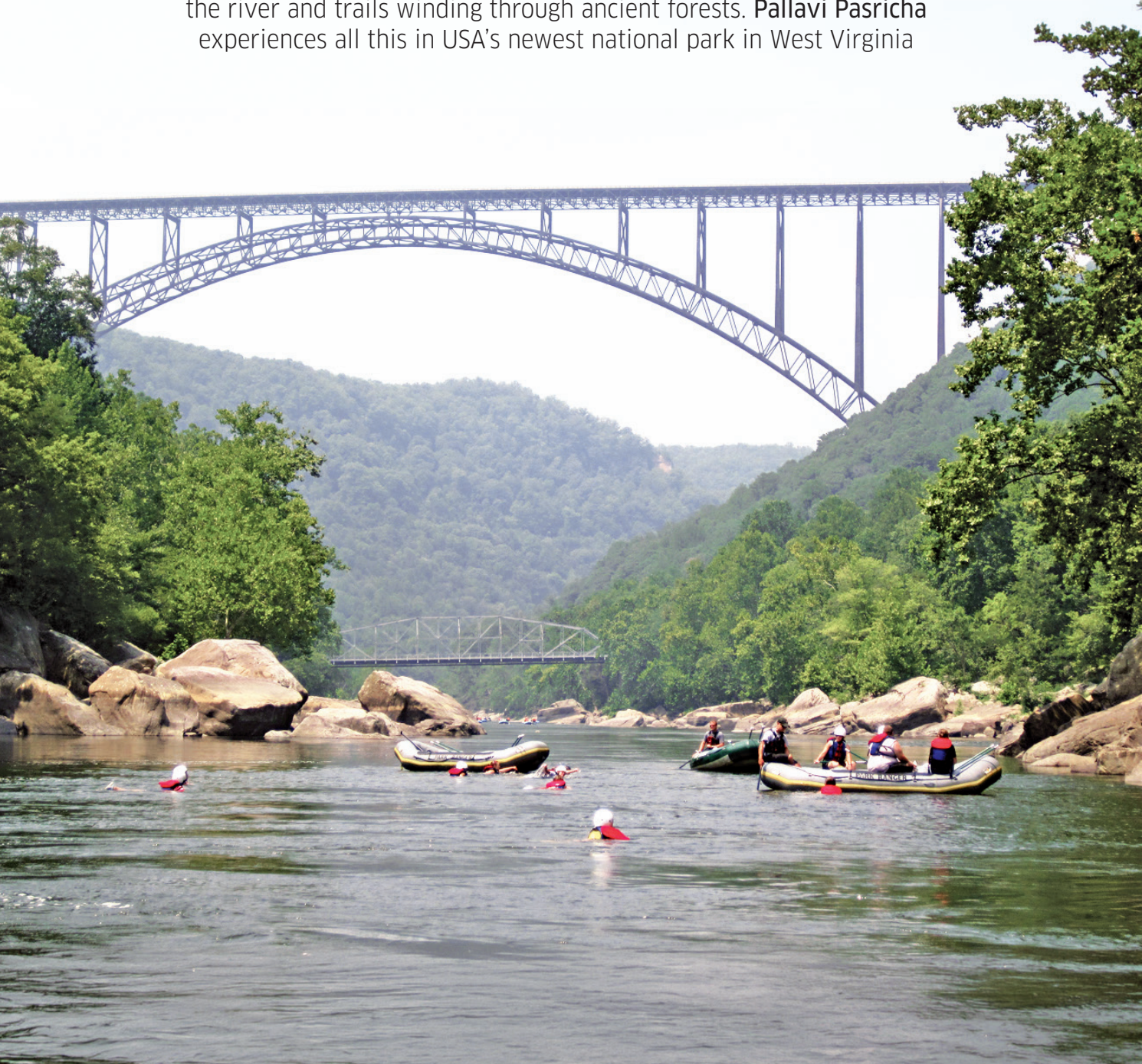


ADVENTURES IN WEST VIRGINIA

White-water rapids, dramatic canyon views, a bridge walk 876 feet above the river and trails winding through ancient forests. Pallavi Pasricha experiences all this in USA's newest national park in West Virginia



LIFE AROUND

I was staying at Adventures on the Gorge located at Lower New River Gorge, one of the park's largest adventure resorts and home to cabins, RV parking sites and camps. I started each morning with a quiet walk to breathe in the crisp air and hear the sounds of the forest, before plunging into the park.

You don't know how to swim and you still signed up for rafting," the guide's surprised query threw me off as clutching my raft, I climbed down a set of steep stairs to the banks of one of the oldest rivers in the world.

In my defence, I had donned a life jacket and was no stranger to rafting. As I stepped into the fast-flowing waters of Lower New River in USA's newest national park, the sun was not in a mood to show up so the water felt cold. But the stunning view of the surrounding mountains made me forget the chill.

The first rapid arrived quickly, but the

guide said it was a gentle one. She warned multiple times that it is very common to fall in the river. Determined not to let that happen, I clutched tightly onto the rope as wave after wave came charging at me. Some rapids like Double Z, a Class IV+ rapid were tough to negotiate because I had to zig-zag through rocks without banging against them. I felt proud as I clambered out of the river – I did not go overboard.

The exhilarating experience was just one of the highlights of my stay at the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve in West Virginia, which won the title of the country's newest national park in 2020.

WEST VIRGINIA'S
NEW RIVER GORGE
NATIONAL PARK
AND PRESERVE WAS
OFFICIALLY NAMED
THE COUNTRY'S
NEWEST NATIONAL
PARK IN 2020



Named after a massive, dramatic canyon carved by the river, it sprawls over 70,000 acres and is surrounded by charming small towns like Fayetteville. It lies about a four and a half drive from Washington D.C.

I was staying at Adventures on the Gorge located at Lower New River Gorge, one of the park's largest adventure resorts and home to cabins, RV parking sites and camps. Surrounded by centuries-old oak, pine and maple forests, the park has rapidly become a magnet both for pursuits like rock climbing, hiking and mountain biking and its sheer beauty. I started each morning with a quiet walk to breathe in the crisp air and hear the sounds of the forest, before plunging into the park's most popular adventures during the day.

HIGHEST BRIDGE IN THE COUNTRY

Devouring tacos and beer at the lively Chetty's Pub, located within the resort one evening, I felt excited about walking underneath the New River Gorge Bridge the next day – one of the park's iconic activities. Soaring at a height of 876 feet, it is the longest single span steel arch bridge in the Western Hemisphere as well as the third highest in the U.S.

After putting on the harness, I reached the entry point of the gangway that lies 25 feet below the bridge and stretches across 3,030 feet along its full length. Stepping



gingerly on the narrow, two-foot-wide catwalk and looking around, I was struck by the sight of the New River surging below and the Appalachian Mountains rising in every direction. For a fleeting moment, I felt as though I had stepped into the frame of a perfect picture postcard.

The gentle, leisurely walk was a cakewalk compared to the one I had done on Australia's Sydney Harbour Bridge. I loved that in the midst of nature, I could slow down and soak in the beauty. When vehicles

Since opening in October 1977, the New River Gorge Bridge closes to traffic on the third Saturday of October for walks, BASE jumps and tours beneath the span and this has now become an annual tradition.

moved at speed on the bridge, the catwalk shook slightly, but the harness made me feel secure.

As we walked, the guide gave nuggets of information about the bridge. Since opening in October 1977, it closes to traffic on the third Saturday of October for walks, BASE jumps and tours beneath the span. This is now an annual tradition.

I managed to walk across the bridge in a couple of hours, stopping along the way to click photos although a part of me wished I didn't have my phone. Technology and nature don't go hand in hand.

HIKES AND VIEWS

How could I be in a national park and not go hiking? I set out on one of the most popular – The Endless Wall Trail with my guide, Rodney Hogan. This 3.6 kms hike passes through an ancient hemlock forest along a sandstone cliff to one of the park's most fascinating viewpoints, Diamond Overlook. The hike was fairly simple and gave me enough time to admire the rhododendrons, which had started to bloom, adding that gorgeous touch of pink to the shades of green.

Hogan told us that this trail changes seasonally, turning yellow and orange during the fall season – possibly the best time to visit – and dusted with periodic snow in winter. I headed to a clearing for a



panoramic view of the bridge before moving onto Diamond Point Overlook, where we took a 20-minute break to soak in the breathtaking sight of the river below, of happy rafters and the rugged cliffs. Looking around I soaked in the view for a while before heading back.

As I headed back to the cabin, I reflected on the days gone by. I had my share of adventures – navigating roaring rapids, walking beneath an iconic bridge and hiking along the reserve's most celebrated trail, but perhaps what stayed with me most were the moments of stillness and calm that I found amid the park's varying frames – the river, the forest, the cliffs and canyons.

ENDLESS WALL TRAIL WINDS THROUGH AN ANCIENT HEMLOCK FOREST AND ALONG SANDSTONE CLIFFS TO DIAMOND OVERLOOK, WHERE BLOOMING RHODODENDRONS ADD TO THE LUSH GREEN LANDSCAPE