



RiverBender Blog: An Arkansas Adventure for My Fourth-Grade Self

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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In fourth grade, I did a project on Hot Springs National Park in Arkansas. And two days ago, I fulfilled a dream I've had since then: to visit.

When I broached the idea of finally going to Hot Springs, my friends were game. None of us had ever been to Arkansas before, and everyone loves a road trip. Why not? We blared “America” by Simon and Garfunkel and headed off for a nature-filled weekend!

But before we left home, we had a few things we needed to take care of. I got an oil change and headed out to Walmart to pick up snacks. My friend announced he was bringing his guitar, which prompted a game of Jenga in the trunk to make sure there was plenty of room for bags and musical instruments. We set out at 4 p.m. on Friday afternoon, steadfast and eager despite the rainy forecast, armed with iced coffee and a dream.

The seven-hour drive quickly turned less exciting and more exhausting. In a total brain fog moment, I had almost put diesel fuel in my car (yikes!), so I spent most of the drive in a state of barely-controlled terror that the engine would explode due to my near miss. Our playlist, which was inexplicably filled with super depressing music, played on as the rain began somewhere around Little Rock. There’s nothing quite as stressful as driving through a major American city at 10 p.m., in pouring rain, with Jeff Buckley crooning in the background.

The next day was off to a better start. We woke up bright and early and headed to the park, where we immediately found a hot spring steaming outside the visitor’s center. Each of us took turns dipping our hands in the water, crystal clear and so hot it burned.

Due to a map misreading mishap, the first stretch of our hike was the most strenuous. We huffed and puffed our way up a hill over treacherous terrain, barely noticing as the clouds cleared and broke into a clear blue sky with steam rising in the bare winter trees. Our first stop overlooked the town and the mountain, with fog streaking through the greenery. It was gorgeous.

The rest of the hike was on more level ground, thankfully. We walked a solid six miles through the wilderness. Since it was the park’s slow season, we only saw a few other hikers, which gave the impression that we were totally alone in nature. We ran our hands through bubbling streams, marveled at bright red berries, scrubbed the fuzzy moss on the rock formations.

When we finally descended from the mountain, we discovered another joy of Hot Springs National Park: the water fountains. We watched as other tourists and Hot Springs natives filled dozens of jugs with water from the fountains. Because of scientific reasons I don’t completely understand, the water is safe to drink, and people say it’s delicious and even has healing properties.

Good enough for me. Bottoms up! My friends and I filled our water bottles and cheers'ed. And you know what? It sure did taste like nature. We would later learn that we were drinking rainwater that had been in the earth for over 4,000 years. I'm not a science person, but even I can acknowledge that this is incredibly cool.

We only had one day to spend at the park, and we definitely made the most of it. Returning to our AirBnB cabin that night, we were all delightfully worn out and in good moods. We ended our Arkansas trip with a bad rom-com and leftover sandwiches from our picnic.

The drive home was equally stressful as the drive there, but now we had the energy of the hot springs to keep us going. We've already started making plans to visit more national parks in the coming months, whenever we're able to go. Life is all about finding adventures, right? My little fourth-grade self is thrilled.

