Jocassee boat tour glimpses nature at its best

The gorges' pristine beauty best seen from the water

By Charles Sowell
Special to The Greenville News

Going into the warmer months of late spring and summer, one of the best ways to enjoy the outdoors is to take a lake tour of Jocassee.

It's cooler on the water, and at Jocassee it is extraordinarily beautiful, too. The Duke Energy lake abuts the mountains of the Blue Wall. The four rivers that feed the lake undergo a tremendous drop before pouring into the clear emerald green waters of the reservoir.

The fact that the Jocassee Gorges have been rated by the National Geographic Society as one of the top 50 destinations in the world for seeing nature just confirms what the locals already know: This is an extraordinary place and extraordinarily rugged, too.

That most of the most scenic spots, primarily the many waterfalls that plunge into the lake, are really viewable only by boat makes boat tours like the ones offered by the Jocassee Outdoor Center all the more appealing for families and newcomers to the region, said Allie Wardell, 30, operations manager at Jocassee Outdoor.

Wardell graduated from Indiana University and studied in Prague in the Czech Republic. She worked in the outdoor industry, mainly in North Carolina, at outdoor camps for young people dealing with problems.



The best view of Wright Creek Falls is by boat from Lake Jocassee. PHOTOS BY CHARLES SOWELL/CONTRIBUTOR

She majored in psychology and Slavic languages.

The thing to know about Wardell is that she simply adores the mountains, and it shows in all that she does at the outdoor center.

"Nothing helps troubled youths like walking their legs off on a trail," she said. "And nothing introduces kids to the great outdoors like touring the waterfalls here by boat.

"We welcome families and large groups here (at the outdoor center)," she said. "There is so much beauty and so much history sewed up in this relatively small lake."

An abbreviated waterfalls tour of the lake stopped first at the mouth of the lower falls of the Whitewater River near the exit tubes for water released from Duke's Bad Creek Project.

The river cascades



Lower Whitewater Falls attracts boaters.

YOU CAN GO

How to get there: Take U.S. 276 to the intersection with Scenic Highway 11 and follow Highway 11 across the Keowee River arm of Lake Keowee. Turn right at the Devils Fork State Park sign and follow it in, almost until you get to the lake and park. Lake Jocassee Outdoor Center is on the right. To make reservations, call 864-944-9016. Ask for a guide to take you to find the smaller waterfalls.



Allie Wardell pilots a tour around the shore of Lake Jocassee.

over steep rapids not visible from the overlook above. The whole river is densely surrounded by laurel "hells" from the time it makes its first drop from the plateau above.

Weekends on the lake can be crowded. Jocassee Outdoor Center offers weekday lake tours in season, though it's advisable to call ahead. The busiest seasons on Jocassee are summer and fall, said Wardell.

From there it was a whirlwind tour of the smaller falls — little creeks that are big on beauty and very photogenic, until you get to Laurel Creek Falls, which plunges about 100 feet into a fairyland grotto.

Most days it is possible for Wardell to nose her big pontoon boat in close to see the falls and grotto, but on this day, private boats were lined up waiting for their chance to get in.

Laurel Creek is also one of the many drop-off points for hikers to cross the gorges, Wardell said.

"We load them up with their gear and ferry them over," she said.