

GAME&FISH

Best Vacation Lodges in Georgia

By Ken Cook
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Great fishing and amazing views are just part of the benefits of state parks. They also make great places for families to make life-long memories. Photo Courtesy of Georgia DNR

State parks are usually located close to excellent hunting and fishing, but are still often overlooked as potential base camps. In fact, those who haven't visited a state park recently might be pleasantly surprised by the amenities.

State parks are no longer just wooded areas to pitch a tent or park a travel trailer. Many offer well-equipped cottages, hotel-style lodging, full-service restaurants and other amenities sportsmen don't always find available on overnight and extended-stay outdoor excursions within the state, though, of course, not every state park is considered a resort with all of the amenities.

However, Georgia state parks are really good at getting folks close to both freshwater and saltwater fishing, as well as popular game species; even the parks with fewer options are good for being fairly close to good hunting and fishing. In fact, Georgia measures more than 59,000 square miles, and contains 103 wildlife management areas, 61 state parks, 32 reservoir lakes, 18 rivers and a deer herd that is estimated to be north of 1 million whitetails, in addition to the countless other game and fish species available throughout the state.



The Peach State contains numerous state parks and resorts that provide access to fishing and camping. Some even allow limited hunting, and all are close to other wild areas allowing hunters and anglers to use these public areas as base camps.

UNICOI STATE PARK AND LODGE

Situated up near Helen, Unicoi State Park sits on the 44-acre Smith Lake — often called Unicoi Lake — which provides fishing for a variety of species, including bass, bream and catfish, in the north Georgia mountains. Even better, Smith Creek flows into the lake, providing opportunities for rainbow, brook and brown trout, and the area offers access to the Chattahoochee River headwaters, where numerous fishing opportunities, both guided and unguided, are available.

The lake contains numerous fishing docks that provide access, and paddleboats, kayaks and canoes are available for rent. Visitors can even attend a guided kayak fishing trip that explains kayak safety, needed gear and how to fish from a kayak. There is also basic fly-fishing instruction available, using provided Orvis equipment, for those interested in learning a new skill, and local guides offer guided trout trips.

Those with boats can travel the lake with a trolling motor as well, but there is no ramp; folks will have to pull the boat down to the water. The store even sells terminal tackle and bait, including live bait. In fact, live bait is an excellent idea, as many anglers claim artificials are less than ideal on the small water. The store also provides a variety of camping gear and food, as well as firewood, for sitting around relaxing after the day is done. However, the store does not sell fishing licenses, so be sure to pick one up beforehand.



The Georgia mountains offer an experience second to none. Photo Courtesy of Georgia DNR

Those not interested in fishing can go hiking or mountain biking, visit the Heritage and Wildlife Center, or even soar down a zipline. The park even has two restaurants onsite — the Unicoi Restaurant and the Smith Creek Tavern. In the Unicoi, visitors can order or hit the buffet, which uses locally produced ingredients where it can, while the tavern provides a variety of dishes, as well as specialty drinks and craft beers for enjoying the evening. Folks can even finish the meal with Georgia Mountain Coffee and a wide selection of desserts.

For hunters in the group, Unicoi is near Buck Shoals and Chattahoochee wildlife management areas, as well as Dukes Creek-Smithgall Woods State Park. All three provide hunting for a variety of both big and small game. Buck Shoals even provides Hunt & Learn sessions for children with mentors. Buck Shoals is quota only, while Chattahoochee is open for all seasons, and even provides opportunities for bear. Dukes only provides archery hunting, and all three can change regulations, so be sure to call or check the regulation book before heading out.

1788 Highway 356 – Helen, GA 30545 – 706-878-3982. unicoilodge.com

Main Lodge: 100 rooms; starting at \$100/night.

Cabins: 29 starting at \$130/night, some are dog friendly.

Improved Campground Units: \$36/night to \$55/night, with power and water; some have sewer.

Squirrels Nest: Platform camping up to four people, \$15/night.

Primitive Tent Sites: \$25/night.

Onsite Amenities: Fishing, camping, restaurants, zipline, archery and air gun range, store, fishing docks, boat rentals.

Nearby Amenities: Helen is a short distance away providing dining, history, culture, vineyards and more.

LITTLE OCMULGEE STATE PARK & LODGE

South and east of Macon sits the Little Ocmulgee State Park & Lodge in Helena, where live oaks, sandhills and pine trees abound. The park adjoins Little Ocmulgee Lake, which provides 224 acres of water for anglers to pursue largemouth bass, crappie, bream and catfish. While the lake is not considered a prime fishing location, it does have fish that can be caught, if one knows how to work around the abundant grass and weeds that grow throughout the lake; consider using frogs and weedless plastics for best results.

For hunters, both Horse Creek and Flat Tub WMAs are fairly close, providing a variety of hunting options. Horse Creek is open for archery, muzzleloader and firearm deer, as well as turkey and small game. It has a lot of water, even providing alligator hunting opportunities for those with permits, and this is the home of Montgomery Lake, where the world-record bass — 22 pounds, 4 ounces — was caught by George Perry in 1932.



Photo Courtesy of Georgia DNR

Flat Tub WMA also offers numerous opportunities for deer, turkey and small game, and the 6,669-acre area actually receives less pressure than many WMAs in the state. Flat Tub is open for hunters, with only sign-in required. Unfortunately, no ATVs are allowed, so be sure to plan how to get game out of the woods.

The park has a variety of accommodation options, from hotel-style rooms with Wi-Fi to lakeside cottages and, of course, RV and tent camping. It also has a full-service restaurant — Fairway Grill — which serves hearty Southern meals, and it has a private dining area that accommodates up to 28 people. The park even has an 18-hole golf course, with a pro shop, as well as a swimming pool and a beach for cooling off in the water. Visitors can bring boats or rent canoes for fishing or just paddling around, take the kids to the playground or hike the 2.6-mile trail.

Those looking for even more fishing opportunities can launch a boat into the Ocmulgee River off US 280 East, about 14 miles from the park, or near Abbeville on US 280 West, about 26 miles from the park. The Ocmulgee is considered an excellent fishery, containing sunfish, bluegill, bass, crappie and catfish.

80 Live Oak Trail, – Helena, GA 31037 – 877-591-5572

littleocmulgeelodge.com

Main Lodge: 60 rooms ranging from \$69/night to \$157/night, depending on day and season.

Cottages: 10 cottages ranging from \$129/night to \$197/night, depending on day and season.

Campground Units: 54 campsites, \$35/night.

Onsite Amenities: Tennis courts, swimming pool, beach, golf, restaurant, hiking, volleyball court, playground, canoe rentals.

Nearby Amenities: McRae dining, Southwest Excursion Train, Civil War museum, Sweetwater Horse Event Park

Creek off US 441.