

Adventures Aplenty in the Nantahala National Forest

When it comes to adventure sports, the southern Appalachian version of Mecca could very well be the Nantahala Outdoor Center.

Nantahala, or "NOC," is located beside the Nantahala River on highway 76, just 31 miles north of the Standing Indian Wildlife Management Area via the Appalachian Trail, 28 trail miles south of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. NOC is commonly used as a mail stop and resupply center for those hiking the entire trail. But the Nantahala River is one of the most popular whitewater runs in the country. NOC offers both guided and unguided rafting trips — or simply rent a "duckie" (an inflatable canoe) or a real kayak. Instructional classes are available for all skill levels. NOC also offers instruction in rock climbing.

If you're not interested in whitewater or if you just want to mix up your activities, rent a mountain bike and visit the nearby Tsali Recreational Area. Trails here range from an easy 7-mile loop to a strenuous 12-miler. There are several spectacular overlooks 200 feet above Fontana Lake with the Great Smoky Mountain range on the other side. Camping with facilities is also available.

Horseback riding is available just downstream from the center, as is fly fishing; the river is well stocked with trout from a nearby hatchery. Fontana Lake, just a few miles downstream, is a great place to get in or on the water for those who prefer flatwater boating, bass fishing, or swimming. For instruction: call (704) 488-6737. For whitewater rafting: call (800) 232-7238.

Information Center to the AT near Big Spring shelter. Follow the AT south, climb to the 5,500-foot summit of Standing Indian Mountain, then descend to Deep Gap, where Kimsey Creek Trail can be followed back to the campground. This loop is about 25 miles — and at least four rolls of film — long.

The real appeal of the Standing Indian Wildlife Management Area is its diverse character. The AT traverses a narrow ledge on a sheer

rock face, makes its way over a mountain that is bald where the trees give way to grass-heath meadows and a 360-degree panoramic view, and carves a tunnel through a rhododendron thicket — all within this one section of the trail. With the great change in elevation, the vegetation in the valleys is similar to that found in the Georgia foothills, while the flora near the summits is akin to Vermont and New

Hampshire. And with such a diverse range of climate, you are certain to find mountain laurel and rhododendron blooming somewhere this time of year. You'll also find views — waterfalls, rock faces, and mountain balds. Because of the lower traffic here than elsewhere in the Appalachians, wildlife seems more plentiful. But you'll want to get on the trail early to see it because the animals seem a bit more timid here too.

Early spring is probably the best time of year to hike this area. Temperatures from late March to early April may dip down around freezing but will climb to the 60s by midday. Spring showers here can be rather violent, but it rarely stays cloudy for more than a day at a time.

Furthermore, unlike the national parks, there are no restrictions on pets here, so Rinny can come along too.