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Best Day Trip

Ohiopyle State Park

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Picnic anyone? The Tharp Knob Overlook's view of the Youghiogheny valley and the borough of Ohiopyle
Courtesy of Ohiopyle State Park

You know those fit little silhouette-people who tirelessly hike, bike, cross-country-ski and ride horses and snowmobiles across the maps of state parks? The ones who hew to the dotted lines marking the appropriate trails, with walking sticks in hand?

It's a tribe that seems especially populous on maps of Ohiopyle State Park. Dozens of the little dudes traverse the topographical map issued by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources ... and they're not there just to keep you company.

The 19,052-acre park, about an hour-and-a-half southeast of Pittsburgh, is among the nation's most-visited state parks. It's justly famous for its 14-mile stretch of the Youghiogheny River, whose whitewater boating traffic is the busiest in the eastern U.S. But even if you don't relish rapids, the Ohiopyle area is a daytripper's dream year-round, with more than enough to occupy any outdoors enthusiast (and even something for the Great Indoorsman).

The park lies where the Yough meets the Laurel Highlands. The result is a mix of winding river bottom and wooded elevations ascending some 2,000 feet, all dotted with campgrounds and laced with 79 miles of trails.

The town of Ohiopyle itself is tiny; its key natural landmark is the 20-foot main falls, where you can watch kayakers take the whitewater plunge. The spine of the park's off-road activities, meanwhile, is the Youghiogheny River Trail. The flat, 27-mile path of crushed limestone (laid on a former railroad bed) is part of the Great Allegheny Passage connecting Pittsburgh to Cumberland, Md.; bike rentals are available.

Within a few minutes' drive of the visitors' center, you can also: try your skill at Class III or IV rapids, or sign up for a guided raft tour (recommended for beginners); take a nature hike; haul your daypack to the southern trailhead of the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail; picnic near a

panoramic view of the Youghiogheny River Gorge (Tarp Knob Overlook); go rock-climbing; try your keister at Meadow Run creek's natural waterslides; rent a horse at a trail-side stable; and go hunting, or fish for trout.

In winter, add cross-country skiing (34 miles of trails); sledding and tobogganing; and snowmobiling (13 miles of trails). Indeed, winter sports are popular enough here that the park hosts both the Winter Sports Extravaganza (Jan. 9) and Winterfest (Feb. 6).

It's not all outdoor rec, of course. The Ohiopyle area's history of European settlement dates to colonial times (Fort Necessity Battlefield is not too far away). Before it became a state park in 1965, Ohiopyle had been a lumber center -- there was a sawmill at the main falls -- and even a resort. All of this history is detailed at the visitors' center. The park also neighbors Fallingwater, the architectural monument to affluent rustic domesticity that Frank Lloyd Wright designed for the Kaufmann family, itself situated in a beautiful stretch of woods, Bear Run Nature Reserve.

Still, Ohiopyle's glories remain its woods, hills and streams. Just across the river from town, for instance, you'll find the Ferncliff Peninsula National Natural Landmark. It's a 100-acre peninsula created by a meander in the river, and its location in a warmer-aired gorge allows certain ferns and other southerly plants to flourish outside their usual range. Also look out for remains of the peninsula's old resort buildings ... and for ditched whitewater rafters making their way to shore.

Meanwhile, the creeks that feed into the Yough, though too shallow for rafting, provide their own scenic attractions, notably a series of waterfalls. See, for instance, the Cascades, located near the park office, and Jonathan Run Falls -- actually several small waterfalls visible from Jonathan Run Trail as it nears the river. And don't limit your falls-gazing to the leafy months. For example, the 30-foot bridal-veil outpouring of Cucumber Falls -- found off Meadow Run Trail -- is just as spectacular when frozen.

And if you do visit Ohiopyle in winter, consult the little map guys first. They're always ready for anything.

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