

10 grand adventures to boost adrenaline

Where to go to ride horses, surf the Pacific, fish for trout, cycle long distances

By Blake Guthrie | For the AJC

The heat can bring out the summer doldrums in almost anyone, even those who constantly crave outdoor adventure. Shake it off by getting out there anyway to off-the-beaten-path spots far from the crowds to discover new adventures. Here are some ideas to help quench that late-summer wanderlust, from high alpine hiking in the Canadian Rockies to cave diving in the Florida Panhandle, and other activities in destinations that might be off your radar.



Scuba divers come from all over the world to explore Vortex Spring in the Florida Panhandle. COURTESY OF VY NGUYEN FILMS

Cave diving

Vortex Spring in the heart of the Florida Panhandle looks like a nice swimming hole on a creek with slides, docks and diving boards, but underneath the surface another world beckons scuba divers. The crystal clear spring with constantly flowing, year-round 68-degree water is a prime freshwater dive spot because of a large underwater cavern. Experienced cave divers come from around the globe to explore the depths. The mouth of the cave sits at the basin of the spring 58 feet below the surface and continues for a hundred yards to 115 feet below. Divers must be certified or part of an on-site certification course to tour the cavern.

■ \$25 daily dive pass; \$199 and up, scuba training instruction. 1517 Vortex Spring Road, Ponce De Leon, Florida. 850-836-4979, vortexspring.com.

Rappelling and rock climbing

The Little River flows atop the Lookout Mountain Plateau in northeast Alabama carving out the Little River Canyon, a national preserve rife with outdoor adventure opportunities, especially climbing and rappelling. According to the National Park Service's website for the preserve, the canyon "offers some of the most difficult and sought-after climbing routes in the South" on its sandstone cliffs. Beginner routes are available, too. No matter your skill level, Travel Adventure Sports, an outfitter and guide service located a mile from the preserve, can show you the ropes. They offer daily rappelling and climbing outings, multiday adventures and overnight accommodations at two cabins. Certification and wilderness survival classes are also available.

■ \$62 and up, hourly excursions; \$258 and up, three-day adventures; \$155 and up cabins. 13102 AL-176, Fort Payne, Alabama. 256-997-9577, trueadventuresports.com.

All-terrain accessibility

In 2022 the Georgia Department of Natural Resources introduced specialized all-terrain wheelchairs to 11 state park sites as part of its Outdoors Beyond Barriers initiative. This summer, eight more sites received Action Trackchairs through a partnership with the Aimee Copeland Foundation's All Terrain Georgia in an effort to make the outdoors more accessible to people with physical limitations and mobility issues. The chairs are free to use but require advance reservations. Reserve one at Richard B. Russell State Park near Elberton, which has long been a Georgia state park noteworthy for its accessibility. Situated on a secluded peninsula surrounded by an uncrowded 26,650-acre lake, the park has six miles of compacted gravel and rubberized trails and four ADA-compliant docks, two of them at fully accessible cottages and one at a campground with ADA sites.

■ \$5 per vehicle entrance fee. 2650 Russell State Park Drive, Elberton. 706-213-2045, gastateparks.org.

Horseback riding

Located in an isolated portion of central Montana where the Judith River flows out of the Little Belt Mountains, Circle Bar Ranch — founded in 1920 — is a true dude ranch. Late summer is the best time to visit this high country locale for horseback riding and other outdoor exploits. Daily rides traverse mountain terrain, open fields, a national forest and across the river with guides who will match your skill level to the right horse and trail. The Full American Plan includes all rides, overnight lodging in TV-free rooms, three meals a day (no alcohol but BYOB is permitted) and other ranch activities such as UTV tours, sporting clays and archery.

■ \$350 and up per person per night, Full American Plan. 206 Porcupine Ridge Road, Hobson, Montana. 406-272-3403, circlebarranch.com.

BELOW: Late summer is the prime time to visit Circle Bar Ranch for horseback riding treks in central Montana.

COURTESY OF SCOTT BAXTER



SUMMER TRAVEL



Georgia-based Songs in the Sails Yacht Charters specializes in luxury sailboat cruises aboard catamarans in the British Virgin Islands. COURTESY OF SONGS IN THE SAILS YACHT CHARTERS

Sail, surf, cycle, hike, kayak your blues away

Sailing
Songs in the Sails Yacht Charters, a Georgia-based company, offers all-inclusive sailing excursions aboard luxury catamarans in the British Virgin Islands, touted as the sailing capital of the Caribbean. Two of their crewed boats – the 55-foot Mystic and the 51-foot Gambit – will let guests assist with sailing duties when wind conditions allow, but major rigging is done by the crew. Excursion length can be tailored, but the most common bookings are seven-night outings to well-known spots in the BVI, exploring secluded coves and remote cays along the way and anchoring on the water each night. The catamarans can sleep up to eight people in four cabins. Included are all onboard meals, snacks, drinks (including alcohol) and water sports gear including snorkels and paddleboards. Land-based meals, drinks and activities are on your own. ■ \$3,375 and up per person, seven-night bookings. 706-901-7525, songsinthesails.com.



The trails at Banff Sunshine Meadows in the Canadian Rockies allow only foot traffic in a pristine high alpine environment. COURTESY OF BANFF SUNSHINE MEADOWS

High alpine hiking
Some of the more scenic summertime alpine hiking in North America can be found at Sunshine Meadows atop Banff Sunshine Village ski resort in the Canadian Rockies. A 22-minute gondola ride carries visitors up to the 7,200-foot elevation village portion of the resort, site of Sunshine Mountain Lodge (\$355 and up, sunshinemountainlodge.com), the only lodging available. Take another chairlift even higher to the 8,000-foot-plus meadows featuring more than six miles of trails rated easy to moderate. The well-maintained trails allow only hikers so you won't have to worry about encountering mountain bikers, ATVs or horseback riders. At this altitude the wildflowers are still in bloom deep into the Canadian summer and wildlife spotting opportunities abound. Trails skirt three pristine alpine lakes, adding to the stunning mountain scenery. ■ \$68 gondola/chairlift access. 1 Sunshine Access Road, Banff, Alberta. 403-705-4000, banffsunshinemeadows.com.

Trout fishing
Fannin County in North Georgia boasts of being the trout capital of Georgia owing to its 100 miles of trout streams and the number of guide services available in and around the town of Blue Ridge. The Toccoa River serves as the heart of the action for anglers. Many feeder streams and creeks are also ideal casting spots. Best to book with a local guide such as North Georgia Trout Fishing (706-851-4001, blueridgetrout-fishing.com) or Hulsey Fly Fishing (706-838-4252, hulseyflyfishing.com) because they provide access to trophy trout streams on private property as well as public waters. Noontootla Creek Farms offers guided fly-fishing tours on its private stretch of a famed trout stream as well as accommodations in a four-bedroom farmhouse (\$275 a night). ■ \$375 and up, guided fly fishing trips. Noontootla Creek Farms, 3668 Newport Road, Blue Ridge. 706-838-0585, ncfga.net.

Surfing
Summer is the sleepy time of year in Sayulita on Mexico's Riviera Nayarit due to heat and the rainy season, but surfers come anyway to this renowned surf village for the consistent, year-round breaks. Less than an hour north of Puerto Vallarta's big resorts (and international airport), the vibe in Sayulita is more laid-back and bohemian. Many local companies offer lessons and multiday camps, including Variant Surf Company. The three-night camp package includes lessons, gear, transportation to and from the airport and surf locations, and overnight accommodations in a private room within walking distance to the beach and the center of town. ■ \$700 and up per person, three-night packages. Calle 24 De Febrero #12, Sayulita, Nayarit. +52 322 208 0634, variantsurfco.com.



Cyclists come to pedal the scenic New River Trail in southwest Virginia, a 57-mile linear state park that parallels one of the world's oldest rivers. COURTESY OF LISA BAYNES

Distance cycling
At first glance, the abandoned mill village of historic Foster Falls on the New River in rural southwest Virginia seems an unlikely destination for distance cyclists, but they come here to pedal along one of the country's premier rail-to-trail paths. Foster Falls serves as a nexus point for New River Trail State Park, a linear park running for 57 miles through a lush Appalachian valley alongside one of the world's oldest rivers. Cyclists rave about the scenery and tranquil nature of the ride on a wide, hard-surface trail undisturbed by traffic. The 10-room Inn at Foster Falls (\$170 and up, stayin-fosterfalls.com) is the only lodging located directly on the trail. There are a handful of tent-only campgrounds along the route, including one with sites on the riverbank at Foster Falls across from the Boat and Bike Livery, a rental shop. ■ \$7 parking. 116 Orphanage Drive, Max Meadows, Virginia. 276-699-6778, dcr.virginia.gov.

Night kayaking
Get away from the crowds on Florida's Space Coast by hopping into a kayak after sunset to explore the bioluminescent lagoons on the Banana River, Indian River and Sykes Creek. This phenomenon occurs between June and September when microscopic organisms in the water glow when activated – a chemical reaction called bioluminescence. Every stroke of the paddle or swiftly moving school of fish creates a brief illumination, like fireworks going off in the water without a bang. Fin Expeditions has guided evening kayak tours all season long around Merritt Island where the luminosity is strongest. August is generally considered one of the best times to experience bioluminescence in these waters. ■ \$69 and up, bioluminescent kayak tours. 599 Ramp Road, Cocoa Beach, Florida. 321-698-7233, finexpeditions.com.



Sayulita on Mexico's Riviera Nayarit beckons surfers year-round with its consistent, strong breaks. COURTESY OF DANIEL STOYCHEV PHOTOGRAPHY