

Trip 20 New River Gorge

Distance 154 miles

Terrain Mostly river valleys and gorges with a small mountain run

Highlights Summersville Dam, Carnifex Ferry, Hawk's Nest State Park, Mystery Hole, New River Gorge and Bridge, Thurmond ghost town

The Route from Summersville

- 0** Depart downtown Summersville on WV 39
- 12.0** Left on WV 129
- 18.0** Right on CR 23 (Carnifex Ferry Road)
- 18.9** Arrive Carnifex Ferry Battlefield, then turn around
- 19.8** Right on WV 129
- 22.3** Arrive Summersville Dam, then turn around
- 30.8** Left on WV 39
- 44.6** Left on WV 16 at Belva
- 50.2** Left on US 60/WV 16 at Gauley Bridge
- 54.8** Left on US 60 at Chimney Corner
- 57.9** Arrive Hawk's Nest State Park, then turn around
- 61.0** Left on WV 16 South at Chimney Corner
- 69.4** Left on US 19 North
- 71.7** Right into New River Gorge Visitor's Center on CR-5
- 71.7** Right out of NRG parking lot onto CR 5
- 71.9** Right onto CR-82 (Fayette Station Road) Some portions one-way
- 78.9** Right onto US 19 South
- 89.7** Left at Glen Jean exit. Signs for Thurmond National Historic Site present at this exit
- 89.8** Left onto WV 16 North
- 90.3** Right onto CR-25 (Thurmond signs should be present)
- 96.7** Arrive Thurmond, then turn around
- 103.1** Left on WV 16/WV 61
- 106.3** Left on WV 61 at 16/61 split
- 110.7** Left on WV 41



136.5 Left on US 60/WV 41

139.1 Right onto WV 41

153.6 Arrive Summersville via WV 41

The New River Gorge is the perfect place to gain an understanding of both the old and new West Virginia. Once completely dominated by coal and

timber harvesting concerns, the Gorge is now an up-and-coming travel destination. We'll have a chance to see both sides on this loop route.

The route begins in Summersville and follows Route 39 west out of town. Route 39 is fairly typical of most roads in the area: where the valley narrows it follows a creek bed and begins to twist and sway; where the valley widens, it stretches out and flies straight. You will see the good and the bad of West Virginia along Route 39. Some communities look clean and prosperous, others as though they've been bombed. Hang a left on Route 129 to go out to the **Summersville Dam** and the battlefield at **Carnifex Ferry**. This road isn't heavily traveled. It runs over the hills and along the ridges just south of town near the Summersville Dam.

Summersville Dam holds back the waters of the Gauley River, creating a 4,000-acre lake. Route 129 passes over the top of the dam. Pull off to one side and you can gaze upon the boulder strewn back side. Near the bottom of the dam are two pipes, each about 20 feet in diameter, that allow water to pass through the dam and continue down the river. The pressure exerted is so great the water blows horizontally out of the pipes and about 30 feet downstream before landing in the riverbed. At the put-in point near the base of the dam there's a sign warning kayakers that if they hear three short blasts, they can expect a sudden rise in the water level. No kidding.

When you leave the dam, double back toward Route 39. You will have to look carefully for the hidden turn to **Carnifex Ferry Battlefield** (carnifexferrybattlefieldstatepark.com). It isn't well marked. About two miles west of the dam, Route 129 makes a sharp right. A smaller, unmarked road to the battlefield branches off to the left at the curve. (Watch for a large billboard advertising the Mountain Lake Campground—it's located along Route 129 at the curve in question.) Make the left turn along this pleasant country lane to reach the battlefield.

The battle at Carnifex Ferry was one of dozens of moves and counter moves conducted by both sides during the War Between the States. According to accounts of the battle which took place in September 1861, a contingent of about 6,000 Union soldiers swept through Summersville to re-establish a supply line broken by the rebels in earlier action. The Confederates, outmanned three to one, had time to dig in. They riddled the Union ranks with fire and suffered only 20 casualties themselves.

Despite suffering a rout, the outlook was undimmed for some Union soldiers like Rutherford B. Hayes. According to him, "[West Virginia] is the land of blackberries. We are a great grown-up armed blackberry party and

we gather untold quantities.” I’m guessing Hayes, who went on to become the nineteenth U.S. president, didn’t see much trench warfare.

Exiting the battlefield, return to WV 129 and head west to WV 39. Turn left and continue south on WV 39, passing through a dozen small villages until you reach Gauley Bridge. Make the left turn on Route 16/60 and head east. You are now following the course the ancient New River has traveled for thousands of years. Follow US 60 East at Chimney Corner where 60 and WV 16 split. This spot is marked by the **Country Store Craft Shop and Gallery**, home to Appalachian crafts including jewelry and crafts made from coal. I don’t care much for today’s modern tourist traps. Places like Pigeon Forge, Tennessee are just too crowded and overdone for me. However, I do favor those small, independent attractions that catch the eye along the road. Case in point is the **Mystery Hole** (mysteryhole.com), located along US 60 a couple of miles up the road from Chimney Corner. I’m more likely to patronize a place like this to chat with the folks who run and reward their entrepreneurial spirit as I am to “explore the mystery.”

Follow Route 60 east from the Hole to **Hawk’s Nest State Park**. You’ll enjoy this section of road as you climb out of the gorge. Rising higher you can see the gorge below and a thin glittering ribbon that is the New River. The best views are from the park. Hawk’s Nest has two sections, upper and lower. The upper portion of the park overlooks the New River Gorge at a



At Mystery Hole, near Hawks Nest State Park, the only mystery is what happens to your money.



Riders Alan McCormick and Tom Houser plot their next move at the bottom of the New River Gorge.

point where it forms a lake. Down by the lake, there are the usual water diversions such as row boats and paddle boats. You can also arrange a pontoon boat ride upriver to the New River Gorge Bridge. To navigate the rough terrain between the lake and the lodge above, there is an aerial tramway which is an attraction in itself. At the lodge, ask for a room with a view. There's no extra charge.

The lower area features a hilltop museum constructed by the **Civilian Conservation Corps** (cccalumni.org) in the early '30s. What looks like a chalet is perched on top of the hill over the gorge. Massive stonework and tremendous wooden beams inside display the craftsmanship of the CCC workers who assembled it. The chalet is filled with a collection of Indian, pioneer, and Civil War artifacts. If you feel in the mood for a hike there are trails which lead to views of the gorge and range from 100 yards to about two miles.

When you leave the park, your best bet for a better ride is to simply retrace your steps to the café at Chimney Corner and hang a left, continuing to follow WV 16 and the river into Fayetteville. In Fayetteville, they still talk about "Five Dollar Frank," a name Frank Thomas earned for the five-dollar airplane rides he offered over the New River Gorge. I once took a ride with Frank over the gorge, and after that experience, I decided motorcycling was

pretty safe by comparison. Sadly, Five Dollar Frank no longer flies over the gorge in his battered old Cessna; he's taken on a new set of wings. Frank offered a rare view of the gorge, but there is still a way to see the gorge and the New River Bridge from a vantage point that few folks know about.

When Route 16 intersects US 19, turn left and head over the New River Bridge to the **New River Gorge National River Visitor Center** (nps.gov/neri) on the right.

The New River Gorge Bridge is the world's largest steel arch bridge, completed in 1977 at a cost of nearly \$37 million. It is the highest bridge in the East, standing 876 feet tall. Before the bridge was completed, the trip from one side of the gorge to the other took nearly an hour; now it takes about 30 seconds. You have to see it to believe it—it is impressive. In fact, if you've seen the television commercial where Chevrolet drops a truck over a bridge on a bungee cord, then you've seen it. On the third Saturday in October, the bridge is closed to traffic and a festival is held on the bridge complete with parachutists, bungee jumping (no, no, after you, I insist), and rappelling.

If you carry a National Parks passport, don't forget to get yours stamped at the visitor center. There are several trails from the visitor center, including one which will take you down to the river for great photo opportunities. Just remember, every step you walk down, you have to walk back up!



At Grandview, in the New River Gorge National Park, the view is as good as advertised on a clear day,



Typical afternoon in downtown Thurmond, West Virginia. “Dear, it says right there, ‘Reservations required.’”

The other popular diversion here is river running. The New River Gorge is widely recognized as one of the best white water rides anywhere. In many areas, the river is about a mile wide, but it squeezes down to a few hundred feet through the gorge and the result is a ride that promises to be bumpier than even Frank’s ten-minute flying tour. In season, the traffic down the river is nearly bumper to bumper. There are a dozen or more companies that organize raft trips on the New. Two of the more established companies are **Class VI River Runners** (800classvi.com) and **Wildwater Expeditions Unlimited** (1wildwater.com).

Out of the parking lot of the visitor center, hang a right and continue down CR 5 for just a couple of tenths, then make the right turn onto CR-82 also labeled in some parts as Fayette Station Road. Route 82 makes some crazy twists and turns as it travels underneath the bridge and picks its way carefully down the gorge to the very bottom. Here you can hop off the bike and take some great pictures of the bridge from your new vantage point. This is the former route of US 19 which now whizzes by overhead. Can you imagine what travel must have been like when this was a major route? Route 82 is a one-way route at this point, so continue across the bridge at the bottom and up the other side. This returns you to the west side of US 19 just a few tenths up the road from Route 16 where you appeared earlier. Head south on US 19

then turn left at Glen Jean, following signs for the Thurmond National Historic Site. You'll make a quick left onto WV 16 heading north, then you'll see another sign at CR-25. Follow CR-25 all the way to the train depot in Thurmond. You'll cross an open grate bridge across the New River to reach it. The bridge looks dicey for bikes, but just maintain a slow, steady speed across and you'll be fine. My Wing didn't complain, and I didn't look down. Piece of cake.

The New River Gorge is home to dozens of towns that once flourished during the coal boom of the early 20th century. The richest of them was **Thurmond**. Mines from this area generated the greatest revenue and Thurmond's banks held the largest deposits in the state. When the coal played out, so did Thurmond. The National Park Service restored the train depot and is working to preserve some of the buildings that remain along the tracks. I think you'll enjoy time spent here. It's an interesting exercise to walk along the row of abandoned buildings and imagine what life was like here during the heady days of the Roaring Twenties.

There are dozens of other sites scattered throughout the gorge though none are preserved like Thurmond. Riding buddies of mine have told me harrowing tales of seeking out these places on their street bikes. I think a dual-purpose bike would be well-suited to an adventure like that, but I wouldn't even think about it on the Wing.

From Thurmond, head back on CR-25 and turn left on Route 16. Follow this down to Mount Hope and make the left on WV 61, then make a left on Route 41 and follow it north all the way to Summersville. This route also crosses the gorge many miles upstream from the main bridge. It plunges down one side of the gorge, crossing the river on a dilapidated steel bridge near the river, then dutifully climbs the other side of the ridge. The scenery is spectacular on both sides and is a pleasant ride to end the day.