

# New River Gorge



Sunrise over New River at Diamond Point

ABOVE—GARY HARTLEY; ILLUSTRATIONS BELOW—NPS / PATRICIA TOPPER

## Welcome to the New River

The river and the gorge—with their impressive display of natural forces—immediately command your attention. For centuries the gorge remained virtually inaccessible along its entire length. Then, in 1873, the railroad opened this isolated part of West Virginia, and the landscape began to change. The railroad bordered the river, making possible the shipment of coal to the outside world. Coal mining grew. Towns near the coalfields flourished. In time, company men (bosses and representatives of the coal industry)

clashed with miners who demanded better working conditions. Accounts of this bitter labor movement are recorded in the songs and legends that have become part of our cultural history. The stories remain but most of the coal towns are gone, abandoned when the mines played out.

In southern stretches, where the river is quiet with a broad floodplain, farming became a way of life and made its own contribution to Southern Appalachian culture.

The New River is renowned for its excellent fishing, and is a premier whitewater boating river. Some of West Virginia's rarest plants grow here. Congress established the park in 1978 to preserve and protect this important free-flowing waterway. Today 53 miles of the river and its gorge and 40 miles of tributaries are preserved as New River Gorge National River, Gauley River National Recreation Area, and Bluestone National Scenic River. Please help us care for the parks—for your enjoyment and for future generations.



## What's in a Name?

The name New River is not an accurate description because this river may be one of the oldest in North America. The most-accepted estimate suggests that the river has been in its present course for at least 65 million years. The New was once a longer river (called the Teays by geologists) that flowed through central Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois and into the Mississippi. About 10,000 years ago the last advance of glacial ice buried most of this river and diverted water of the New into the Ohio and Kanawha rivers that were created by glacial action.

Another indication of the New River's old age is that it flows across the Appalachian Plateau, not around or from it as other streams. The river was there before the Appalachians formed—and the mountains are very old.

New River's deep gorge exposes geologic history as it slices through rock layers that tilted as the Appalachian Mountains rose. Some exposed rocks are as old as 330 million years. (See diagram at right.) Because of the nature of the tilt, younger rock layers are in the northern part of the park. As you explore, look for black streaks, which contain coal deposits.



## Activities in the New River Gorge

To many visitors this park is whitewater! Here the New River falls 750 feet in 50 miles, from Bluestone Dam to Gauley Bridge, creating one of the finest whitewater rivers in the eastern United States. By comparison the Mississippi River falls 1,428 feet from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico, a distance of 2,300 miles.

The park's southern end has Class I to III rapids ideal for intermediate boaters. North of Thurmond, Class I to V rapids require greater skill. Only experienced and properly equipped boaters should try to navigate these waters. For safety, others should go with an outfitter who knows the river.

Anglers fish from banks, shallows, or boats. Climbers tackle the gorge's sandstone cliffs. Others explore scenic and historic areas by foot and mountain bike or from vehicles. You can picnic at the river level and near the rim. If you enjoy vigorous activities or just relaxing—New River Gorge is for you.



Biking along the Arrowhead Trail



Whitewater rafting on the New River



Climbing the Endless Wall in New River Gorge

