



Kayaking on Salt Fork Lake, which dominates Salt Fork State Park, the largest of the state's parks. It is about a two-hour drive from Cleveland. Photos by Susan Glaser, cleveland.com

Exploring Ohio's state parks

Salt Fork State Park has boating, fishing, hiking and Bigfoot, and is just two hours from Cleveland

Editor's note: This is the first in an ongoing series about state parks, in Ohio and surrounding states. Please send suggestions to Travel Editor Susan Glaser, at sglaser@cleveland.com.

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CAMBRIDGE — It was raining when I arrived at Salt Fork State Park, but no matter. I sat on the porch of my cabin, looked out at the lake and listened to the rain on the roof, thinking: I need this.

My guess is we all do. A change of scenery, even a rain-soaked one, is good for the soul during tough times.

So I packed up my car and headed south. True, travel is perceived as somewhat precarious while the coronavirus pandemic continues to spread. But this trip seemed relatively safe, tucked in the trees of eastern Ohio, two hours south of Cleveland.

Human interaction was relatively brief and mostly outside. Interaction with Mother Nature, on the other hand, was nearly constant and surprisingly diverse.

OHIO'S LARGEST STATE PARK

Set among the rolling hills of eastern Ohio's Appalachia region, Salt Fork is Ohio's largest state park, with more than 20,000 acres. It was created in the late 1960s after the construction of a dam along the Salt Fork Creek. The resulting 3,000-acre reservoir was initially intended as a water source for nearby Cambridge, but evolved into a recreational playground.

This is not Ohio's most spectacular state park — that title easily belongs to Hocking Hills, about 90 miles farther south. But it is one of the most diverse recreationally, offering more than enough amenities and activities to fill a long weekend or more.

The centerpiece attraction here is Salt Fork Lake, a long, winding body of water with numerous inlets and coves to explore. The Sugartree Fork Marina offers boat rentals, including fishing and ski boats, pontoons and kayaks. The lake also offers a huge beach, plus plenty of opportunities for fishing.

And on land: hiking and horseback riding, plus a well-regarded 18-hole golf course.

In recent years, Bigfoot hunting has become big business here as well. The park is the longtime host of the Ohio Bigfoot Conference, postponed this year from May until August, and has been featured on numerous shows and articles about Sasquatch. The gift shop is filled with T-shirts and other souvenirs bearing the likeness of the elusive creature.

I kept my eye out, just in case, but didn't see anything more interesting than a squirrel.

There's also a nature center (currently closed), a large campground, cabins and 148-room lodge, with indoor and outdoor swimming pools, which is reopening this weekend.

I had been here before, but it had been more than a decade, so I was happy to reacquaint myself with the property. I spent just 24 hours — one night and a full day — before obligations called me back to Cleveland. But it was enough time to unwind and have some fun.

First up, on the sunny morning after the rain: The 1.8-mile Stone House Loop trail, which winds along the lake and ends at the historic Kennedy Stone House, built by



There are 53 overnight cabins for rent on the park grounds.



The lake offers huge opportunities for fishing at Salt Fork State Park.

Salt Fork State Park

Getting there: The park, about 110 miles from Cleveland, is an easy drive, south on I-77 to exit 47 (Ohio 541) or 54 (U.S. 22).

Staying overnight: The 148-room lodge reopens this weekend, along with the Timbers Restaurant, Wildlife Lounge and outdoor pool. The indoor pool, undergoing renovations, should reopen later this summer. There are 53 cabins and 215 campsites.

Activities: Golf, fishing, swimming, boating, hiking, plus 70 miles of bridle trails and a horse camp.

Information: ohiodnr.gov, saltforkparklodge.com, visitguernseycounty.com

Ohio State Parks

How many are there?

75

Number of overnight lodges

9

Punderson, Geneva, Maumee Bay, Mohican, Deer Creek, Salt Fork, Hueston Woods, Shawnee, Burr Oak

Overnight cabins

23

Grand Lake St. Mary, Kelleys Island, Lake Loramie, Maumee Bay, North Bass Island, Beaver Creek, Geneva, Malabar Farm, Mohican, Punderson, Pymatuning, Deer Creek, Mount Gilead, Buck Creek, Cowan Lake, Hueston Woods, Pike Lake, Shawnee, Burr Oak, Dillon, Hocking Hills, Lake Hope, Salt Fork

Campgrounds

59

More information ohiodnr.gov

SEE SALT FORK STATE PARK, K2



The 3,000-acre reservoir was initially intended as a water source for nearby Cambridge, but evolved into a recreational playground. Photos by Susan Glaser

Exploring Ohio's State Parks: Salt Fork State Park

FROM K1

an early resident in 1837 and constructed from locally quarried stone. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the house is usually open to tour and staffed with docents, but remains closed because of the coronavirus.

It was a lovely hike, relatively easy, all shade, and with little elevation change. It was muddy, thanks to the previous day's rain, and could use widening in spots, as it was difficult to pass fellow hikers without violating social distance requirements. Benches at the house provided a nice spot to rest and relax before heading back.

Nearby is Hosak's Cave trail, just a mile out and back, but with spectacular scenery, particularly in the spring when a 50-foot waterfall forms atop the rock formation. A sign at the start of the trail warns hikers not to venture to the top of the cave, where falls and fatalities have occurred. A memorial to a 14-year-old girl, killed in 2003, drives home the point.

I heeded the warnings and did not hike up, but I did venture past a constructed wooden lookout point, the trail's official end, to get closer to the falls for some photos. Off the trail, the hiking got more difficult (although not dangerous), definitely worth it for the views.

After hiking around the water, it was time to get on it.

Rental options at Sugartree Marina include pontoon boats (\$125-\$150 an hour), fishing boats (\$60 an hour), ski boats (\$150 an hour) and kayaks (\$30-\$35 an hour). The power boats were all rented in advance on

the Saturday of our visit — so call ahead if that's your choice.

My husband and I opted for a double kayak and headed out onto the water. It was windy on the lake — small whitecaps were forming — which made the paddling challenging and a bit unnerving. We stayed close to shore for safety's sake, enjoying views of the forested lakefront.

The most relaxing part of the trip came in and around our cabin, one of 53 on the Salt Fork grounds. Many are immediately adjacent to the lake, and all have at least a partial view of the water. You could be content right here, even if you never set foot on a hiking trail or ventured out onto the water.

The roadway that winds through the cabin area makes for a nice stroll along the water, past a small dock, fishing pier and launch area for boaters.

These accommodations are not inexpensive, nearly \$300 per night, and aren't at all luxurious.

Each has a full kitchen and bath, two bedrooms, a living room with TV, screened porch, grill and fire circle.

But the location is perfect. I opted for a Hillside cabin to save \$20 — I could still see the lake — but wish I had spent the extra money to be right on the water. That's a quibble, however.

The screened porch became my oasis. I was out there during all of my waking hours — for breakfast, for dinner, to check my computer, to read.

And to just sit quietly, listening to the birds, listening to the boats and listening to the rain.



The historic Kennedy Stone House is accessed via the Stone House Loop trail at Ohio's Salt Fork State Park near Cambridge, about two hours from Cleveland.



The outdoor swimming pool and 148-room lodge at Salt Fork State Park.



Salt Fork State Park features a large swimming beach.



Hosak's Cave at Ohio's Salt Fork State Park near Cambridge.