



KENTUCKY WILDLANDS

By Caroline Eubanks

In southern Kentucky, former coal towns like Corbin, Harlan, and Somerset have turned to tourism. They're also gateways to nearly a dozen state parks and the Red River Gorge area, which are especially popular with outdoors lovers. Providing a great alternative to the often-crowded national parks, this region offers cave tours, Via Ferrata rock climbing, plus plenty of small-town charm.

MUST-SEE SCENERY

The biggest reason to come to this part of the state is for its natural beauty. Each park has something different to offer. Cumberland Falls State Park is called the "Niagara Falls of the South," with the only regularly occurring moonbow you'll find in the Western Hemisphere. In addition to the falls, visitors can hike to a 1937 fire tower or go fishing and horseback riding.

Kingdom Come State Park is great for kids, with mini-golf, paddle boats and a playground. Natural Bridge State Park has 10 trails and a one-mile-long Sky Lift to the famous rock formation. You can take it one way, soaking in the views and then walk down the other. The crown jewel is the Red River Gorge, which is a draw for rock climbers. There's a wide variety of trails including the beginner-friendly Whittleton Arch and Rock Bridge Loop hikes.

Local outfitters run zipline tours through the area, which soar 55 miles per hour 300 feet above the gorge. The Gorge Underground is one of the most interesting experiences, where visitors navigate an underwater cave by guided boat or kayak tour.

QUIRKY LANDMARKS

The small town of Corbin is best associated as the original home of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Visit Sanders Cafe, the restaurant opened by Colonel Sanders, which is both an operational restaurant and a museum about the brand.

The Pinball Museum of Corbin allows visitors to pay one fee and play the pinball and arcade games dating back to the 1960s. It has all the favorites like Donkey Kong, air hockey and an Addams Family pinball machine.

The Kentucky Coal Museum in Benham highlights the experiences of the region's coal miners, with exhibits on the industry, plus native daughter Loretta Lynn and the popular television series Justified, which is set in the town of Harlan. The neighboring Portal 31 is a former coal mine open to tours. The International Paranormal Museum and Research Center in Somerset is small, but interesting, focusing on the weird history of the region including Bigfoot and the Hopkinsville Goblins, an alleged UFO sighting.



WHERE TO EAT

There are great restaurants in these small towns (but double check the hours as some of the restaurants closer to the Gorge are only open seasonally). In Corbin, Wrigley Taproom & Eatery focuses on farm-to-table Appalachian fare with an abundant selection of Kentucky bourbon. Folktale Coffee is a great place to start the day, with biscuits made from scratch, pancakes, and, of course, the all-important coffee. Named for the famous waterfall feature, Moonbow is a casual café with locations in Harlan and Williamsburg. Both offer locally roasted coffee, wraps, hot dogs, and ice cream.

Harlan is home to Harlan County Beer Company, the first in the area since Prohibition. While you might come for the house-made beers like the IPA and lager, the brewery also makes great burgers and bowls. Or grab a pie from Portal Pizzeria, which appeared on the show *Justified* and has pizzas, calzones, and pasta. Closer to the gorge, Miguel's Pizzeria has been a staple of the region since 1984, set in a former country store. The menu includes its beloved pizzas, plus sandwiches and breakfast burritos, with a selection of craft beer and margaritas.

The restaurant also has a climbing gear shop onsite and offers free camping in the field behind the restaurant, which during the summer months becomes like a small village. Red River Rockhouse sources from local farmers for its burgers and burritos. Daniel Boone Coffee Shop offers coffee, breakfast, smoothie bowls, and paninis. The shop also offers primitive camping and RV sites onsite and operates an adjacent liquor store.

LOCAL CAMPGROUNDS

Just about every state park and public land here offers camping, including **Kingdom Come State Park** (primitive campsites); **Cumberland Falls State Resort Park** (tent and RV sites); **Natural Bridge State Resort Park** (tent and RV sites); **Jenny Wiley State Park** (cabins, tent, RV and boat-in sites); and **Daniel Boone National Forest** (cabins, tent and RV sites). Several businesses also offer cheap tent camping on their properties. Beyond these, we also recommend Happy Camper, Somerset (RV sites) happycamperlakecumberland.com; Callie's Lake & Campground, Stanton (primitive and RV sites) callieslakeandcampground.com; Corbin KOA, Corbin (cabins, RV and tent sites) koa.com/campgrounds/corbin; and Red River Gorgeous (cliff cabins, treehouses, and dome tents) rrgcabin.com.

