



Rafters on the New River approach the famous U.S. 19 bridge

NEW RIVER GORGE NATIONAL PARK

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“John the immerser appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were immersed by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”

—MARK 1:4-7

THIS TRANSLATION OF THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT IS FROM AMERICAN
RELIGIOUS LEADER ALEXANDER CAMPBELL.

Ironic, isn't it, that one of North America's oldest rivers is named the New River. The V-shaped gorge it cut through the rock of the once equally “new” Appalachian Mountains is nearly 1,000 feet deep, creating an incredibly diverse ecosystem. Seventy thousand acres of moisture-loving forest, ancient and worn-down mountains, and 53 miles of river valley in the heart of West Virginia comprise New River Gorge National Park and Preserve.

The views from the rim of the gorge are stunning from any vantage point. Stands of oak and hickory line the higher and drier elevations, yielding to maples and beeches in the cooler damp ground along the steep descent then to sycamores and river birch tracing the river bottom. In coves carved from the walls that drop to the valley below, roots of Tulip poplars and basswoods hold the rich soil supporting their trunks stretching toward the top of gorge. Combined, it's a habitat supporting a wondrous array of mammals, birds, reptiles, and insects. The three rivers that dominate the area — the New, the Gauley, and Bluestone — teem with sport fish like muskellunge, bass, walleye, crappie, catfish, and bluegill at the gorge's lowest depths.

The New River Gorge's two best known features are the river and



A BASE jumper rides the winds to the river below

the 3,000-foot span of U.S. Highway 19 that crosses it, 876 ft above its surface. As the third-highest bridge in the country, it is celebrated annually with “Bridge Day”, drawing as many as 250,000 visitors to stroll on the

steel and concrete crossing and to watch BASE jumpers (thrill seekers parachuting from structures such as Buildings, Antennas, Spans, and Earth, hence the acronym, or other tall natural structures) and rappellers engage their extreme sports on the one day it is legal to do so from this platform.

This region is also the home of the legend of John Henry, the Steel Driving Man, and the home of those who immersed themselves in the mountains to extract the coal and timber that fed America’s hunger for energy for more than a century. With the railroad’s arrival in 1869 came men and machines as well as the struggle between human and mechanized labor, issues of safety and wages, and concerns about children’s welfare in the work force. Organized labor emerged from the mines and tunnels in the hillsides, changing conditions and pay for generations of the blue-collar base of America’s manufacturing.

The cliff-climbing, rapid-riding, trail-trodding and fish-finding fun of recreation is home here in the gorge, infusing a desire to move into even the most ardent couch potato. To willingly plunge into the icy current, to change the pattern of your breath, to intentionally heighten your awareness to all that is alive in your surroundings is a cleansing of sorts. It reminds us of the ancient practice of baptism, being

immersed with hopes of coming out changed on the other side.

To spend time immersed in the gorge is to meet with the promise emerging different than when you went in. Whether it is the thrill of running Class V rapids or watching the daring BASE jumper glide to the river bank below, both have the power to stop and restart your heart. Or take the blessed renewal of walking with the wonder of mostly undisturbed nature, breathtakingly sublime in simplicity yet astounding grandeur. Retrace steps of those dedicated to making a living carving out the gorges' natural resources, often at the risk of their lives. Time here, immersed in the offerings of the gorge, grants perspective. It's a chance to leave behind your fears, your stress, your loss of wonder, the frustrations of work or relationships, your sense of loss or failure, to have them washed away when you reemerge above the rim of its wonders.

What in you needs transformation? How do you gain new perspective? What makes you want to fully live your life?



Trillium



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