

WEST VIRGINIA | WHITEWATER RAFTING



River Expeditions

RIVER EXPEDITIONS

Almost Heaven

West Virginia is a whitewater rafting mecca

By Robin Roenker

WEST VIRGINIA IS HOME to some of the most revered commercial whitewater rafting runs in the country. So, whether you're new to the activity or a seasoned pro, the Mountain State has a section of river that's sure to be a perfect fit.

"I moved here 20 years ago planning to spend one year working on the river and never left," says Haynes Mansfield, marketing director with ACE Adventure Resort in Oak Hill, W.Va., which offers

guided rafting packages on the New and Gauley rivers. "This landscape offers everything that an outdoor recreation enthusiast is looking for, including rock climbing, mountain biking, whitewater rafting, whitewater kayaking, hunting and hiking," Mansfield says. "You can do all of that here in this amazing little microcosm (of the New River Gorge), the quality of which I've never found anywhere else in the country."

NEW RIVER

Despite its name, the New River is one

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of the oldest rivers in the world. It is, however, home to America's newest national park, the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve. The upper section of the river, which has mild, Class I through Class III rapids, is family friendly and "perfect for the beginner or someone who has never been rafting before," says Roger Wilson, CEO of Adventures on the Gorge in Lansing, W.Va., which offers guided tours of both the New and Gauley rivers.

The Lower New River, which includes more adventurous Class I to Class VI+ rapids, is the most popular option for older teens and adults, according to Wilson. Mansfield agrees: "The Lower New is absolutely the best way to see the splendor of the new national park," he says.

As groups traverse either section of the New River, it's not uncommon to spot bald eagles and other wildlife, and the setting itself is a major draw. "The New River Gorge is a 1,000-foot deep, cliff-lined gorge that was formed over thousands of years. It's this amazing, rugged landscape that's teeming with wildlife, and the scenery is spectacular," Mansfield says. "It really is the 'Grand Canyon of the East.'"

Rafting trips on the New River are typically offered from May through October, though the water is warmest and most inviting for a calm-area swim in the summer.

GAULEY RIVER

The peak time to try rafting West Virginia's Gauley River is September or October, since river flow is guaranteed in the early fall — the result of an annual, required release of water at that time of year from the nearby Summersville Lake dam.

While the Lower Gauley, with its primarily Class III and IV rapids, is a good option for first-timers, the Class V Upper Gauley is recommended only for experienced rafters. "The Upper Gauley is a world-renowned stretch of whitewater ... that people aspire to do," Mansfield says. "It's absolutely an adrenaline-pumping, nonstop whitewater experience."

SHENANDOAH AND POTOMAC RIVERS

On a guided whitewater trip with River Riders, an outfitter based in Harpers Ferry, W.Va., you can enjoy an 8-mile, family-friendly Class I through Class III route that begins on the Shenandoah River and ends on the Potomac. "It goes past the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, so it's very picturesque," says River Riders staffer Michael Martin.



River & Trail Outfitters

RIVER & TRAIL OUTFITTERS; ADVENTURES ON THE GORGE



Adventures on the Gorge

AMERICA'S NEWEST NATIONAL PARK

In late 2020, New River Gorge National Park and Preserve became the country's 63rd national park. Whitewater rafting on the New River is an ideal way to explore the park's beauty, but there's plenty to do by land there as well. Learn more about getting the most from your visit to the park at [nps.gov/neri](https://www.nps.gov/neri).

— Robin Roenker

For the most thrilling experience, book a trip here in the spring or early summer, when the water levels are typically higher and the flow is slightly more intense, Martin advises. If you want to try your

hand at tackling these waterways single-handedly — as opposed to the paddling teams most often found on whitewater rafts — you can book a Class II whitewater tubing experience on the

Potomac with River & Trail Outfitters, also headquartered in the Harpers Ferry area.

"It's a very different experience," says River & Trail Outfitters CEO John Gonano. "To be honest, in a tube, even though the rapids aren't as big, you're by yourself and unguided. So, in some ways, it's much easier to be tipped."

PLANNING YOUR TRIP

Many whitewater companies in West Virginia, such as River Expeditions based in Oak Hill, W.Va., offer rafting packages with lodging and dining accommodations as well as add-on adventures like zip lining, stand-up paddleboarding, rock climbing, horseback riding, mountain biking, paintball and more.

"We offer everything from primitive camping on-site to five-bedroom cabins with hot tubs and fireplaces," says Heather Johnson, who co-owns and runs River Expeditions with her husband, Rick. Johnson partners with area adventure companies to provide an array of additional outdoor experiences. "We want people to extend their stay in the area — and be repeat visitors — so they can explore all there is to do here," she says.