

TRAVEL

HOCKING HILLS STATE PARK

New Lodge wows with terrific views from every room



A pergola frames the back entrance of the new Lodge at Hocking Hills, which sits inside Ohio's most popular park. Photographs by Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer

The lodge opened last weekend and immediately became a magnet for visitors and locals alike.

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LOGAN— Ohio's most remarkable state park finally has an overnight lodge that matches its grandeur.

The Lodge at Hocking Hills opened last weekend and immediately became a magnet for visitors and locals alike.

"It exceeds expectations," said Sue Karshner, from nearby Lake Logan. "We've been waiting a long time for this," said local Jon Jager.

Indeed, according to some calculations, the area has been waiting five decades, since 1972, when the state built the original Hocking Hills lodge, which burned to the ground in 2016. It was initially intended to have overnight rooms, but the state ran out of money and didn't finish the project.

Instead, it became a restaurant-only lodge, with meeting rooms and a large outdoor swimming pool on the site.

After the lodge caught fire in late 2016, the state sought to remedy its long-ago omission. The new \$40-million facility features 81 overnight rooms, almost all with terrific views of the surrounding parkland.

The public spaces are even more impressive, with soaring ceilings, massive windows and rustic touches throughout. The lodge's new restaurant, Rock House, is also off to a terrific start.

OHIO'S FLAGSHIP PARK

Spread across 2,356 acres in Southeast Ohio's Hocking County, Hocking Hills State Park is Ohio's flagship, located about an hour southeast of Columbus. The park



The Grand Terrace offers outdoor games and plenty of seating.



Whispering Cave is a short hike from the new Lodge at Hocking Hills State Park.

is known for its spectacular sandstone creations, including Old Man's Cave, Cedar Falls and Rock House.

Most of the 5 million visitors who come here annually don't stay the night. Those who do typically choose a remote cabin or rustic lodge for their overnight accommodations.

"Now there's an upscale lodging option with full-service amenities," said General Manager Todd Tucker, a Logan native who moved back home from Arizona to run the



A path behind the lodge leads hikers to multiple trails.

new lodge.

"When this opportunity became available, I knew it was a dream come true," said Tucker, who used to swim at the lodge and camp at the nearby park campground. "It's special to me. This is an iconic location for everyone who lives near here and for the entire state of Ohio."

Indeed, my advice to every Northeast Ohioan I meet who has never walked the trails of the Hocking Hills — make the 3 ½ hour drive from Cleveland. You won't

believe how beautiful it is. You won't believe it's in Ohio.

I've been enjoying this park for decades, since I was a kid, staying at the campground, in cabins and overnight inns.

The new Lodge at Hocking Hills shoots to the top of my list for this reason alone: It is located in the heart of the park, with some of the park's signature hikes and features just outside the back door.

In addition to its central location, the lodge offers:

- ▶ 81 rooms, including two suites, some with bunkbeds, many with a patio or balcony overlooking the park.
- ▶ Two pools and two hot tubs, both inside and out. The outdoor hot tub features radiant heat on the surrounding walkway to melt snow during the winter months.
- ▶ A terrific restaurant, Rock House, featuring chef Matt Rapposelli, a Cleveland native who ran the restaurant at the previous lodge.

Rapposelli said he initially didn't want to come back — the fire from six years ago was still too traumatic. But Tucker convinced him.

"It's been like a homecoming," said Rapposelli, who left his position as chef at the nearby Inn at Cedar Falls to oversee the lodge's new kitchen.

Rapposelli has brought back a few favorites from the old lodge menu — including fried catfish and mixed berry cobbler — and added some new items designed to appeal to the wide variety of people who travel through a state park lodge. "I want to have something that appeals to every group — affordable and familiar, and special occasion," he said.

I ate three meals here — breakfast, lunch and dinner — and all three were excellent, including a thick-cut Ohio pork chop for dinner, burger with wild mushrooms for lunch and biscuits and gravy for breakfast (hey, I was hiking!)

Breakfast was a buffet during my stay, but will be replaced with an a la carte menu as more staff is hired; Rapposelli also plans to expand the dinner menu in the coming weeks. But be warned: The place was turning away patrons last Sunday afternoon; make a reservation if you can.

"I think they should have made the dining room bigger," observed local Donna McKnight, who used to own a cabin rental business in the area, and was enjoying breakfast at the lodge on Sunday.

SEE HOCKING HILLS STATE PARK, K2

HOCKING HILLS STATE PARK

New Lodge wows with terrific views from every room



The new Lodge at Hocking Hills has two pools, one inside and one out, plus two hot tubs. Photos by Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer

Continues from K1

Elsewhere inside the lodge, there are some fun public spaces to discover — a pool table tucked into an alcove on the second floor, a skybridge that cuts across the dramatic three-story lobby, and 39-foot-tall stone fireplaces with fossilized rocks embedded within.

There's a well-appointed gift shop, meeting rooms on the ground floor, plus some terrific works of public art, including a beautiful interpretive map of the park made out of wood hanging in the lobby.

The outside spaces are even better, including plenty of outdoor seating surrounding the building. There's a rear pergola that seems destined to be a popular wedding venue; a space called the Grand Terrace, built atop the old pool, outfitted with cornhole, Jenga and other outdoor games; and the Grandma Gatewood Hikers Pavilion, with rocking chairs and trail maps to guide hikers on their way.

I stayed the first night the lodge was open — not usually the best time to book a room — but only had a handful of minor complaints: There was a glitchy light in my bathroom, the small café off the lobby hadn't yet been stocked with many food items, and the cell service throughout this area remains awful (a long-standing concern in Southeast Ohio generally). The Wi-Fi at the lodge, however, worked great.

As spectacular as the lodge is, the star here is the land that surrounds it.

Shortly after check-in, my husband and I took the short trail south toward Whispering Cave, a magnificent rock formation less than a half-mile from the lodge. The trail was short, but moderately challenging, over rocks and up and down a hill. But what a payoff: 275 feet across and 105 feet high, the cave features acoustics that rival a symphony hall.

The trailhead to Whispering Cave reopened last weekend, at the same time as the lodge, after being closed for several years because of construction on the site. The only way to access the cave in recent years had been via a longer trail from the Old Man's Cave or Cedar Falls areas.

On our second day, we headed north from the lodge toward the Old Man's Cave trail, which winds through a spectacular gorge and into a large recess cave that was home in the mid-19th century to hermit Richard Rowe ("the Old Man"). The 1.5-mile trail is the park's signature hike, past Lower and Upper Falls, Devil's Bathtub and other fantastical rock formations.

In 2020, during the COVID pandemic, the park converted almost all its trails to one-way hikes in an effort to prevent overcrowding on the pathways. From the lodge, hikers headed to the Old Man's Cave area are directed to walk along



Views of the lobby at the Lodge at Hocking Hills from the mezzanine skybridge.



View of the park from the three-story lobby at the new Lodge at Hocking Hills.

the 1.2-mile Whispering Cave to Old Man's Cave Loop, a new path that follows too closely to the roadway. The trip back to the lodge via the Grandma Gatewood/Buckeye Trail is much more scenic — through the gorge, along Queer Creek and across the swinging Hemlock Bridge.

In all, the hike from the lodge to Old Man's Cave and back took about two hours — a lovely, moderate trek that showcases some of the park's best-known features.

From the lodge, you can also take the Grandma Gatewood/Buckeye Trail east 1.5 miles to Cedar Falls, the gorgeous 40-foot cataract framed with hemlock trees (which early settlers misidentified as cedars). Ambitious hikers can continue another 2.3 miles south to spectacular Ash Cave, 700-foot wide and nearly 100 feet tall, another don't-miss spot in the park.

I saved those hikes for another day. On this trip, I was content to head back to the lodge for one more meal and one more soak in the hot tub.



Rocking chairs await tired hikers in front of the new Lodge at Hocking Hills.

IF YOU GO: THE LODGE AND CONFERENCE CENTER AT HOCKING HILLS

What: New 81-room lodge set in the heart of Hocking Hills State Park. The lodge also includes Rock House restaurant and pub, open to the public. It's one of 10 overnight lodges within Ohio's state park system, which also includes lodges at Punderson State Park, Salt Fort, Mohican, Maumee Bay, Geneva and others. For the complete list: greatohiolodges.com, thelodgeatgeneva.com

Where: The lodge is located at 20020 Ohio 664, just south of the Hocking Hills State Park Visitors Center. The park, located in Hocking County, is about 200 miles from Cleveland, a 3 1/2-hour drive. The quickest route is I-71 south to Columbus, east on I-70 to U.S. 33, then east on 33 to Ohio 664 south.

How much: Room rates vary depending on the date, but range from about \$150 to \$270.

More information: hockinghillsparklodge.com, explorehockinghills.com, ohiodnr.gov/go-and-do/plan-a-visit/find-a-property/hocking-hills-state-park