



Located deep in the woods, this 19th-century Charit Creek cabin features weathered hewn logs and Appalachian-style dovetail corners.

Historic Host

Tennessee log cabins offer hikers rustic accommodations believed to be the National Park Service's oldest.

IF YOU'RE LOOKING to get away from it all, you can't do much better than Charit Creek Lodge. This unassuming assembly of restored log cabins, located deep in the heart of the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area in east Tennessee, lacks electricity, is accessible only by foot or on horseback and has served many a weary hiker as a welcome refuge at the end of the trail. Each year, hundreds of guests enjoy the natural beauty, home-style cooking and pioneer-era lodgings, never suspecting their humble shelter's unheralded claim to fame.

When hunter Jonathan Blevins built the first cabin in the area in 1817, he added a blacksmith shop and a barn. Over the years, the original cabin expanded with a number of additions.

Despite its remote location, the

homestead witnessed several noteworthy events. During the Civil War, fighting broke out near the property, and two young boys hid out there, underneath a feather mattress, to evade capture. Unfortunately, they suffocated and were buried a short distance from the lodge. Later in the 1800s, William Riley Hatfield, of the infamous Hatfield-McCoy feud, moved in to escape tensions between the hostile families. He was also interred on the property, and the hill that stands behind Charit Creek Lodge was christened Hatfield Ridge in his memory.

In the mid-1900s, entrepreneur Joe Simpson bought the property, added to its three existing structures two cabins that he moved from nearby homesteads and established a commercial lodge for the many hunters who came in search

of the area's coveted wild boar. The National Park Service took over the property when it established the park in the early 1970s, and for nearly 20 years, the buildings sat abandoned, slowly falling into disrepair.

Fortunately, all was not lost. In 1987, the buildings were restored and converted into a youth hostel, which later became the hike-in lodge recent visitors are familiar with. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Charit Creek Lodge operated in conjunction with LeConte Lodge, another Tennessee hike-in lodge, under the management of Tim and Lisa Line. This winter, the couple decided against renewing their concessions contract with the National Park Service.

Again, the lodge's future seemed to be in jeopardy. Then a local business-



man decided he just couldn't let the property fall out of service. Larry McMillan, owner of a local horseback-riding company, made a bid to the park and was awarded a three-year provisional contract.

It wasn't until he settled up with his insurance agent, however, that he learned the true value of what he had just acquired. "The underwriter for the insurance policy did

some digging and called us and asked, 'Do you realize what you have here?'" says McMillan. "These are the oldest buildings still being utilized for lodging in the whole United States National Park Service." Since this discovery, the visitors' center and several park rangers have been proudly informing guests about the lodge's notable history.

Previous visitors to the lodge can expect the same level of Southern hospitality under the new management, but McMillan plans to expand the menu to feature more authentic pioneer cuisine. Without electricity, the kitchen operates with a simple propane-powered stove and refrigerator, so the hosts also offer cowboy-style Dutch-oven meals and other campfire cooking, in addition to the standard fare of country meats, vegetables and desserts.

Getting to the lodge requires a two-hour drive from Knoxville and then a pleasant hike along one of the many trails that arrive at the lodge. Visitors interested in unusual geologic formations will especially enjoy the easy 1.8-mile section of the Twin Arches Trail, which brings hikers from the trailhead to a pair of massive natural arches before depositing them at the lodge.

Nightly rates at Charit Creek Lodge range from \$18 per person for basic indoor camping to \$72 for full-service accommodations. For info, call 931-879-2776 or visit charitcreeklodge.com.

Janet L. Hopson photos

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