



TRAVEL

Tales from Old Rocky Top, down in the Hocking Hills

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LOGAN, OHIO — If you paused long enough to read the trailhead signs in Ohio's Hocking Hills State Park, you'd find that the Black Hand sandstone underfoot was laid down 350,000 years ago, on an ancient seabed.

Or you could blow off the science lesson – like I did – and push ahead to the Old Man's Cave, past a meandering creek and down a level path. Level, it seemed, until both trail and creek abruptly vanished, swallowed up by a hole in the earth.

A moment earlier I'd been slathering sunscreen on my nose. Now shadows dimmed the sky, pinched between narrow walls, and the sun's filtered rays glanced off a cluster of half-hidden caves and a waterfall below.

For a moment I wondered if we – my sister Mary and I – had tumbled into Rivendell, in Middle-earth. But the shapes ahead weren't elves. They were teens on a school trip, posing for selfies and daring each other to jump in the water. "Don't be a chicken," teased one of the girls. "It's nothing special. Just a creek."

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But not to us, nor the hikers behind us, astonished at their surroundings. The Old Man's Cave was as fabulous as it was unexpected. But our next day's outing, a nature walk booked in advance, which – to my surprise – included an introduction to rappelling – outdid the caves by half.

"Don't we need a cliff to step off?" asked Mary, nervously scanning the landscape as eco-biologist Steve Roley, our guide, a rock climber and the owner of High Rock Adventures, gathered the group together. "Yeah, where's Old Rocky Top?" echoed the guy behind me.

But Roley, a student of native plants, was in no hurry as we strolled uphill beneath birches and hemlocks. Stopping here and there, he pointed out the edible plants that thrive beneath hemlocks, trees descended from similar hemlocks that flourished 10,000 years ago, when the climate was cooler and moister.

"These here are jack-in-the-pulpits and those are may apples," he said, moving on to a patch of greenbriar and a solitary sweet cicely.

Then Roley stopped short, next to two rocky walls. "Geez," said somebody, gazing skyward. But before you could snap your fingers, we'd buckled up, climbed to the top, wobbled over a narrow bridge, and one-by-one, gasped, backed off into thin air and "bumped" down the wall to the ground.

"Wow, it's easy, let's do it again!" clamored the group, thrilled – and relieved – that they hadn't backed out. And to think that a month earlier, I'd written off Ohio as one of the states you fly over on your way to somewhere else.

And I would have, if my sister, who lives in Kent, hadn't suggested a getaway to the Hocking Hills, southeast of Columbus. "C'mon, this is Daniel Boone country, with log cabins and pioneer history, like those books we used to read," she said. "Except that it's the 21st century. There's zip lines, music festivals, art galleries, antique malls. Even golf, or canoeing or we can look for the caves."

"Everybody wants to see the caves," said Audrey Martin, at the Hocking Hills Tourism Association, in Logan, the county seat. "From nature lovers to serious hikers, or families camping or renting a cabin, they all want to get out and walk.

"The park gets an estimated 1.4 million visitors annually, but the trails are rarely crowded," she said. "But come in autumn, if you can. When the weather cools and the maples and birch change colors, every hillside glows. They're a dazzling panorama of reds, golds, bright yellows and orange, with splashes of green. Hemlocks are evergreens."

Packing up, we drove southeast to Columbus and on to Hocking County on State Route 33, crossing rolling meadows and farms. Then it was on to two-lane roads over bigger hills, and finally to roller coaster-steep hills, winding, turning and climbing and plunging.

Cottages, barns and trailers measured the miles; front porches, vegetable gardens and laundry on the line marked the days. Here was a rusty truck; there a flower garden. The last turn, on State Route 374, left us at our destination's door, the Inn & Spa at Cedar Falls, and to Ellen Grinsfelder, the owner.

You'd think we were cousins, judging from Grinsfelder's warm welcome. But I think it was Mary who'd read about her mid-1840s (pre-Civil War) chinked-log cabin, still used, and picked out the inn from 203 other cabin rentals listed in the Hocking Hills Official Visitors Guide.

Perched on 75 green acres near the State Park, the inn was a modest B&B when Grinsfelder inherited it. Today it's classic rustic-luxury, with a cozy lodge, nine single rooms, 12 furnished log cabins (some with kitchenettes), four snappy yurts (where we stayed) and an outdoor fire pit plus benches.

The restaurant, the neighborhood's best, employs a full-time chef and supports a large and inventive menu. The 1840s cabin houses a tiny bar and half the kitchen; a meeting room seating 50 hosts girlfriend reunions, county dinners and small weddings.

Best of all, it was a brisk walk from the inn to the State Park where the trail loops from Cedar Falls to the Old Man's Cave, to Rose Lake and to the newest area, Whispering Cave. Other park sites – Conkles Hollow, Ash Cave, Rock House and Cantwell Cliffs – are linked by roads, a free public shuttle bus, 35 miles of hiking trails and 33 miles of bridle trails.

And after hiking? We squeezed in three hours for a zip line whiz through the treetops – literally, giant beech trees – at Hocking Hills Canopy Tours, in nearby Rockbridge. A birds-eye view of the hills and the Hocking River below were the highlights; our guide and comedian-in-training, Maddi Karlovec, was an unforgettable gem.

The next day we toured Logan, named for Talgayeeta, aka Logan, the distinguished Mingo Indian chief who befriended the region's first white settlers. Welcoming to all, he preached and practiced friendship, until a couple of vicious white supremacists murdered his family. Wandering through the town center we came upon his name and picture on a small monument, a poignant reminder of Ohio's early history.

And the town's premier attraction? The Columbus Washboard Factory, the last American maker of washboards, the rickety percussion instrument favored by country and bluegrass bands. The business, owned by James Martin, a former Brit, sells thousands of washboards annually, many to tourists lingering in the gift shop. A souvenir hunter's heaven, it's awash in games, hats, soap, honey, lotions, towels, playing cards, toys and, of course, washboards.

On our last morning we headed for the Hocking Hills Moonshine company, making and selling old-time corn liquor, now produced legally. Distilled on site, it uses local spring water and crack corn (hard, dry kernels) bought in huge big sacks labeled "animal feed."

Stepping up for a taste, I wavered. Would it be the 80-proof "original-recipe," the wonder-woman 120-proof "Buckeye Lightning," or a sip of one of the flavored liquors displayed on the counter? The clerk waited, glass poised in midair.

To heck with a swallow. After all, I'd hiked up the hill, gritted my teeth, rappelled off Old Rocky Top and lived. "A large one," I told the clerk. "And I want to buy a bottle." Like it says in the song,

"Rocky Top," why not "get MY corn from a jar?"

"Hey," said Mary, waving the car keys. "One sip. You're driving."

THE NITTY GRITTY:

Going: Fly to Columbus, Ohio, drive southeast on U.S. 33 to Lancaster and Logan.

Staying: The Inn & Spa at Cedar Falls; www.innatcedarfalls.com, State Rt. 374, Logan.

Hocking Hills Tourism Association; Visitors Guide at 800-hocking or 740-385-2750.

Eco-tours/rappelling: High Rock Adventures; www.highrockadventures.com, Rockbridge.

Zip lining: Hocking Hills Canopy Tours; www.hockinghillscanopytours.com.

Columbus Washboard Factory: www.columbuswashboard.com.

Hocking Hills Moonshine: tour and tasting, 519 East Front Street, Logan. 740-347-9044.

Recommended reading: Allan Eckert, "That Dark and Bloody River," Bantam Books.

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