

Pristine and Free-Flowing

BUFFALO NATIONAL RIVER

Arkansas

The Buffalo is that great rarity: 150 miles of pure, wild water with not a dam in sight. Snaking past towering limestone bluffs, it is one of the nation's prettiest places for canoeing and a stellar example of why Arkansas,

with its mountains, rivers, and abundant wildlife, is called "The Natural State."

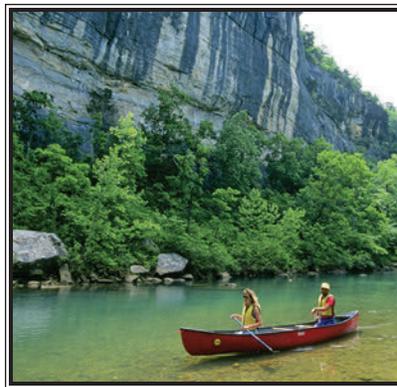
Sufficiently scenic to be singled out for protection as America's first national river back in 1972, the emerald green Buffalo starts as a trickle in the Ozarks and flows eastward before merging with the White River (see p. 396). A 95,000-acre national park stretches for 135 miles on both sides, protecting a magnificent mix of oak and hickory forests, open fields, and box canyons—a wild landscape that supports mink, beaver, bobcat, even elk and black bear.

The best way to see the Buffalo is by canoe—whether on half-day trips or leisurely ten-day explorations that take you camping down the length of the river. You can bring your own canoe or rent one from outfitters who set you in the river at any one of 20 access points and have your car waiting for you wherever you pull out. To navigate the scenic upper Buffalo, featuring the 500-foot Big Bluff, you can rent a canoe or rubber raft at the Buffalo Outdoor Center in Ponca; the center also offers log cabins and a mile-long zip-line canopy tour that lasts two to three hours. Azalea Falls Lodge offers two rental homes as well as elegant rooms in the Beauty Lodge B&B.

Along the river there's a stretch for every skill level, from the Class I and II white-water rapids of the upper Buffalo in early spring to the easy family jaunts of the middle and lower Buffalo, which can be floated year-round. The parkland on either side of the Buffalo invites other forms of exploration, especially hiking.

The Rimrock Cove Ranch offers guided horseback rides and even hayrides on trails that wind through woods and meadows up to the top of the bluffs for panoramic scenes that have changed precious little over the centuries.

WHERE: Tyler Bend visitors center near St. Joe is 110 miles northwest of Little Rock. Tel 870-439-2502; nps.gov/buff. **BUFFALO OUTDOOR CENTER:** Ponca. Tel 800-221-5514 or 870-861-5514; buffaloriver.com. *Cost:* \$62 per canoe per day; cabins from \$129; zip-line canopy tour \$89. **AZALEA FALLS LODGE:** Kingston. Tel 870-420-3941; azaleafalls.com. *Cost:* from \$135 for the B&B. **RIMROCK COVE RANCH:** Ponca. Tel 870-553-2556; rimrockcoveranch.com. *Cost:* \$35 per person per hour for horseback rides. **BEST TIMES:** spring and early summer for float trips.



The 150-mile Buffalo National River passes through a lush and scenic national park.