas

Address: 1285 Petit Jean Mountain Road, Morrilton, Ark., 72110

Distance: Roughly 185-195 miles depending how you go

Drive time: Around [3.5 hours](#)

Website: arkansasstateparks.com/parks/petit-jean-state-park

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The beauty of the Ozarks shines especially bright at Petit Jean, the first designated state park in Arkansas. The mountainous recreation area is rich in waterfalls, canyons, bluffs, rocky wonders, historic buildings and lots to do for all ages. While it's a great road trip destination any time of year, autumn color adds extra panache. In fact, with so much to do and a 3.5-hour drive, this trek may be best for an extended weekend. Learn why in our latest guide to outdoor Ozarks goodness.

What's so special about Petit Jean

Petit Jean State Park and mountain have something for every outdoor enthusiast. Hikers love the park for its [20-mile network](#) of trails to awe-inspiring waterfalls, natural bridges, cascading creeks, high bluff overlooks and canyon walls.

Not into hilly hikes? There's an accessible boardwalk overlook, easy paved paths for strolling or cycling and short treks to several natural wonders, including a Native American bluff dwelling and massive boulder formations.

If you love a gorgeous sweeping view, this park has those too! One spot is known for stunning sunsets; another for sunrises. And there are plenty of high-bluff vistas around the canyon's rim. (Parents of small kids take note: most rim areas are not fenced!)

Add to all that a 100-acre lake, cabins, campsites, playgrounds, swimming pools and historic buildings including the Mather Lodge and restaurant — plus the legend of one tragic spirit still haunting the hills — it's no wonder Petit Jean is a favorite destination.

Our Favorite Trails

If you like trails with natural scenic rewards, you'll love hiking in Petit Jean. One of our favorite hikes is the moderate [Cedar Creek Trail](#). This 1.25-mile loop begins at the Old Pioneer Cabin, built in 1845 by early settler John Walker. Start on the left side to walk *down* the steep stair-stepping trail versus climbing back up at the end. At the creek level, continue to the right, then cross a pretty bridge.

When you come to a "T" and a way sign, arrows point right to continue the Cedar Creek Trail with various elevations and scenic spots, including a natural rock bridge. Or add to your hike by going left at the sign to follow a portion of the Boy Scout trail to the Rock House Cave.

For an easier way to see the cave, drive around to the quarter-mile [Rock House Cave Trail](#) of Red Bluff Drive.

It starts at the Turtle Rocks, a sloping bed of turtle-shell-like geologic formations. Just beyond, you'll find the cave – actually an ancient bluff shelter that housed Native Americans more than 1,000 years ago. Inside, look for pictographs on the ceiling.

Another easy but amazing spot is the quarter-mile [Bear Cave Trail](#). The formation of monolithic sandstone boulders is more adventure than hike. (There no bears nor actual caves!)

Follow the trail around the perimeter, duck into indentions, squeeze between boulders and even (carefully!) climb to the top for incredible views. You can park at the site or walk over from Mather Lodge.

Cedar Falls is a popular trail destination at Petit Jean State Park, Arkansas. (Photo from the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism)

The park's centerpiece sight is Cedar Falls. To see it from below, hike the moderate-to-strenuous [Cedar Falls Trail](#), a 2-mile out-and-back trek to the 95-foot waterfall and grotto. The rocky trail starts steeply downhill, eventually crosses a bridge and continues to the right on a more level path.

Passing photo-worthy creek cascades and pretty pools, the trail leads to the stunning waterfall. (Heads up: There might not be much flow during dry seasons.)

A natural arch on the Seven Hollows Trail is one of many awe-inspiring geologic formations in Petit Jean State Park, Arkansas. (Photo by Sony Hocklander)

Another popular hike is the moderate (to sometimes challenging) 4.5-mile [Seven Hollows Trail](#), perhaps best known for its massive natural stone arch. With varying elevations, the loop trail goes through forested areas, over ridge tops, along streams and past many geologic formations. A short but rocky spur leads to a rock shelter and grotto. If you only have time for part of the trail, start clockwise (left side of the loop) for a roughly 2.6-mile there-and-back hike to see the stone arch.

More Hikes to Explore

Stretching 12 miles, the park's longest trail trek follows the [Winthrop P. Rockefeller Boy Scout Trail](#), a moderate to strenuous path that overlaps or connects to many other park trails.

Another hike is the [Canyon Trail](#), an extension of the Cedar Falls Trail that showcases more pools and cascades. After crossing the bridge to Cedar Falls, turn left for the Canyon Trail instead of right to the falls. This trail adds up to one mile out and one mile back from the bridge.

To skip harder hikes, you can view Cedar Falls from above by walking the [Cedar Falls Overlook Trail](#), a barrier-free boardwalk. There's also the shaded, paved [CCC Hike & Bike Trail](#) that runs along the road through the park, helping visitors walk or bike between the lodge, campgrounds, swimming pools, lake, visitors center and other park amenities.

Overlooks & Sweeping Vistas

With such a deep canyon, Petit Jean has [incredible views](#), some of which are right in front of cabins. A must-view overlook is at Mather Lodge. (In fact, it's so pretty, this writer once witnessed wedding vows exchanged there.)

The most visited overlook may be at Stout's Point, a short drive from the main park. Located on Petit Jean Mountain, it overlooks the Arkansas River and Ada Valley and is a great place to catch a sunrise. It feels a bit reverent here as visitors wander the concrete path. After all, it's also the legendary burial place for Petit Jean, for whom the mountain and park are named. A sign near her gravesite, surrounded by open fencing and tucked between boulders, shares her [tragic story](#).

The best place to watch the setting sun is at the [CCC Overlook](#), a rock shelter perched on the bluff of the Cedar Creek Canyon on Red Bluff Drive. The road takes you first to the Mary Ann Richter Overlook, also a great view that includes nearby Mount Nebo. But the shelter overlook area is wider so it's easier to find a spot on busy evenings. Another place to watch the sunset is the Palisades Overlook on Arkansas 154 highway.

Historic Buildings & Park Amenities

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) left its stamp all over Petit Jean State Park, established in the early 1930s. You'll find native stone cabins, the Lake Bailey rock dam, Davies Bridge (to Red Bluff

Drive), an old rock tower, the old CCC Field Chimney (what's left of a recreation hall) and Mather Lodge – the only CCC-built state park lodge in Arkansas.

The CCC was also responsible for many of the great trails we enjoy today. The “Iron Mike” park statue honors those workers. (Go [here](#) for more detailed history.)

Mather Lodge is the heart of the park and the site of a restaurant, gift shop and open-air gathering places on the rim of the Cedar Creek Canyon. It's named for Stephen Mather, director of the National Park Service in the 1920s.

Down the road, the new Dr. T.W. Hardison Center opened in 2021 near the shore of Lake Bailey. Named for the man considered the “father of the Arkansas State Park System,” the visitors center features a gift shop, interactive exhibits about the park, bathrooms, meeting rooms and a large outdoor fireplace.

Stroll from the visitor center along the lake shore to the [boat house](#) where small motor and paddle vessels can be rented in summer months. Anglers can try their luck from Lake Bailey's shore, an accessible pier or from a boat.

Families with kids will appreciate the park's two playgrounds. And if you are visiting in summer, cool off in one of two pools. (The one near Mather Lodge is only for cabin and lodge guests).

Whether you stay in the park or in a nearby rental, give yourself time to explore Petit Jean to the fullest.

Add to your trip

The drive to reach Petit Jean State Park takes you through gorgeous wilderness areas. Plan to stop for a hike or scenic view along the way there or back. While traveling through northwest Arkansas, try [Lost Valley Trail](#) in Boxley Valley, [Alum Cove Trail](#) near Deer, or [Pedestal Rocks & Kings Bluff](#) trails near Sand Gap. Stop for a meal or snack at the [Ozark Café](#) in Jasper.

Great side trips from Petit Jean include a visit to [Mount Nebo State Park](#) (about [40 minutes](#) away) and [Mount Magazine State Park](#) (about [one hour](#) away). If you're a car fan, the [Museum of Automobiles](#) is just minutes away.