'JUST CALLED JOCASSEE'



CAITLIN HERRINGTON | THE JOURNAL

Kay and Brooks Wade recently purchased a second pontoon boat for Jocassee Lake Tours so they can spend more time together working on the water.

Couple offers 'natural history-focused' tours of local lake

'We have a grander philosophical reason for doing what we do. We want to bring people in and introduce them to this region from an environmental perspective so they can realize how tender, wild and special this area is to the entire Southeast.'

Brooks Wade
Jocassee Lake Tours guide

BY CAITLIN HERRINGTON
THE JOURNAL

SALEM — Brooks and Kay Wade planned to spend their days living in a four-wheel-drive Volkswagen van in Mexico. But, as they tend to do, plans changed.

A camping trip in 2009 at Devils Fork State Park convinced the couple they had found the perfect place for retirement.

"We came up to vacation at Jocassee, and that was kind of the end of that story of traveling," Kay said. "We decided we were going to settle here and never leave."

Six months later, they were back in Salem, living out of an Airstream trailer and working as "campground hosts" for the park.

"We lived in the campground right across the way for nearly three years," Brooks said. "We went through the master naturalist program, Kay went right to work here as a landscape gardener and we spent about a year getting ready for this business."

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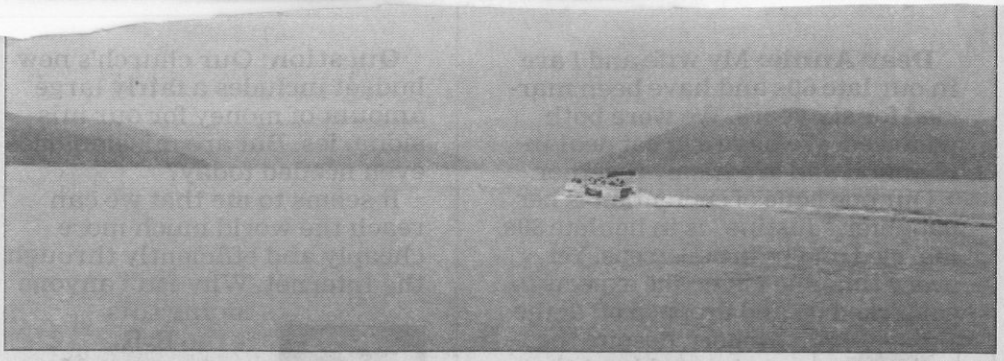
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Kay Wade points out rhododendron blooms as she brings her guests to get a closer look at Hidden Creek Falls on Lake Jocassee.



SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Colleen Zecca takes a picture of her father, Ed O'Brien, and 5-year-old son, Ryan, at one of the stops on a Wednesday waterfall tour. Guide Brooks Wade said it isn't unusual for generations of one family to come on the same tour.



SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

The Blue Ridge Escarpment is home to a temperate rainforest, so it isn't unusual for Brooks and Kay Wade to weather out a popup storm in the midst of a tour.

JOCASSEE: Lake Tours offers 'year-round tours of paradise'

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Brooks grew up watching his father do glass-bottom boat tours in Florida, so the idea of spending his retirement as a tour guide on the water sounded just about perfect. The two now own and operate Jocassee Lake Tours.

"Brooks is a natural-born tour guide," Kay said. "As soon as we found this lake, his wheels started turning. I was kind of left in the dark about all this — I had no idea what he was planning.

"He let me know a little at a time. First, he told me we were selling our very beloved four-wheel-drive Volkswagen van, which was kind of a shock," she said. "But almost immediately upon finding a buyer for it, he told me that we were buying a pontoon boat — which was cool because we're on a lake and had family coming in like everybody else."

Once he had the boat in the water, business took off.

"I had it all to myself for three years," Brooks said, noting that "Captain Kay" has only recently joined the ranks of the tour guides when a second pontoon was purchased in May. "This is our first summer having regularly scheduled tours on two boats."

Jocassee Lake Tours offers "year-round tours of paradise" for kayakers, hikers, birdwatchers and everyone in between.

Brooks said the company tries to keep the natural beauty of the area at the center of each tour, leaving customers with knowledge about Jocassee's formation and current state.

"There's so much more going on here than just the waterfalls," he said. "We say lake tours and not waterfall tours for a reason. There's so much to see and do here. The longer you can take in a smaller area, there's just so much to show and discuss."

It would take eight hours to see everything on Lake Jocassee, according to Brooks. Anything less than that, and he's "still cutting corners."

For guests, cutting corners usually involves swim breaks, splashing in waterfalls and taking in the panoramic view of the Blue Ridge Mountains that surround the lake.

Each tour is scattered with facts about the lake — what's under it, what's around it, where it came from, how it produces energy — all prompted by guests and quickly answered by the guides. There isn't a very rigid structure to the day other than trying to visit as many areas as possible.

"You never know what you'll get on a Wednesday tour," Kay joked when some recent guests got toasty and asked for a swim break.

Even those who don't want to dive into the water can enjoy one of Jocassee Lake Tours' many offerings.

Boynton Beach, Fla., resident Cathi O'Brien said the pontoon tour was a great fit for her family since she could bring her 93-year-old mother along.

"It just seemed like something we could all do together," O'Brien said.

O'Brien and her husband, Ed, have a second home in Keowee Key, but that didn't stop them from wanting to explore Jocassee. During a break, Cathi's mom enjoyed lunch on the boat while her daughter and grandson splashed around in Thompson River.

Though Jocassee and its 90-mile shoreline are man-made, the Wades are adamant about the importance of its history and the ecosystem it now houses.

"We have a grander philosophical reason for doing what we do," Brooks said. "We want to bring people in and introduce them to this region from an environmental perspective so they can realize how tender, wild and special this area is to the entire Southeast."

Brooks spends most of his day on the water — something that helped Kay gravitate toward helping with tours rather than spending every day in the dirt.

"He'll come in from a day of rock hopping or kayaking and just have this glow," Kay said.

"It's called sunburn," Brooks joked.

"It's also just called Jocassee," Kay said.

The couple can be found on Jocassee anywhere from sun up to sun down, depending on the day.

"We're planning so we can do all of the above," Kay said. "Morning hours, afternoon hours and even evenings.

"Sometimes we'll have two or three tours in a day. Sometimes (Brooks will) shuttle hikers, come back and do tours, then shuttle them back."

As busy as it keeps them in what they claim is retirement, the Wades wouldn't have it any other way.

"I can't imagine not doing this," Brooks said. "I guess I'll just get old and fall off the boat."

For more information on tours, hiker shuttling and equipment rental, visit www.JocaseeLakeTours.com or call (864) 280-5501.

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