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To experience the New River, get beyond the bridge

FAYETTEVILLE, West Virginia (AP) -- At the bottom of the 174 wooden steps from the Canyon Rim Visitor Center to the lookout on the New River Gorge, Jim Dill removes his woven straw hat, as if he has entered a holy place.

"This is breathtaking," he says softly, as wife Rita begins snapping photos. A few minutes later, he adds: "I can't look enough! I've got a sore neck, twisting my head one direction and then the other."

Dill, of Caldwell, Idaho, is one of some 300,000 people who stop at the New River Gorge National River each year. Most are here just to get a glimpse of the world famous New River Gorge Bridge and the canyon below. The steel-arch span, the second-longest in the world, is a sight in itself, made famous by jumpers who parachute from its edge at a festival the third Saturday of every October (October 21 this year).

In May, *Roads & Bridges* magazine ranked it one of the top 10 bridges of all time, in the company of such icons as the Brooklyn Bridge in New York and the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

And while they don't yet have the numbers to back up their theory, guides with the National Park Service swear that tourism has increased since the release last year of the West Virginia quarter -- a coin bearing the image of the bridge.

But there is more to the New River Gorge than the steel that stretches over it. And there is more to it than the blue and yellow rafts that ply the whitewater below the bridge, carrying 100,000 people a year down Class 4 rapids that qualify as the park's most traveled "trail."

There is the rest of the New, beyond the bridge.

The river begins at a spring in Blowing Rock, North Carolina, and winds north for 320 miles until it intersects with the Gauley. For 53 miles in West Virginia, it is a national park encompassing 70,000 acres between Fayetteville and Hinton.

The park was created in part to preserve the legacy of coal mining towns like Kaymoor and Thurmond, though its valleys are now free of the smoke that once belched from coke ovens and freight trains. Today, it offers recreation in many forms, from rock climbing and biking to fishing, birding, swimming and hunting.

Each of the four visitors' centers has something different to offer.

Twelve miles south of Fayetteville, travelers turn off U.S. 19 into the village of Glen Jean, then onto a narrow road that winds for seven miles through a community of tin-roofed homes that give way to orange lilies exploding from the greenery. A few miles in, a mountain waterfall roars over a stream filled with boulders and lined with moss-covered trees.

Eventually, the road offers up a choice: Left or right. History or nature.

Running parallel to the railroad is a one-lane path that emerges from the trees and crosses a narrow rusting bridge into Thurmond, a boom town turned ghost town.

In the early 1900s, Thurmond's banks were among the wealthiest in the state, and 15 passenger trains a day passed through on the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway. But the Great Depression triggered shutdowns and bank failures, and rail travel began to shift from the steam engines that served the C&O to diesel locomotives that made jobs in the rail yard obsolete.

The proliferation of cars and roads cut deeper into train travel, and when the coal industry began to give out, there was little reason left to travel to Thurmond. Today, it's a monument to a lost way of life.

A few miles away, at the opposite end of the fork, is the Dun Glen recreational area, a little-known stretch of the New with a wide, sandy beach.

Melissa Wilson, 32, of Thayer, is camping with husband Chris and three daughters, relishing the peace broken only by a train that passes four times a day.

"A lot of people ought to enjoy this," she says. "It's something else."

"A lot of people just don't know it's there," Chris adds. "They just think that road out there is a road to nowhere."

In a way, it is nowhere. But that's what makes it so appealing, Melissa says. And there is plenty to do.

"You can fish or swim or just sit here under the trees and camp. Where else do you get this kind of peace?" she says.

Still, there is more.

About 25 miles south of Glen Jean, just off Interstate 64, county Route 9 winds for 5 miles between rolling pastures and well-kept homes.

At the end is Grandview, a well-manicured section of the park with playgrounds and pavilions. The longest trail is three miles, and the walkway leading to the main overlook is level sandstone, somehow suggesting there is not much to see. But emerge from tree line, and it's clear there is.

The Grandview overlook is higher than the perch at Canyon Rim, some 1,400 feet above the New, with views that spread for miles and include the town of Quinnimont, where the first coal left the gorge in 1873.

The only sounds are the birds above and the rapids below.

It's only another 20 miles to the southernmost visitor center, Sandstone. The eco-friendly building has a light-colored roof to reflect sunlight, is insulated with recycled cellulose and has a geothermal heating system.

But its highlight is an intricate terrazzo tile floor map of the New River watershed -- dark green for park land, white for public land, gray for state parks and forests, and blue for the river.

Few tourists make it this far south, and Sandstone spokesman David Caldwell says even many locals don't realize it's part of the park.

Just a few miles from here, the New drops over a rock shelf in a sheet of water some 1,500 feet wide. The Park Service has built picnic areas, hiking trails and a boardwalk, making it one of the safest and most accessible spots on the river.

"There's just as much nature here as in the other end of the park," Caldwell says, "but here, you go slow enough to see it."

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