

HIDDEN IN THE HILLS

The lush forests of southern Illinois shelter natural wonders that will recharge your spirit.

STORY BY **LORI VANOVER**
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Brilliant fall foliage adorns 3,300 acres of wilderness that is Garden of the Gods Recreation Area in the Shawnee National Forest.

PHOTO BY TERRY DONNELLY

THE FIRST TIME I VISITED SOUTHERN ILLINOIS

with my husband, Dirk, I was lured by the promise of farm-fresh peach cobbler, award-winning barbecue and locally made wines. I was raised in north-central Illinois, where the landscape is mostly cornfields and prairies. I must admit I had no idea there were any natural wonders hidden away in the 286,000-acre Shawnee National Forest.

The food and wine were definitely worth the drive. And I had a great time meeting Dirk's relatives who live in Cobden, a friendly village known for its unique school mascot, the Appleknockers. We now try to come down at least once a year.

Usually we just spend a few days relaxing in the countryside, sipping and socializing along the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail. But a couple of years ago, we took a wrong turn on one of the winding, densely forested roads and arrived in the Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge.

As I wondered what creatures find sanctuary in the woods, I realized southern Illinois is our sanctuary from city life. My curiosity was piqued to

explore more of the Shawnee Hills.

We started this year's trip at the Little Grand Canyon, a deep box canyon carved by water erosion near Pomona. Two hiking trails combine for a 3-mile loop. We descended to the canyon; the other direction offers views of the Big Muddy River and the Mississippi River floodplain.

After about a mile we reached a canyon overlook that peers down over a mature oak and hickory forest. Here the pathway takes a sharp left and disappears into a streambed.

We walked carefully alongside steep bluffs over wet sandstone rocks and mud. If you go, follow the white diamond trail markers and watch for handholds and steps carved by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. The forest was gloriously silent except for chirping songbirds and buzzing cicadas.

If you're looking for an easier hike, check out the Pomona Natural Bridge. Also nearby, Highway 2, known as Skyline Drive, offers spectacular overlooks of Bald Knob, the highest peak in southern Illinois. Several cab-

ins and bed-and-breakfasts line this scenic road.

After a good night's rest, we headed to the Henry Barkhausen Wetlands Center at the Cache River State Natural Area, known for centuries-old cypress and tupelo trees. It's also the starting point of Tunnel Hill State Trail. This bike path built over former railroad tracks stretches more than 45 miles north to Harrisburg, where the headquarters of the Shawnee National Forest is located. Several miles follow the Trail of Tears, the path the Cherokee Indian tribe took during its forced relocation to Oklahoma in 1838-'39, and the River to River Trail, which extends from the Mississippi to the Ohio.

We had the trail all to ourselves other than a few bird-watchers, and we spotted warblers and swallows, as well as a mink, painted turtles and needlenose garfish.

Back at the wetlands center, the personable guide gave us directions to see the giant cypress trees. A quick drive took us to a small parking area named Big Cypress Access. Within

just a few steps, the massive specimens came into view.

These are no ordinary trees—they are 1,000 years old and more than 40 feet in circumference. It's astounding to think about how the world has changed while they've grown.

Northeast of here you'll find otherworldly geological wonders at Garden of the Gods. These magnificent stone formations tower over 3,300 acres of forested wilderness. It's hard for me to believe this is in the same state where I grew up.

We hiked the Observation Trail, which takes you close to giant marvels like Camel Rock and Monkey Face. Adventurous types can climb up onto the rocks for jaw-dropping scenic views and watch as raptors soar through the sky at eye level. This is definitely a place to appreciate the

DEVIL'S STANDTABLE towers above hikers at Giant City State Park (top); Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge glows near dusk.



LITTLE EGYPT

The origin story of the area's nickname varies, but Egyptian references are frequent here, from towns named Cairo and Karnack to the Southern Illinois University mascot, the Salukis.



Discover the spectacular, otherworldly rock formations at Garden of the Gods.



Giant 1,000-year-old cypress trees rise from the wetlands at the Cache River State Natural Area.

CYPRESS: DIRK VANOVER; APPLES: LORI VANOVER; VINEYARD: COREY PETERS; MAP ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT SCHILLER

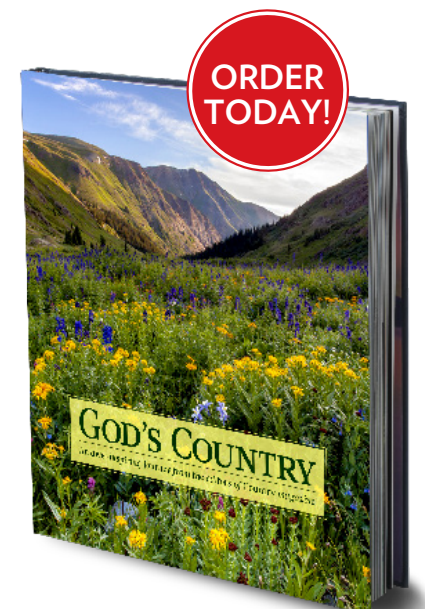
glory of nature. But please be careful and use common sense, as it is a very steep drop off the rocks.

We spent our final day at Giant City State Park in Makanda. Dirk has fond memories of family reunions here, and during our visit the park was bustling with activity.

If you wish to extend your stay in the park, several campgrounds are available. Or stay in the charming cabins near the Giant City Lodge, which was built by the CCC in 1939.

We followed directions to get to the Nature Trail that features the famous “streets” of Giant City. These magnificent rock walls look like the sides of buildings, giving the illusion of an urban cityscape in the middle of the woods. We also hiked up to see Devil’s Standtable, a towering pillar of sandstone, and looked for native wildflowers on the Trillium Trail.

As our time in southern Illinois came to an end, we felt rejuvenated. We’re already planning what to see on next year’s trip. I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of exploring the wonders of this restorative refuge. 🌿



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Flavors of the Shawnee Hills

After hiking, biking and soaking up the scenery, take a break and refuel with some of Lori’s picks for southern Illinois foods and wines.



1 Farm-Grown Fruit

We always buy fruit at Dirk’s extended family’s centennial farm, Flamm Orchards. Look for strawberry shortcakes, peach cobblers or apple dumplings at the Fruits & Cream stand. 618-893-4241, flammorchards.com In fall, we stop by Rendleman Orchards for cider doughnuts. 618-893-2771, rendlemanorchards.com

2 Fried Chicken

Giant City Lodge is famous for its hearty all-you-can-eat fried chicken dinners, served with mashed potatoes and gravy, corn, dumplings, green beans, coleslaw and biscuits. 618-457-4921, giantcitylodge.com

3 Barbecue

Stop in Murphysboro or Marion for a meal at 17th Street Barbecue. Owner and pitmaster Mike Mills has won multiple grand world championship awards for his pulled pork, ribs and beef brisket. 618-684-3722, 17thstreetbarbecue.com

4 Wine Trail

The Shawnee Hills Wine Trail has 12 wineries; many offer food and live music. Alto Vineyards (below), 618-893-4898, altovineyards.net, and Owl Creek Vineyard, 618-893-2557, owlcreekvineyard.com, are among the oldest and best winemakers.

