

Breaks Interstate Park and Appalachian Heritage Tour Itinerary



Destination: The Grand Canyon of the South – Breaks Interstate Park

Overview

Breaks Interstate Park, often called the "Grand Canyon of the South," is a unique bi-state park situated in southeastern Kentucky and southwestern Virginia within the Jefferson National Forest, at the northeastern tip of Pine Mountain. Rather than being managed by individual state park systems, it is governed by an interstate compact between Virginia and Kentucky, making it one of a few such parks in the United States, and only one of two operated jointly under a compact. Major partners include the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation and the Kentucky Department of Parks.

This is an example itinerary based on a previously successful trip. Pricing subject to change.

The park is traversed by the Russell Fork River and the Clinchfield Railroad (now CSX Transportation Kingsport Subdivision). It is accessible via Virginia 80 and Kentucky 80, between Haysi, Virginia and Elkhorn City, Kentucky, passing through the Breaks community east of the park.

History

Around 180 million years ago, this area was submerged under a vast inland sea. Over time, the Russell Fork River carved the spectacular valleys seen today. Native American tribes such as the Shawnee and Cherokee used the area as hunting grounds. In 1767, Daniel Boone explored this region in search of a westward pass through Pine Mountain, ultimately naming it "The Breaks." Preparations have been made for elk viewing, as elk were spotted near the park in 2023 for the first time since the 1800s.

Geography

Breaks Interstate Park lies approximately 5 miles (8 km) east of Elkhorn City, Kentucky, and encompasses 4,500 acres (1,800 ha). Its signature feature is the Breaks Canyon, which stretches five miles and ranges from 830 to 1,600 feet (250 to 490 m) deep, formed by millions of years of erosion by the Russell Fork River.

Day One

- 4:30 PM – Arrive at Breaks Welcome Center for a 30-minute tour featuring the "Grand Canyon of the South" overlook. The tour begins at the Welcome Center and includes information on the region's plant and animal life, presented by a park ranger. The park, located about 35 minutes from Pikeville City near the Kentucky/Virginia state line, offers unforgettable outdoor experiences. At its heart lies a 250-million-year-old, 1,600-foot-deep canyon—the largest east of the Mississippi—with over 13 miles of hiking trails. Each trail is generally less than a mile and interconnected. Group photo at the canyon overlook.
- 5:30 PM – Check into lodging at Breaks Interstate Park, 327 Commission Circle, Breaks, Virginia 24607.
- 6:30 PM – Dinner at the Breaks Rhododendron Restaurant featuring meatloaf, flounder, three sides, full salad bar, and dessert.
- 7:15 PM – Live music by Rachel Messer and Connor Dale (Voice Season Twelve contestants), sponsored by Pike County Tourism CVB hospitality.
- 8:00 PM – Pauley Hollow Distillery after-dinner tasting and educational session.
- And to all, a good night.

Day Two

- 6:15 AM – 8:00 AM – Breakfast.
- 8:00 AM – Depart for McCoy Well site.
- 9:00 AM – Pick up Mr. Warren for Hatfield and McCoy historic sites tour: Hog Trail Site, Historic McCoy Well Site, Pawpaw Tree site, Aunt Betty's, and the Historic Williamson Coal House. No fee for guests with Pikeville-Pike County.

The Coal House in Williamson, West Virginia, is constructed entirely of coal masonry—65 tons of coal from the Winifrede Seam, designed by Hassel T. Hicks. Built as a publicity stunt in 1933, it symbolizes the "Billion Dollar Coalfield" and now houses the Tug Valley Chamber of Commerce.

- 12:30 PM – Lunch at South Williamson’s South Side Steak House buffet.
- 2:00 PM – Depart for Dueling Barrels Tour.
- 2:45 PM – Dueling Barrels Tour.
- 4:15 PM – Return to Breaks Interstate Park.
- 5:00 PM – Downtime at Breaks lodging: relax in room or on balcony, or walk around the park.
- 6:00 PM – Depart for Breaks Park Elk Tour, including a picnic meal and bottled water from the Rhododendron Restaurant.

Elk Viewing Experience

Since the restoration of 1,500 Rocky Mountain elk in Eastern Kentucky in 1997 and Virginia’s own program beginning in 2012, elk populations have thrived. Currently, over 250 elk reside in Virginia and more than 13,000 in Kentucky, with many agencies contributing to their successful return. Elk now inhabit rehabilitated coal mine sites and forests near the Breaks. The tour (\$35 per person, including dinner) is guided by experienced staff into Virginia’s elk restoration zone. Guests should wear earth-toned, season-appropriate clothing, bring cameras or binoculars, and avoid strongly scented perfumes due to elk sensitivity.

Fall elk tours coincide with the rut, offering opportunities to see large elk groups, hear bull elk bugling, and witness dominance displays. Later tours also showcase the vibrant fall colors of Central Appalachia. With a 100% elk sighting rate and frequent views of deer, wild turkey, and occasionally black bear, these tours promise memorable wildlife encounters.

- 8:15 PM – Return to Breaks Park.
- 8:45 PM – S’mores around the campfire with live bluegrass music, sponsored by Pikeville-Pike County Tourism and The Breaks Park.

Day Three



- 6:15 AM – 8:00 AM – Breakfast.
- 8:30 AM – Depart.
- 9:30 AM – Visit Webb Grocery.

- 10:00 AM – Tour Butcher Holler (\$5 each, shuttle provided by Pike County Tourism CVB hospitality).
- 12:15 PM – Lunch at Van Lear Museum (\$15 each) featuring a Coal Miners Lunch bucket: homemade beef veggie soup, seven-layer salad, chicken salad and bologna sandwiches, dessert, and drinks.
- 1:15 PM – Van Lear Museum tour of the original CONSOL mining building, including the post office, doctor's office, jail, and a model of Van Lear (\$3 each).
- 2:15 PM – Depart.
- 2:30 PM – Mayo Church tour and organist performance on the Andrew Carnegie-donated pump organ (\$200 total group fee). Mayo Methodist Church in Paintsville, Kentucky, was constructed from 1908, spearheaded by local millionaire John C.C. Mayo. The church features native sandstone, a roof of over 12,000 glazed green tiles, stained glass windows imported from Italy, and its first service was held on September 19, 1909.
- 3:30 PM – Depart.
- 3:45 PM – Country Music Highway Museum visit.
- 4:30 PM – Depart.
- 4:45 PM – 1850s Mountain Home Place tour.
- 6:00 PM – Dinner at Paintsville Lake Pavilion overlooking the lake, with hot pulled pork, pulled chicken, baked beans, coleslaw, drinks, and dessert (\$16.95).
- 6:30 PM – Live local music at the Pavilion; in case of rain, dinner and entertainment will be held at the auditorium at the 1850s Mountain Home Place. A 60-minute music performance (bluegrass, country, or inspirational) can be arranged for \$450.
- Return – Back to Breaks Interstate Park.

Day Four



- 6:30 AM – 8:00 AM – Breakfast.
- 7:00 AM – Bags out.
- 8:00 AM – Depart.
- 8:45 AM – Arrive at the Big Sandy Heritage Museum for the Hatfield-McCoy feud relics exhibit. The museum showcases feud artifacts (including bullets from the McCoy home), life-size wax figures of "Devil Anse" Hatfield and Randolph McCoy, paintings, and the 1924 "Everlasting Friendship" certificate marking the feud's end. Exhibits also highlight Appalachian culture, the coal and railroad industries, Daniel Boone, President Garfield, and the Pikeville Cut-Thru.
- 9:45 AM – Walk next door to the Pike County Historic Court House (no fee), marked by Historical Marker #1866. The courthouse and adjacent jail were central to the trials of Hatfield family members,

who were convicted for the murders of several McCoy family members in 1889. One, Ellison Mounts, was executed in 1890. These trials marked the feud's transition into the legal system and signaled regional progress and modernization.

- 10:30 AM – Arrive at the Pikeville Cut-Through Project, an engineering marvel dubbed the "eighth wonder of the world" by The New York Times. Initiated in 1973, the project alleviated Pikeville's annual flooding, enabled urban development, and improved transportation infrastructure. Key stops include the original river site, Pauley Bridge (a WPA project), Cassady Blvd (earth relocation site), the swinging bridge, and Pikeville Lake. Group photo at the Cut-Through (no fee, Pike Tourism).
- 11:15 AM – Early lunch at the Pikeville Event Center, which offers a catered Italian meal (baked spaghetti, baked lasagna, salad, breadsticks, dessert, and drinks) at the overlook event space.

