

Spa au naturel

Cougar Reservoir harbors natural hot springs where swimsuits are optional

By Ashley Griffin
Freelance Reporter

Located about two hours outside Eugene, just east off Highway 126, Cougar Reservoir offers the comforts of a hot tub with one caveat: Swimwear is entirely optional.

For the modest, the hot springs in Blue River can be a slightly shocking experience.

However, this feeling is part of what makes the trip unique to Oregon, Outdoor Program Resource Room Coordinator Ahsa Jensen said. Jensen first visited the hot springs on a program trip but said the nudity didn't make her uncomfortable.

Sophomore Matt Moore, who has been to the hot springs six times, was also prepared for the nudity. He said it made for an interesting experience.

"I guess you just have to expect it," he said. "And it makes for funny stories."

One of Moore's favorite stories about the hot springs was when two unknown men popped out of the shadows and surprised their group.

"You should have seen their faces," he said. "He was harmless, but it was just hilarious nonetheless."

The hot springs also give visitors the chance to meet many different personalities.

"The people are really friendly," Jensen said. "They are all into relaxing and enjoying the natural environment."

Jensen said she enjoys going to the hot springs because of the great atmosphere.

"It's an awesome place to just sit and relax," she said.

Moore shared similar sentiments.

"It's always nice to go during the cold winter and let your muscles relax," he said.

Unlike other hot springs, Cougar's paths and changing facilities are made to look like they are natural. A small stream cascades into the four steaming pools, cooling them. Flat rocks surround each pool and are great for leaning against or sitting on. Jensen said recent renovations to the hot springs were inclusive of nature and don't detract from the natural environment.

The springs are close enough to Eugene that one can make the trip in a day, but far enough away to feel like a vacation. In addition, they are relatively inexpensive.

"At a lot of other hot springs you pay, like, 12 bucks for a half-hour," Jensen said. "These ones are free."

COUGAR RESERVOIR

It takes about two hours to get to Cougar Reservoir. From Eugene, go east on Highway 126 for about 50 miles. Just past the sign for the Blue River Campground, watch for the sign to Cougar Reservoir on the right. Follow Forest Service Road 19 for 7.5 miles to the trailhead. The reservoir dam is four miles from the intersection of Highway 126 and Forest Service Road 19. At the dam, turn right. Continue 3.5 miles to a small lake on the right with a waterfall at the far end. Just past the lake, park in the area on the left side of the road and walk back to the north.

The springs are about a 10-minute hike into the woods, allowing for a private experience year-round. Other area hot springs, like McCredie in Oakridge, are located closer to the road.

"Simply put, it is the definition of Oregon," Moore said. "The Cougar Hot Springs are laid back, outdoors, enjoyable and a great place to get away for a couple hours."

Ashley Griffin is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.

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RAPID RIDES

Outdoor-enthusiasts with a taste for water adventure will love the scenery but must also take precautions

By Catherine Ryan
Freelance Reporter

The McKenzie River's swirling, frigid rapids take some unsuspecting kayakers and rafters by surprise. The bubbling water sometimes holds those who attempt to kayak along its banks upside down, fighting for breath, leaving them with an intense headache and the desire for more.

The river flows from the Cascade Mountains, parallels Highway 126 and merges with the Willamette River near Springfield. It provides waves for adrenaline junkies and breathtaking scenery for anyone who loves the outdoors.

Business administration major Macy Burnham, who also owns and operates the outdoor kayaking school River Quest, said the McKenzie is an incredible river to learn on.

"From a beginner's standpoint, it's an excellent river if you don't mind

getting cold," Burnham said. "It's beautiful up there — crystal-clear water. The scenery is stunning."

On most days, kayakers play in the holes or float on a downriver run. In March, the sunny weather lured many paddlers into the 42-degree waters.

The river also has some of the best play-boating in the region. Paddlers practice flipping their kayaks sideways, end-over-end and in circles.

Junior LJ Groth said he frequents the wave hole at Neils Point.

"At Neils, you can do just about any new trick that's possible," he said. "You can practice for bigger and better places."

The McKenzie also is a great river for those who are less interested in flipping their kayaks and more concerned with keeping the boat on the top of the water. According to the whitewater guidebook, "Soggy Sneakers," most of the McKenzie is rated a II-III. The accepted rapids rating system is based on levels one to five, with five being the most difficult.

The classic "Milk Run," as some locals call it, is a section of the

"There's something to do at low, medium and high water levels. ... There's always something fun to kayak on."

LJ Groth
University junior

McKenzie that is a class II-III.

"There's something to do at low, medium and high water levels," Groth said. "There's always something fun to kayak on."

The Milk Run includes Clover Point, a class II rapid with a play hole, and Marten Rapids, a class III. "Rafters and kayakers alike find themselves swimming at the end of Marten Rapids," said Outdoor Program trip facility manager Ed Fretette. "It makes an impression."

All paddlers should be aware of Brown's Hole, which is one of the most notorious spots on the river. It may look unassuming, but kayakers and rafters can be held and recirculated in

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