

“Secrets of the Gorge”

Forget the spring wildflowers, summer picnics, or even the vivid colors of fall. Winter is the very best time to visit the Clifton Gorge/John Bryan State Park complex. That’s when we can see most clearly the cliffs, waterfalls, caves and boulders that have led many to call the gorge of the Little Miami River the most beautiful place in Ohio.

After a snowfall, especially, the gorge becomes a magical crystal wonderland. Snow accentuates every contour, highlighting the filigree patterns of dark branches in the sky. What are mere trickles from the cliffs in summer become frozen Niagaras in the winter. And every cedar is a Christmas tree.

In addition to nature’s hidden splendors, traces of long-forgotten human history emerge from hiding, too. It’s a treasure trove for history buffs: the gorge is a long, narrow ghost town—complete with real ghosts.

For those who prefer really ancient history, this is a prime example of what is called “post-glacial canyon cutting.” Geologists explain that from 10,000 to 30,000 years ago the melting waters of a mile-thick glacier undermined the softer layers of shale and dolomite that supported a top layer of resistant Cedarville dolomite, creating the gorge and causing huge chunks to split off from the cliffs. The stone layers themselves were the product of even more ancient seas.

The large rocks, called “slump blocks,” that have separated from the sides of the gorge have landed at many angles, creating a fantasy landscape of narrow passageways, caves, and rock castles. With their craggy surfaces the stones seem to have stepped right

out of a Chinese scroll. Many are covered with green velvet moss, a bright touch of color in an otherwise monochrome work of art.

So bundle up, lace up your hiking boots, and grab a walking stick--two if it's icy--because we're going on a treasure hunt. This adventure will take from two and a half to three hours, depending on how much time you want to spend on the other pleasures of a winter's walk, which include identifying animal tracks and trails, spotting bird, squirrel and hornet nests, watching for the pileated woodpeckers that are common here, or simply listening to the rippling sounds of the river.

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The most spectacular part of the walk begins at the parking lot of the Clifton Gorge Nature Preserve near Clifton Mill, whose Millrace Restaurant serves a great breakfast and lunch. Noted for its dazzling display of over 3.5 million lights at Christmas time, it is the only mill still operating of the 216 that once prospered here.

The first grist mill was built in the gorge in 1802, and by the 1850s there were five grist mills, a cotton mill, paper mills, three distilleries, and possibly a button factory. Lookouts along the walkway offer views and brief histories of some of their remains, including that of the mill built by Col. Robert Patterson. He's remembered as the founder of Lexington, Kentucky, and Cincinnati, Ohio, and grandfather of The National Cash Register's John H. Patterson. The mill, which supplied cloth for uniforms in the War of 1812, was washed away in 1870.

One platform overlooks the site of Darnell's Leap. In January 1778, Daniel Boone and his party of 28 were captured by the Shawnees. After Boone was escorted to a different area, his companion Cornelius Darnell was able to escape, getting as far as the

edge of the gorge. There, an historical marker explains, with the Indians at his heels he leapt to safety across the 22-foot gap by grabbing the branches that extended across the stream at the time. It would be impossible to jump across at this point now.

It is true that at the most narrow part of the gorge, it looks as though one could easily step across. Don't even think of straying off the path. The foaming water that thunders through this bottleneck is beautiful, but deadly. Although new walkways, railings and lookouts render the walk safer, many have fallen victim to the gorge: ten fatalities in the fifteen-year period between 1965-1980 alone and several more since then.

One of the earliest tales of tragedy describes the attempted rescue of a pioneer woman named Rosalie after she and her son were abducted by the Shawnees. The boy escaped, but Rosalie was killed in a skirmish with the Indians. As her husband struggled with her attacker, both men slipped over the cliff. Their bodies were never found. There have been reports since then of brief sightings of a couple dressed in the style of the early 1800s. Look again, it is said, and they're gone.

Fifteen minutes into the walk we arrive at "The Bear's Den," where you'll find an interpretive kiosk and where at one time a real bear, called "Muggins," was kept for the amusement of tourists. An oldtimer tells me that he remembers when the bear's owner used to offer boat rides up the river as far as the first falls. Unfortunately, Muggins, too, became a victim of the gorge when some pranksters released her from her cage. She was found in the river several days later.

Go down the stairway here, carefully; the steps and path along the river can be slick. On the cliffs down below on the right, rock climbers used to practice their sport,

but climbing activities have been moved to other areas in the park to give the land a chance to rest and recover.

Passing “Steamboat Rock,” a particularly large slump block, you’ll approach the wooden walkway around Amphitheater Falls, which flows from a small stream above. If you catch the afternoon sun just right, you can see a rainbow through the mist. In cold weather ice will form from the top and bottom of the falls; rarely, but spectacularly, it can become a veritable ice palace. It appears that someone has carefully piled up chiseled steppingstones at the base of the falls, but these chunks of layered Springfield dolomite are nature’s handiwork.

Just beyond this point there is a path to the right that leads to the top of the cliff, offering an alternative way back. If you continue past the rapids a few more yards, however, you’ll come to the Blue Hole, made famous by a painting of that name that hangs in the Cincinnati Art Museum. A rather scratched photograph displayed here doesn’t do it justice. The artist, Robert S. Duncanson, was the son of a white man from Scotland and a free black woman. Born in 1821 in New York State, he was raised in Canada, where his father felt his biracial son could receive a better education, but returned to the States in 1841 to pursue a successful career as a painter.

Blue because of its depth and algae growth, the pool was called the “Spirit Pool” by the Shawnee, the story goes, because of a maiden who drowned herself here in a case of unrequited love. Some say you can still hear her sobs.

A short walk past some intriguing slump block formations, including the “Bear Cave,” you’ll reach the footbridge that crosses to the south bank of the river. This marks the end of the Clifton Gorge Nature Preserve and the beginning of John Bryan State Park.

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You can choose to return by the path above the cliffs, taking the old road on the right that once supplied mills in this area, or continue across the river for a one-hour circuit from this point. This is a good time, though, to at least go up the road to the site of the stick-and-stone hut built by Wiley the Hermit. Comparing old photographs with today's topography, it appears that it was between the cliff and a large rock near the "don't enter" marker. Wiley had a home and family in Clifton but preferred to spend warmer weather in the cool of the gorge, where he sold soda pop to stagecoach passengers. He was also a victim of the gorge, having lost his life in 1912 when his wagon didn't make the turn coming down the road. He, too, is said never to have really left. A cheery fellow in life, in death he can be heard whistling a merry tune, wearing his customary bib overalls and bandanna.

On the south bank, just past the path leading to the 4-H Camp, there's another cascading stream, weather permitting. I've tried to count just how many small waterfalls it contains—ten? twelve?

A few steps farther a stairway leads up past a large growth of moss nourished by the spring above. I sometimes think the emerald green plant is underappreciated in this country, unlike in Japan, where it is commonly used in Zen-inspired gardens; Kyoto's famous Saiho-ji Temple boasts 120 varieties. Moss has the marvelous ability to become dormant and seemingly die out in dry periods but revive when it has water again. Its reproductive cycle consists of sexual, as well as asexual, reproduction, in which the plant depends on moisture to transport sperm to egg.

Next comes a particularly slippery section of path between colossal green-shrouded stones. (If it looks too treacherous, turn around and go down the other side of the river. We don't need another ghost story.) Past this spot on the left you'll see a shallow recess cave in the bluish-gray cliff above. The large flat stone in front of it could be—depending on your imagination--a stage, a speaker's platform, a sacrificial altar, or maybe a table for troglodytes. Ahead it appears that what was originally one huge slump block has broken into two large pieces. I like to pretend that the rock was split in two by the tree that has sprung up between them, an affirmation of the force of life. Although of course this is not the case, it is surprising how many good-sized trees do manage to thrive on top of such rocks. The next conglomeration of slump blocks forms an impressive fortress.

Soon we'll come to a cabin on private property. Its foundation and some other stones nearby are all that is left of the Butterfield Distillery, which took advantage of the springs in the hillside. Around 1845, I was told, community leaders from the village of Clifton stopped here on their way to a meeting to plead their case for access to the railroad. They were having such a good time that they never got to the meeting; the railroad went to the rival town of Yellow Springs.

Three or four minutes past the cabin, look for an incline on the right that may have been the extension of the Pittsburgh-Cincinnati stagecoach trail after it crossed the river. Then, on the left, look for a long earthen dam and an opening in that dam. The earthworks undoubtedly retained the waters of a mill pond. Where there was a mill pond, there must have been a mill. Downhill on the right, sure enough, several yards below the opening for the millstream there is a small stone building.

A more modern bit of history lies ahead. You'll note that a great number of trees have fallen here, the result of the severe thunderstorm of June 2001, which destroyed over a hundred large trees throughout the park. First impressions were that a tornado had struck—we are, after all, not far from Xenia, which suffered devastating losses in the 1974 tornado. The National Weather Service explained, however, that since the trees mostly fell in the same general direction it was more likely a “microburst” of high, straight winds.

As you cross the footbridge to return to the north bank, look down into the water, where you can see part of the structure of the dam that created a swimming hole for visitors many years ago. This area and adjacent Glen Helen in Yellow Springs, once a popular spot for “taking the waters,” have been tourist destinations for well over a hundred years.

Local historian Pam Adams tells me that the free-spirited attitudes of the community are not new. Early on, the region was home to free-love advocates and an antebellum commune. It sheltered numerous nineteenth-century eccentrics, including John Bryan himself. He bucked the tide of the times by specifying that religious services of any kind were never to be allowed in the park that bears his name.

Just downstream from the bridge is Cutler's Hole. The grassy area was the site of Brewer's Grist Mill and Distillery, where pigs were fattened for market on distillery refuse. This dangerous stretch of the river with its whirlpool current has also been the scene of several tragedies, including the death of the eponymous farmer Cutler, who fell through the ice with his team of horses when, his judgment impaired, he attempted to cross the frozen stream.

As you make your return trip headed east you'll be on the old stagecoach road, but take a short detour from the main trail to take a look at the small waterfalls emerging from the grove across the river. Back on the stagecoach road, when you step across the stream that flows over the path, about ten minutes from the bridge, be sure to spy the gem of a waterfall on the far left. It's another treasure invisible most of the year.

The very large stone you'll come to on the right in another five minutes or so is known as Bandit's Rock. From there robbers could ambush stagecoach travelers or passing Shawnees, perhaps hoping to steal silver from the latter. There have long been rumors of a hidden mine and a cache of silver buried by the Indians at the foot of three sycamore trees. Only one problem in locating the treasure, though. The sycamore trees, of which there are many, always seem to grow in groups of three.

Some ten minutes later on the left, check out the ruins of a lime kiln and, toward the end of the John Bryan section, note the earthworks connected with the Fallis Mill. According to an 1855 map, three buildings once stood at this location: the mill and two other structures that possibly housed mill workers.

Returning through the Clifton Gorge Preserve, stop again at the pool overlook. The trees here, commonly called white cedar, have the official name of arbor-vitae, literally the "tree if life." This is the plant credited with saving the lives of explorer Jacques Cartier and his men in Canada when the natives cured their scurvy with a brew of its needles.

I once thought I saw a date—1800 something--carved faintly in the pothole on the cliff at the left of the pool, but I have never been able to find it again, even when I

returned with binoculars. Was it a trick of the light--or the sign of another ephemeral, ghostly presence?

At any rate, there are plenty of other mysteries still to be explored in the gorge. Where is the Elfin Pool I've heard mentioned? And a section called Rusty's Run? And all those places I've read about that are associated with the prince of darkness: "the Devil's Tail," "the Devil's armchair," "the Devil's Pool," "the Devil's gorge"? Surely they warrant another wintertime search. Or perhaps I'll do a little naming of my own.

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There are numerous places to eat well in the area. In addition to the Clifton Mill, in nearby Yellow Springs there are the renowned Winds Café (closed Mondays and the first two weeks of January); Ye Olde Trail Tavern, a log cabin built in 1827 and said to be haunted; and a variety of other restaurants. Lodging possibilities include, in Yellow Springs: the Springs Motel, the Arthur Morgan House B&B, and the new Grinnell Mill B&B in a restored 200-year-old mill on Bryan Park Road. Several chain hotels are located in Springfield, Ohio, and at I-675 and Fairfield Road in Fairborn, near Dayton.