

5 things you didn't know you could do at Georgia parks

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Georgia state parks are well known for affordable camping, renting paddle boats, maybe even a minigolf course or two, but there's more to Georgia parks than meets the eye.

Whether it's rolling in the deep of a swamp or frolicking at a splash pad, these are some atypical offerings at some of Georgia's state parks.

1. Climb a waterfall

Amicalola Falls State Park and Lodge, Dawsonville

Who would expect such dramatic scenery plunked down in the middle of North Georgia, much less the chance to hike beside it? At 729 feet, Amicalola Falls is the tallest cascading waterfall in the Southeast. Fit and daring visitors can choose to climb alongside it via 600 steps of staircase trail. Overlooks have excellent views and some benches offer rest at strategic points along the way. A point of pride is to be able to spot the "moonshine truck" that tumbled down the mountain during the Prohibition Era. And at the top is another unusual state park touch: a five-mile hike leading to the Len Foote Hike Inn, Georgia's only backcountry lodge.



2. Frolic at a splash pad.

Gordonia-Alatamaha State Park, Reidsville

Waterpark fun at a state park? That's what splash pads are for, and Gordonia-Alatamaha State Park is one of a few parks in Georgia that offers one. It's a great spot for down home family fun, too, with picnic tables, pedal boat rentals and fishing docks. Kids, keep a lookout for beaver dams! When

they're not splashing around, parents might want to duck over to the park's golf course.

3. Stay overnight at an island mansion.



Reynolds Mountain at Sapelo Island, McIntosh County

Sapelo Island is part of Georgia's famed Colonial Coast, replete with coastal wildlife and complex beach and dune systems. The state park offers historic and wildlife guided tours of the islands, which visitors reach via a 30-minute ferry ride -- but that's not even the most unusual highlight of this park. That would be the historic Reynolds Mansion, which features marble sculptures, an ornately decorated Circus Room, murals by Athos Menaboni, a bowling

lane, billiards and library. And groups of 16-29 people can stay on the island in the mansion for \$175-\$225 per night depending on the season, two-night minimum. The mansion only allows groups to stay, not individuals or couples.

4. Kayak by the light of the full moon.

George L. Smith State Park, Twin City



Like many Georgia state parks, George L. Smith rents canoes, kayaks and even aquacycles for those wanting to enjoy the cypress-filled water of its mill pond (and peer at its refurbished saw mill, covered bridge and plentiful waterfowl). But this park takes the idea one step further. A few times each year George L. Smith Park staff invites paddlers to enjoy the sights by moonlight —full moon paddles, to be specific.

The dates for 2016 include Friday, September 16; Friday, October 14, and Saturday, November 12; patrons can rent equipment or bring their own.

5. Tour a swamp via guided pontoon boat

Stephen C. Foster State Park, Fargo

Way, way out in the wild, that's where you'll find Stephen C. Foster State Park. It's 18 miles from Fargo and 50 miles from a major grocery store, located within a national wildlife refuge. It's a primary entrance to the legendary Okefenokee Swamp — one of Georgia's seven natural wonders. And while paddlers and photographers who venture this far out can enjoy seeing the swamp and wild animals like alligators, turtles, herons and wood storks from their own crafts, it's especially cool to take in the 402,000-acre refuge by guided pontoon tours that the park offers. Same-day reservations are recommended, and sunset tours are an option. Officials estimate that about 12,000 of the nation's largest reptile, the American Alligator, live within the refuge, so keep an eye out and a camera ready!