

# Southern West Virginia's Coal Country Full of Welcome Surprises

travel

BY VANESSA ORR

West Virginia bills itself as “wild and wonderful,” and after a weekend spent riding UTVs down muddy trails, following the many battles of the Hatfields and McCoy's and listening to pickers play deep down in the hollows, I'd have to wholeheartedly agree. But contrary to its ‘backwoods’ stereotype, it is also home to an impressive array of museums, independently owned shops and restaurants and unique historical attractions.

Take, for example, The Coal House in Williamson, WV, which is entirely made out of, well, coal. Built in 1933, the building is a standing tribute to the natural resource that supports southern West Virginia. With walls two feet thick coated in weather-proof varnish, the Coal House was able to withstand four major floods; fire, unfortunately, proved to be a tougher foe, gutting the interior of the building in 2010 but leaving the outside intact. Now completely renovated, the inside, which houses the Tug Valley Chamber of Commerce, showcases the area's coal history and the famous Hatfield McCoy feud.

Now I can hold a grudge as well as anyone, but I have to say that I'm truly impressed by these feuding families, who despite their battles in the late 1800s, have left their mark on the state to this day. One of the best ways to learn more about this historic feud is through a Hatfield and McCoy Country tour, led by filmmaker and West Virginia University Associate Professor Bill Richardson. A three-hour tour includes a visit to the place where Johnse Hatfield and Roseanna McCoy, the Romeo and Juliet of the hills, met and fell in love and the burial sites of family patriarchs Devil Anse Hatfield and Randle McCoy. What's really different about this tour is that the historical sites are simply a part of present-day West Virginia life—the remnants of Randall McCoy's home actually sit on private residential property; the graveyard where Devil Anse Hatfield is buried is still a working family cemetery that hosts funerals to this day. There is also a map for a self-driving tour of the sites, though I would highly recommend taking the tour with Bill; not only does he know all the facts, but his excitement for the state's history is contagious.

A visit to the West Virginia State Museum in Charleston, located in the Capitol Complex, provides an all-encompassing view of West Virginia's evolution, starting in primeval times and winding its way to the present. Visitors follow a meandering path through the

museum, starting in a forest hundreds of millions of years old, through frontier times to early industrialization to the present day; Discovery Rooms target the changing roles of women, the importance of coal to the area, the changing nature of transportation, and the role of arts, among other milestones. What I found really intriguing was the interactive nature of the museum; as I followed the bare footprints on the floor, to the shoeprints, to the railroad tracks leading into a mineshaft, to the company store and then the town center, I felt like I had actually traveled through time. This museum is an absolute must-see when in this part of the state.

Of course, West Virginia is also famous for its great outdoors, which now includes more than 600 miles of Hatfield McCoy trails for the ATV or UTV rider to explore. Thanks to Mike Pinkerton and his extremely friendly and knowledgeable staff ([www.trailsheaven.com](http://www.trailsheaven.com)), I got the chance to drive a UTV through the mud holes, rocky cliffs and jaw-dropping curves of the Little Coal River Trail System for an insane, adrenaline-fueled rush; and that was only following the green (or easiest) trails. The seven trails in the system travel through nine West Virginia counties, and some connect ATV-friendly towns, which allow the vehicles to be driven on the roads in order to enable riders to visit stores and restaurants along the way, no matter how muddy the riders are. And believe me; you are going to get plenty muddy.

For a little tamer trip outside, you might want to stop by Chief Logan State Park, a reclaimed coal mine of roughly 4,000 acres. Its Museum in the Park features a range of impressive artwork, and soon its latest acquisition, parts of the cabin of Valentine Hatfield, will be rebuilt



*A statue of Devil Anse Hatfield towers above the family cemetery.*



*More than 600 miles of Hatfield McCoy trails make for seriously muddy fun.*

within the Museum's walls. A quick jaunt up the hill will also enable you to meet Rascal and Mandy, two black bears who make their home in the park's Wildlife Center, along with wild boars and wildcats. And if you happen to be in the park on Thursday or Saturday evenings, make sure to attend Pickin' in the Park for a chance to hear some amazing musicians and watch locals practice flatfoot dancing for free.

A weekend really isn't long enough to take in all that southern West Virginia has to offer, but it's a great start. For more information, visit [www.wvtourism.com](http://www.wvtourism.com) or call 800-CALL-WVA. ■

**For more information, visit [www.wvtourism.com](http://www.wvtourism.com) or call 800-CALL-WVA. For more detailed travel information, contact any of the following:**

**Charleston, WV:** 304-344-5075, [www.charlestonWV.com](http://www.charlestonWV.com)

**The Coal House, Williamson, WV:** 304-235-5240, [www.tugvalleychamber.com](http://www.tugvalleychamber.com)

**Tours of Hatfield McCoy Country:** [www.hatfieldmccoycountry.com](http://www.hatfieldmccoycountry.com)

**Hatfield McCoy Country:** 304-752-6020, [www.hatfieldmccoyCVB.com](http://www.hatfieldmccoyCVB.com)

**West Virginia State Museum:** 304-558-2779, [www.wvculture.org/museum](http://www.wvculture.org/museum)

**Hatfield McCoy Trail System:** 1-800-592-2217, [www.trailsheaven.com](http://www.trailsheaven.com)

**Chief Logan State Park:** 304-792-7125, [www.chiefloganstatepark.com](http://www.chiefloganstatepark.com)