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Cool off this summer by paddling the water trail at Finger Lakes State Park, which also has paths for hikers, bikers, and motocross enthusiasts.

BY JACKIE TUCKER

The paddle made a small splash as I dipped it into the water and pushed off from the shore of Peabody Lake. For a park that is best known for its ATV (all-terrain vehicle) and motocross tracks, the lake was a lot quieter than I expected. The only sounds were birds chirping and the water lapping softly against the side of my kayak. The thick brush and tree lines along the edge of the narrow lake created a feeling of safety, the illusion that we were truly somewhere away from it all.



Above: Finger Lakes State Park is famous for its ATV and motocross track, which has mounds up to 30 feet high.

In Title: The new 4.5-mile water trail is located on Peabody Lake at the park.

Below: The park's new pump track features a number of humps or "pumps" to increase cyclists' speed so they can take on the banked curves at each end. Missouri State Parks photos

Finger Lakes State Park, a 1,128-acre park just north of Columbia, Mo., got its name after a coal strip-mining operation donated the land to the state. The mining pits were dammed and filled with clear water, leaving almost a dozen slender, finger-shaped lakes that are now used for fishing, swimming, boating and, most recently to my great pleasure, kayaking, and canoeing.

PADDLING ON PEABODY LAKE

Last June, a 4.5-mile water trail was created on Peabody Lake (the largest in the park) that invites visitors to enjoy the fun, scenery, exercise, and adventure of paddling its peaceful waters. Surrounded by leafy trees and hills teeming with nature, the trail is divided into two loops marked with red and blue buoys, as well as a .40-mile trail marked with white buoys that connects them.

Paddlers can do one loop or the entire route as they explore the narrow waterways and hope for a sighting of beavers, otters, birds, and all manner of wildlife.

"There's no current on the trail, and it's out of the wind. So, it's an easy route for beginners," says Park Superintendent Debbie Newby. "But it is definitely still enjoyable enough for seasoned paddlers," she adds.

The water trail is a great way to experience an area of the park you may not have seen before, but there are also many benefits to paddling. It is great exercise. Depending on how hard you paddle, you could burn more than 300 calories in just one hour of kayaking. The constant motion is an ideal way to get



your heart pumping, as well as build lean muscle.

There are mental benefits as well. Exercise is a great way to decrease stress, and there is something about the water and being close to nature that adds a meditative aspect to paddling. Whether you're searching for peace and tranquility or the thrill of adventure, the water trail at Finger Lakes State Park offers something to suit your needs.

Kayak rentals are \$15 for a two-hour minimum, or \$30 for an all-day rental. Canoes also are available at \$10 for a two-hour minimum or \$25 for the entire day.

In addition to rentals, the park offers Learn 2 Paddle, a free kayaking instruction program, on eight Saturdays at several state parks. And on Sept. 12, Finger Lakes State Park will hold the Adventure Challenge, a 5K paddle plus a 5K run.

FUN ON LAND AND WATER

The thing Finger Lakes State Park is probably best known for is its ATV and motocross track. A 5.25-mile designated trail takes riders of all skill levels for an exciting ride through a wooded landscape with steep mounds, measuring 20 to 30 feet high. Motocross enthusiasts come from all over the country to experience the thrill of riding this trail.

For hikers and mountain bikers, the 2.75-mile long Kelley Branch Mountain Bike Trail loops from the picnic area to the park's southernmost point. Along the trail, visitors cross Kelley Branch Creek, pass by a picturesque waterfall, and discover the remains of an old mining bridge left from the park's days as a coal mining operation.

A new treat for cyclists is the park's two new bicycle tracks. The pump track is a banked oval ring with tight curves and humps along the track to help the cyclist go faster. And the 12-part skills course is designed to help mountain bikers gain control over rocky conditions.

Swimming areas, fishing spots, and open water for boating can be found on all of the lakes, and you'll see park visitors enjoying the water. They come for a day in the sun, but by evening most people find themselves drawn to the shaded and spacious campground. The park offers 19 basic and 16 electric campsites—available by reservation—along with a dump station, showers, and water.

A NEW WAY TO EXPERIENCE MISSOURI STATE PARKS

The water trail at Finger Lakes State Park is one of several in the various state parks around Missouri. The state's very first water trail was created several years ago for powerboats at Lake of the Ozarks State Park. It is a 9.75-mile self-guided trail marked by buoys. Last spring, Stockton State Park—known for its fishing and plentiful supply of bass, crappie, walleye, catfish, and bluegill—opened a 6.65-mile water trail that curves along the shoreline of Stockton Lake.

Kayaks or canoes are available for rent at 17 state parks throughout Missouri. Kayaking is the second fastest-growing outdoor activity in the country, according to Bill Bryan, Missouri State Parks director, and the state is making sure visitors can experience Missouri State Parks in this new and exciting way.

Jackie Tucker is a contributor from St. Louis, Mo.

Creative Columbia

After you cool off at Finger Lakes State Park, enjoy the nearby city of Columbia, Mo. Whether you're looking to immerse yourself in culture and the arts, enjoy a delicious meal, or tour the University of Missouri campus (pictured), Columbia offers plenty of options.

Explore the 50 "not-so-square" blocks of The District and discover boutiques and restaurants that exude the creative and the eclectic. At Artlandish Gallery on Walnut Street, you'll find strange and wondrous handmade art and jewelry. Then head over to Sycamore for seasonal American cuisine that features fresh local ingredients.

There are plenty of places to hear all genres of music. On July 10, three finalists from American Idol will join the Missouri Symphony Orchestra for a performance at the Missouri Theatre.

— Jackie Tucker



Missouri Tourism photo

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