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A Well Kept Secret in South Carolina's Golden Corner



By Chris Reinolds
Photos by Alex Kozelle

In the silvery early morning mist, the triathletes came dribbling across the finish line. Most looked relieved and drained after a swim and hilly bike and run through the Lake Jocassee area of South Carolina. But even in the midst of the pain, the competitors marveled at the splendor of the clear, pristine lake and the undulating mountains in South Carolina's western "Golden Corner."

Clint Shealy, camped before the Oct. 3 race with his family at the lake's state park, Devil's Fork.

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"It's the most beautiful course I've ever been on. Tough mountains and rolling hills. God's creation is amazing. I couldn't get through it if I didn't enjoy the beauty," Shealy said.



One of the six waterfallls that empties directly into Lake Jocassee. ***Courtesy of Ken Sloan***

Thankfully you don't have to be a triathlete to enjoy the Lake Jocassee area. You just need an appreciation of nature and an adventurous spirit. The lake features world class trout and bass fishing and is home to bald eagles, peregrine falcons, black bear, deer, beaver and other wildlife.

The "Golden Corner" of South Carolina is known for its numerous cascading waterfalls and the picturesque lakes named Hartwell and Keowee. Lake Jocassee's beauty, however, is absolutely jaw-dropping given that it is bordered by the pristine wilderness of Sumpter National Forest and closely ringed by the Blue Ridge Mountains. An added bonus is that it's not as well known as Hartwell and Keowee, so spending time there is truly about getting away from it all.

The lake itself was built in the early 1970's by Duke Power as a source for hydro-electric power. In 1974 it opened to the public. Jocassee was named for a Cherokee Indian word meaning "Place of the Lost One." Legend, of which there are many in this area, has it that a Cherokee girl named Jocassee walked on water across the Whitewater River after finding that her lover, Nagoochee, was killed by her own tribe. Today, her spirit is said to still walk on the river searching for the ghost of Nagoochee.

The unusual attraction is the presence of six individual waterfalls that spill directly into the lake. Bring or rent a boat, get out your map and off you go on a scavenger hunt. A lake bejeweled by rushing waterfalls adds a new dimension to the lake experience. Each waterfall has its own characteristics and makes for a great swimming hole during warmer weather.

In fact the Devil's Fork State Park villas are sold out during the summer months. One reason for that, aside from the spectacular setting, could be that the park has only been in use since 1991. That's a freshness you won't find in many state parks. Facilities are newer and in good working order.



The villas at Devil's Fork State Park are like private vacation homes.

Our family stayed at the villas, which were higher standard than a traditional state park cabin. It was more like renting a vacation home on the lake. We had two bedrooms, a roomy screened porch, fireplace and a full kitchen. The area is low on traffic and a playground is accessible to all the villas. That makes it easy to lounge on the porch while the young'uns scamper up the slide and collect walking sticks.

Assistant Park Manager James Stanton said most visitors come to play on the lake, but a good number also stay at the park for Clemson football games in the fall.

"We're halfway between Atlanta and Charlotte and for a lot of folks it's an easy drive," Stanton said.

Ken Sloan, executive director of the Mountain Lakes Convention & Visitors Bureau, said the biggest draw to the area is the 150-plus waterfalls.

On our first day, we started with sumptuous homemade egg and cheese biscuits at Jocassee Outdoor Center. Then we took out a pontoon boat at the center, which is conveniently located near the entrance to Devil's Fork State Park. The center rents a variety of boats including kayaks which are very popular for treks to the waterfalls. If you want to kayak, know that it takes about an hour to reach the first fall. With young kids, we opted for a quicker (and roomier) motorboat.



Returning from a cruise on the lake.

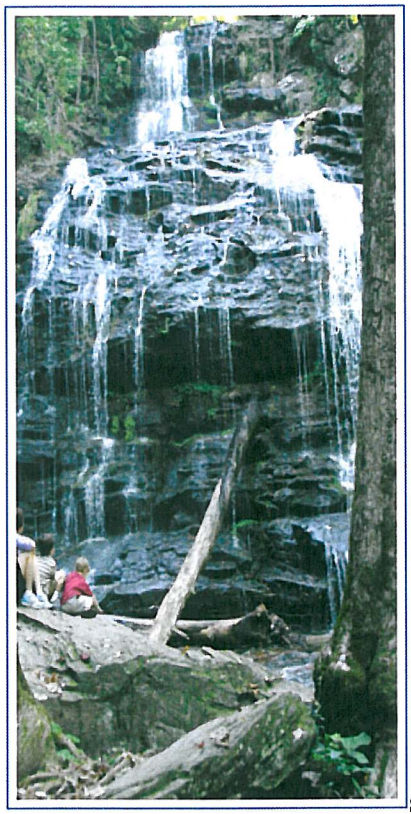
The Caribbean-blue and forest green water of Lake Jocassee becomes more intense as the Blue Ridge Mountains hug the rocky shoreline. Each of the lake's six waterfalls is tucked away in coves and inlets. We found only five before the weather started looking bad. At each waterfall a soft mist filled the air. I promise to come back in the summer to swim near the falls. The sound of rushing, falling water is trance-like.

We ended our day hiking the 2.5-mile Bear Cove Trail. That day, the trail was dotted with gold and red mushrooms, and much to my son's excitement – bear and deer foot prints. The trail pauses midway on a shale beach.

Ready for more sightseeing, we spent most of the second day hiking to waterfalls. We visited Stumphouse Tunnel Park and Issaqueena Falls. An easy five minute hike gives you a view of the waterfall named for an Indian maiden who hid on a ledge to avoid capture as she fled to warn her English lover of an Indian attack.

The nearby tunnel is what remains of an abandoned railroad that was supposed to go over the Appalachians to connect the port city of Charleston with Knoxville and later Cincinnati. Rather than go over the mountains, it was decided to build a tunnel. The 1,600-foot long tunnel was started in 1852 but the Civil War and a lack of money stopped construction.

In 1951, nearby Clemson University bought the tunnel and used it to cure the South's first blue cheese. And it is now the "tunnel to nowhere."
Bring a picnic lunch as there are picnic sites and a port-a-john on site.



Station Cove Falls, up close and personal.

We ended the day touring the Oconee Station State Historic Site and hiking to Station Cove Falls. Built around 1792 during tensions between white settlers and Creek Indians, the Oconee Station was one in a string of small frontier posts garrisoned by state militia. Its impressive 20-inch stone walls are still standing. The site includes access to the sixty-foot Station Cove Falls in the Sumter National Forest, an easy thirty minute hike.

On our way out of town, we made sure to hike Whitewater Falls, the most spectacular and easiest to access. From baby strollers to senior citizens, this is a hike for everyone.

Beginning in North Carolina and ending in South Carolina, these falls are the highest in the eastern United States. The Upper Whitewater Falls plunge 411 feet. South Carolina's Lower Whitewater Falls drops another 400 feet.



The magnificent Upper Whitewater Falls, the tallest in the the eastern U.S.

A myriad of other activities we didn't get a chance to try: horseback trail rides, whitewater rafting, and touring the Walhalla Fish Hatchery. Also the Foothills National Recreation Trail for hardcore hikers covers about one hundred miles and crosses numerous rivers. The terrain varies drastically from extremely steep ravines to relatively moderate portions.

Maybe next time!