



Rejuvenating Retreat

DeSoto State Park offers a wide range of lodging options, giving guests of all stripes – even those who insist on modern conveniences – an opportunity to commune with nature.

story by MEREDITH CUMMINGS

photos by BRITTNEY HUGHES and MEREDITH CUMMINGS

TO SAY I AM NOT AN OUTDOORSY PERSON WOULD BE AN understatement. I've gone camping in an actual tent exactly one time in my life.

But this summer I found myself writing while enjoying the woods of my beloved, sweet home Alabama – a state I profess I do not know as well as I should. Yet a stay in one of the chalets at DeSoto State Park helped me rediscover the camping trips of my youth and get reacquainted with Alabama's natural environment.

When I arrived at the park Lodge to check in, it was with great trepidation. Like I said, I am not a "nature" person. I do not camp. I do not bike. I do a lot of walking and running and working out in closed workout rooms, devoid of fresh air. I did not know what to expect or – even at almost 42 years old – if I could handle it. I, in short, am a baby.

But a woman of my age needs to suck it up and forge ahead, and I'm so glad I did.

For me, this was the perfect foray into the world of state parks. I understand that many people need to rough it to feel close to nature. But central heat and air conditioning are essential to me, as pretentious as that sounds (surely, somewhere out there I have friends who will agree), and the chalet met this demand. In addition, DeSoto State Park is conveniently located just a 15-minute drive from downtown Fort Payne, Ala., so I didn't feel cut off from the rest of the world. It's amazing how close a city center can be to a vast state park.

The chalet was the perfect mix of "rustic" – and I use that term loosely because people who actually know rustic would throw things at me – and modern, with just the right amenities.

Plates, dishes, sheets and towels were all provided. It was kind of like a hotel without the daily housekeeping services and with an unmatched view.

In addition to chalets, the park offers log cabins with similar amenities, rustic cabins and motel rooms, and is building a primitive pioneer cabin.

Designed for adventurous souls far braver than myself, the pioneer cabin



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DeSoto State Park's improved campground offers picnic tables, grills and hookups for water, sewer, electricity and cable TV; A view of a chalet's living area from its loft; The porch of a log cabin; The upstairs bedroom in a chalet; The dining room inside the Lodge, which, along with other structures in the park, was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s; The sign at the Country Store, where you can buy snacks and camping and travel supplies.

will give those interested in experiential tourism a chance to live without modern conveniences such as running water.

"In the new primitive cabin, guests need to bring a sleeping bag, and there is an outdoor bathroom," says Brittney Hughes, park naturalist.

The park also offers improved and primitive campgrounds and back-country campsites. Sites in the improved campground include picnic tables, grills and hookups for water, sewer, electricity and cable TV. Each primitive campsite contains a fire pit and enough room for two tents. Restrooms, picnic tables, a picnic shelter and a water faucet are centrally located. Two back-country campsites feature 8-foot-by-10-foot, trail-side shelters. All campers can access showers at the improved campground.

Camping requires packing much of what you'll need, but I didn't bring anything special. I packed just like I would for a hotel stay and was quite comfortable the entire time. The only extra things I brought were some snacks and drinks. The closest full grocery store is in Fort Payne, though the park's Country Store & Information Center offers beverages, snacks, gifts, books, camping supplies, souvenirs and travel incidentals.

The busy season at DeSoto, Hughes tells me, starts in February, right around Valentine's Day. I can see why lovebirds would enjoy a trip here. The season gets busier from there.

"Usually March is when the doors fling wide open," Hughes says, and the

fun doesn't let up all summer. "We will be full through weekends in October and November until Thanksgiving."

After Thanksgiving, things slow down, so if you're the kind of person who needs solitude to commune with nature, that might be the time for you, though during my mid-summer stay, the park wasn't the least bit crowded or noisy.

My favorite thing about the chalet was sitting on the back porch, rocking. It took me back to my youth in my grandparents' un-air-conditioned home in Birmingham, where I would rock away the hours with nothing pressing to do but read, write and watch people.

It's not that I don't have an appreciation for the outdoors. Years of visiting my uncle's farm just over the state line in Tennessee led me to love nature. But when forests are part of the equation, my mind automatically conjures horror movies in which a cabin in the woods equals certain death.

Despite the fact DeSoto State Park is heavily wooded (the natural landscape for the majority of Alabama, after all), this experience was low-stress in a way that rejuvenated my soul. The chalets are tucked close to a small, paved road, but passing cars don't even register on the noise scale. While the getaways are close enough to each other that I knew I had neighbors and could sometimes see motion through the trees, there was still plenty of privacy.

When I drove up to the unassuming chalet, I felt a little like I was going to camp again. I expected to hear my mother say, "Have fun, dear!" The brown

exterior blends with the surroundings, and a thick tuft of tall trees towers over the structure.

The plain exterior added to the shock when I opened the door to a big surprise – a beautiful and spacious interior with a fireplace, dining table and enough amenities to make it feel like home.

It's just enough camping and just enough hotel to mingle the two worlds. Central heat and air conditioning were welcome in the Alabama summer heat, and linens, cookware and any utensils I needed to prepare food were also available.

My favorite part of the interior, aside from the fireplace, is the stunning amount of light that shines in from all corners. Every wall has windows (with blinds for privacy), and because the ceilings are high, this gives the main, open living area a much bigger feel than the square footage would reflect.

Upstairs is a loft with twin beds. Downstairs is a small, tidy bedroom with a dresser, chair and queen-size bed. The living room's comfortable couch doubles as a sleeper sofa.

On the second day, I tried the Mountain Inn Restaurant, part of the Lodge, that offers a full-service menu with items ranging from standard favorites like omelets, pancakes and waffles for breakfast to soups, salads, sandwiches and more substantial entrees for lunch and dinner. The variety could make even the pickiest of family members content.

The Lodge was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the 1930s and is nestled on a canyon edge overlooking Little River.

Back at the chalet, cable TV assured I could watch those late-night reruns of "Friends," but I didn't because I was too busy enjoying being outside on the screened-in porch.

I can picture going back when the weather is colder, and Hughes confirms that when the foliage is thinner and colorful flowers are not in bloom, it's still a beautiful place to be.

"Even when we're about to have a snow event, people come up here in the snow. Pretty much they want to get stuck," Hughes confesses, and I can completely understand the need to get away, as well as the desire to get "stuck" there and not be able to go into the office.

My time at DeSoto State Park was, in short, a serene and peaceful getaway that was a much-needed refueling station on the way back to everyday life. As I drove away, I felt a twinge of last-day-of-camp sadness watching the park disappear in the car's rear-view mirror.

I plan to go back soon and take my daughter – also not an "outdoorsy" person – and I can already hear the protests that will take place along the way. I'm not going to say anything to influence her because I know once she steps inside, her mind will be made up: "Mom, we're staying here awhile." 🌲



Things to Do in the Park

Hike on more than 25 miles of trails that showcase interesting rock formations and waterfalls.

Visit DeSoto Falls, a 100-foot waterfall, six miles north of the main park, off DeKalb County Road 89.

See the Nature Center featuring animals that can be found atop Lookout Mountain as well as information on the park and area history.

Check out the Civilian Conservation Corps Museum and learn about the Depression-era program that developed DeSoto State Park.

Kayak and Canoe – Launch your own boat or rent a kayak or canoe in the area above the dam at DeSoto Falls. More information at 256-634-8370.

Mountain Bike on 11 miles of trails.

Fly Fish in Little River. Learn more at alapark.com/desotoresort.

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