



Catching a beautiful sunset on the lodge patio at dusk at Mohican State Park. Photos by Susan Glaser, cleveland.com



Big Lyons Falls features a small trickle of water over an 80-foot high recess cave, within Mohican State Park near Loudonville.



Along Lyons Falls Trail within Mohican State Park in Ashland County.

REGIONAL TRAVEL

Exploring Mohican State Park, a longtime fall favorite, with an unexpected surprise



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LOUDONVILLE — On a steep hill rising above the Clear Fork River, I stepped into a magical forest, with 200-year-old pine trees towering overhead.

The most surprising thing about this space: that I had never been here before, despite more than a dozen trips to Mohican State Park over the years.

This park, about 80 miles southwest of Cleveland, has long been my go-to get-away for outdoor adventure. I camped here as a kid, raced tubes down the river as a teen and got into trouble with a park ranger during an after-hours trip atop the fire tower when I was in college (long story).

In more recent years, I've repeatedly brought my own kids here, and they've made it one of their favorite places, too.

Earlier this year, when I launched a series of stories for the Plain Dealer and cleveland.com on Ohio state parks, I knew I would include Mohican in the mix.

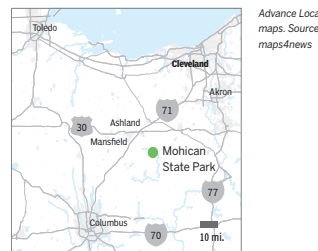
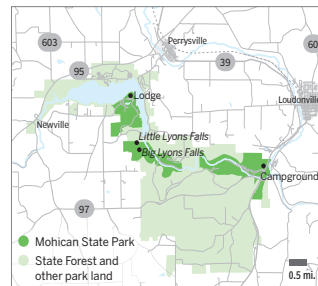
What I didn't expect: that I would discover a new place in the park — a park within the park — that I had never noticed before, but which took my breath away.

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

Mohican the park is named after Mohican the river, which is named after the Native American tribe (although it was Delaware Indians who originally inhabited this land). The park's 1,100 acres are surrounded by 4,500 acres of Mohican-Memorial State Forest, one of the most popular recreational areas in the state, located about equidistant between Cleveland and Columbus.

It is particularly gorgeous in the fall, with a canopy of colorful trees lining the picturesque Clear Fork branch of the Mohican, an Ohio Scenic River.

The campground here is terrific, with 185 sites, from fully equipped to primitive, including dozens right on the river.



Advance Local maps. Source, maps4news

Twenty-five cabins, across the river from the campground, also are beautifully sited along the water. There's an outdoor pool here, a nature center and other amenities.

I've stayed in the campground and the cabins over the years, but for this trip, I booked a room at the 96-room lodge, which is also perfectly located, up a hill from Pleasant Hill Lake, which was created in the late 1930s by the damming of the Clear Fork. **SEE MOHICAN, K2**

On summer weekends, this place is swarming with boats, and oftentimes boaters and booze, with the waterway sometimes overrun with partying paddlers. That wasn't the case on the chilly weekend I visited this month. My husband and I rented a canoe and had the river all to ourselves. It was serene.



Towering white pine and eastern hemlock trees grow along the steep gorge, part of Clear Fork Gorge State Nature Preserve, surrounded by Mohican State Park in Ashland County.

Left, Paddling on the Mohican River near Loudonville, the canoeing capital of Ohio. Photos by Susan Glaser, cleveland.com

Exploring Mohican State Park, a longtime fall favorite

Continues from K1

You can rent boats on the lake, but canoeing on the river is by far the most popular watersport in these parts.

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The late Dick Frye is credited with launching the region's paddling tradition in the early 1960s, establishing Ohio's first canoe livery (what became Mohican Adventures), near where the Clear Fork and the Black Fork combine to become the Mohican. Today, with a half-dozen liveries, the region has clearly earned its title, "Canoe Capital of Ohio."

In recent years, the park has also become a mecca for mountain biking. The 25-mile Mohican Mountain Bike Trail is considered the best in the state, with heart-pumping stretches of uphill climbs interspersed with downhill relief.

BUT I COME HERE TO HIKE.

The most popular trail is the moderate 2-mile Lyons Falls loop, which weaves through impressive rock formations and past two scenic waterfalls - Big Lyons Falls, an 80-foot-high cataract atop a massive recess cave; and Little Lyons Falls, 25 feet off the ground. Don't expect much water here, unless there's been a recent storm - the falls is typically a trickle, though the scenic backdrop will not disappoint.

Other recommended hikes: the ¾-mile Pleasant Hill Trail, on the opposite side of the river from the Lyons trail, flat and easy and lovely; and the 2-mile Hemlock Gorge Trail, which connects the park's two campgrounds, hugging the river the entire route.

Also here: the 2.5-mile Hog Hollow Trail, which connects the covered bridge with fire tower (currently closed because of pandemic). It was off this trail that a short, unnamed loop path captured my attention.

The half-mile trail, easily accessible from the fire tower parking lot, loops through the southern edge of Clear Fork Gorge State Nature Preserve, a 29-acre protected space completely surrounded by the state park.

The preserve features a large stand of towering white pines and eastern hemlocks rising from the steep bank of the gorge wall.

The difference in atmosphere was stark as I walked from parkland, with its vibrant fall foliage, into the mystical evergreen forest of the preserve.

The area was declared a National Natural Landmark in 1967 and added to the Old Growth Forest Network earlier this year.

Rick Gardner, a botanist with the Ohio Division of Natural Areas and Preserves, said it's a special place. "Some of the trees in there have never been cut," said Gardner.

Though much of the Mohican River valley was farmland a century ago, the areas along this part of the Clear Fork were too steep to harvest. "They were left behind," said Gardner.

And how wonderful that they were. I actually hiked this short trail twice I was so enchanted. And my guess is I'll hike it many more times in the years to come, as I return to Mohican again and again.



The historic fire tower, built in 1934, at Mohican State Park.

Left, The lodge at Mohican State Park in Loudonville.



Above, Sunset over Pleasant Hill Lake as seen from the patio at Mohican State Park Lodge near Loudonville.



Taking in fall color at the Gorge Overlook, part of Mohican State Park.

IF YOU GO: MOHICAN STATE PARK

Where: The park is located about 80 miles southwest of Cleveland, south of Loudonville off of Ohio 3.

Where to stay: We stayed at the Mohican Lodge and Conference Center, one of nine state park lodges in Ohio. Amenities include indoor and outdoor pools, a game room, full-service restaurant, lounge, fire-pits, tennis and more. Rates vary, starting at about \$110 per night.

State park campgrounds and cabins are open year-round, as well. Information: mohicanlodge.com

Where to eat: The food at the lodge was better than expected, with a limited menu of sandwiches, salads, dinner specials and more. We ate here twice, for dinner and breakfast. Note: We ate outside for

both meals, on a lovely patio overlooking the lake.

Also recommended: The Black Fork Bistro, 153 W. Main St., which opened early this year in the space of the former Hanover House Diner. The menu features burgers, sandwiches, pizzas, salads and more. Highly recommend.

In the area: Hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, canoeing and kayaking, ziplining and more, although some activities are closed for the season. See ohio.dnr.gov, discovermohican.com.

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