



BY ABBY LAUB,  
PHOTOS BY J.A. LAUB PHOTOGRAPHY

# CAPTIVATING WATERWAYS

The Kentucky and Dix rivers offer  
breathtaking experiences

It seems that the Kentucky River is a far-flung destination accessible only to people with their own boats and lots of time on their hands. That is partly true, as access to the scenic Ohio River tributary flanked by towering palisades is pretty limited. And in my opinion, this is a shame.

Before last summer, I had made several visits to the Kentucky River since moving to the Bluegrass State 10 years ago, including a few trips to High Bridge in Wilmore. Several other trips were on a motorboat. But last summer, my husband and I had the pleasure of floating the river on Dix River Adventures owner **Brad Johnson's** 20-foot aluminum motorboat.

I partly expected it to be just like before—whisking along at high speeds in the blazing sun, enjoying the freshwater smell. But this time life slowed down, and suddenly I felt blissfully lost on the water for a couple of hours. Seeing the peaceful river in a whole new way left me refreshed. After returning to our home in Lexington, I felt the need to tell people about our experience.

Johnson, an Indiana transplant who came to central Kentucky to attend Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, is a kindred spirit of mine—a non-Kentucky native who arrived thinking he would be here temporarily and ended up staying with his young family.

“I remember saying to my wife, ‘For \$15, I can go to Walmart and get a fishing rod and head to the river,’ and now here we are,” he quipped.

On our boat tour, I asked him if, more than 15 years later, his wife gave him a hard time about his love of the river that had escalated in time and financial commitments from a simple fishing pole. “Only always,” he said.

But the effects of spending time on the river are so cathartic he couldn't help but share it with others and get his family more involved.

“When I spend time on the river, I'll literally have to ask myself, ‘What day is it today?’ ” he said.

So last summer, when I was about six months pregnant with my son, we left our toddler with a babysitter and headed out for an afternoon nature date. My husband and I met in Colorado, and enjoying the great outdoors was literally a part of who we were for almost a year while we dated. Connecting to that again together was a special, relaxing time.

Spending our time flanked by the towering Kentucky River Palisades in Pool 7 and on the adjacent Dix River, we waved at passengers breezing by on the elegant but adorable *Dixie Bell*, nodded to fellow travelers on other small vessels, got barked at by dogs perched in the front of canoes, chatted with fishermen about their catches, and enjoyed several idyllic hours like we were in an old hometown we had never left.

Pool 7 is probably the most scenic stretch of the Kentucky River and holds many historical marvels. We soaked up the experiences as we reflected on the use of the river in yesteryear. Johnson described the river as an ancient “interstate” that used to be much busier than it is now. Visitors to Pool 7 can see the old stone abutments for the Camp Nelson Covered Bridge, High Bridge (a still-active railroad bridge constructed in 1876 as the first cantilever bridge in North America, towering an astonishing 275 feet over the river), small waterfalls, a blue heron rookery, the mouth of Hickman Creek in Jessamine County, Chimney Rock, Golden Gate, and other geological and historical wonders.

It is here, and, of course, on the seamlessly connected Dix River, that Dix River Adventures spends most of its time. The Dix, which connects to Herrington Lake, is perhaps one of the most underappreciated parts of central Kentucky, and the Dix River Gorge will absolutely take your breath away. I had seen the Kentucky River Palisades, but the Gorge was a whole new experience.

When we turned a corner on the rocky Dix and the Gorge came into view, Johnson cut his engine, and we peacefully floated up to the mouth, where the extra-cold water coming from deep Lake Herrington gently poured over the rocks into the quiet stream. It was untouched and awe-inspiring. There were massive rocks everywhere, reminding us how powerful water and gravity are, and how small we are. It was a beautiful sight to take in. Johnson calls the Gorge the “crowning jewel of the Palisades, and it’s not even on the Kentucky River.”

Johnson’s boat is outfitted with a special, quiet motor to use for fishing and enjoying those very scenes in solitude and tranquility. It also serves as a backup in case he loses his main engine. The cooler water coming off of the Dix brings the air to more bearable temperatures in the middle of the sweltering summer months, and in the early morning, it creates a “magical” experience of fog ribbons on the water, Johnson said.

He witnesses these magical moments sometimes by himself and sometimes with his family, but also gets to guide others to experiences they will never forget through his boat tours.

“I’ve seen some really amazing things happen between fathers and sons on this boat and sometimes between three generations of family,” he said, rubbing goose bumps on his arm as he reflected on the special times created by the river’s essence and the way it allows people to unwind and be together.

“My interest is just getting people out there and having fun,” he said. “We’re going to follow their lead. We aren’t selling a product; we are selling an experience.”

“If people want to talk about their work, we’ll listen. If they want a history or geology lesson, we will do our best. And some people just want to be quiet, and we will respect that, too.”

Johnson’s tours include the “Morning Mist” and fall foliage excursions. He offers catered and custom experiences and has plans to add more outlets to enjoy the river. He has hired more staff, as the attraction has caught on rather quickly.

It’s because the river beckons to be explored, he said, not just on his boat. It offers people a chance to see



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wildlife, get exercise and fresh air, and simply enjoy nature. The problem is, he said, accessing it in central Kentucky is difficult to do. Pool 7 has only two places to put in boats, and the steep Palisades make it hard to create beaches.

As we headed back toward the boat ramp, Johnson stepped on the gas and gave us the full, windblown-hair-effect thrill ride to end our excursion on the perfect, sunny day.

I left hoping to pursue more adventures on the river, much like my friend **Mark Dickinson**, who regularly treks the wooded areas near the river and paddleboards in the early morning before the busy hours of daily life kick in.

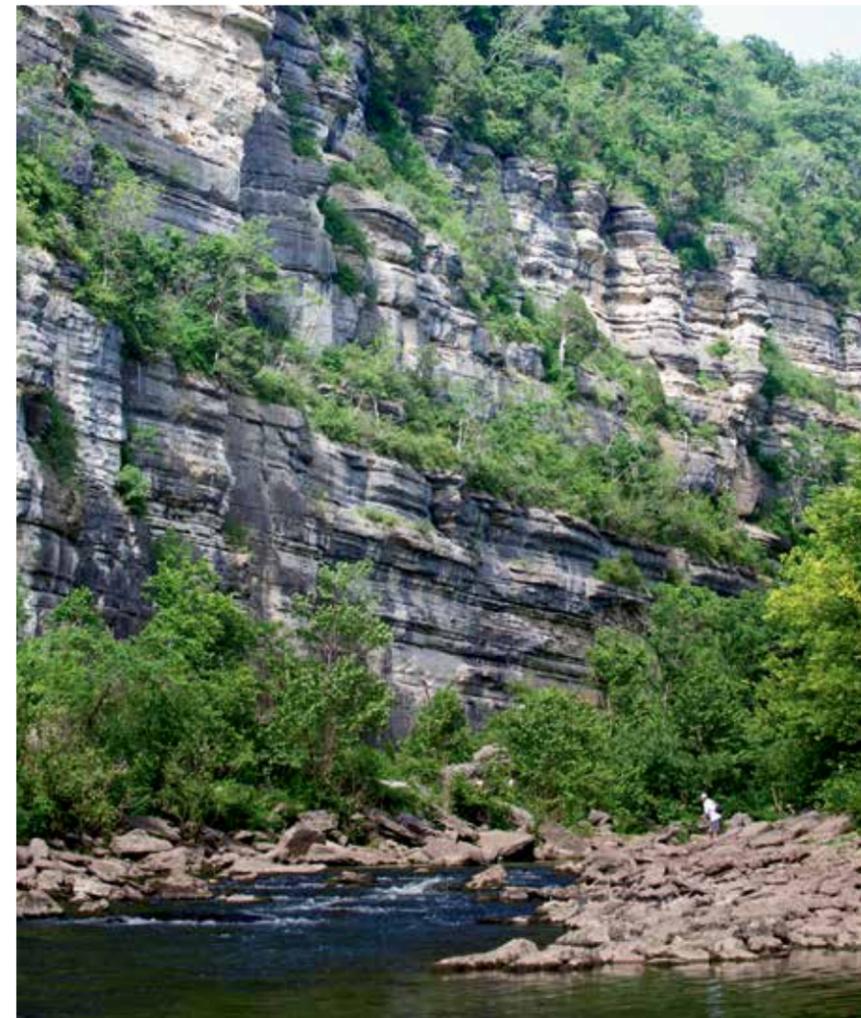
The Jessamine County resident said what began years ago as a morning exercise ritual turned into more.

“Now, exercise is only a consequence of what I do,” the Florida native explained. “It’s just about being out there in nature and soaking that all in, rain or shine—just being in the elements. I’ve always been drawn to water.”

Prior to switching to a lightweight, easily portable, stand-up paddleboard, Dickinson used a canoe to traverse the river, but the process of getting on and off the water was too cumbersome for his busy schedule. Now, it is only one easy trip from the car, and in a matter of minutes he is on the river—sometimes up to four times per week between May and August.

“It’s kind of like soaking in the nature, the atmosphere, the authenticity ... When you’re out there, you’re really part of the world, even though it’s a tame river. It puts everything in perspective,” he said. “There is something deep there that’s hard to quantify.”

Dickinson also thinks the river should be more accessible and that mini “river towns” could be set up to provide resources to visitors—similar to the Trail Towns on



eastern Kentucky’s Shelton Trace National Recreational Trail.

“Jessamine County and the city of Wilmore have not realized the potential yet of the river,” he said. “It’s a gold mine there for tourism, even if it’s just picnicking, and definitely for kayaking and canoeing. They totally ignore it.”

He hopes to see the area look to places like Frankfort, where the concept of becoming an established river town is much further along. Or, he said, maybe there could be a location to place sand on the shore and create a beach area like the one at Boonesborough State Park. Even without a specific place to access the river, Dickinson has noticed a wide cross-section of people trying to enjoy the water, and that is encouraging.

But more can be done. For example, he said, Asbury University has about 1,000 acres on the river and could offer kayak rides, crew and other water activities.

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The rivers represent geological, ecological and biological lessons. And it’s great for wildlife spotting, with critters like blue herons, kingfishers, turtles, beavers, river otters, giant muskie, trout, deer, coyotes, turkeys and more. Dickinson noted the fascinating rock formations that are best viewed at slow speeds. The Palisades, considered by environmentalists a unique ecosystem, and their rich limestone soil are home to extravagant wildflowers and several endangered plant and bat species.

**Scottie Ellis** with the Kentucky Department of Travel and Tourism said the state encourages river tourism and exploration, but ultimately the development of consumer experiences is up to local towns and officials.

“We obviously promote and encourage outdoor recreation and would love to see more outfitters pop up along the river to help build opportunities there,” she said, adding that the state offers several development incentives to help eligible businesses. She said the Office of Adventure Tourism is working on “trail towns” and “river towns” to promote outdoor recreation as a whole, not just on the water.

If you’re like me, you will probably experience the area once and want to go back for more. 🐾



Brad Johnson

## Explore, Cruise and More

Those interested in a river excursion can check out Johnson’s Dix River Adventures, (859) 858-8235, [dixriveradventures.com](http://dixriveradventures.com); **Andy Bathje** and AdventureServe in Wilmore, (859) 858-0140, ext. 21, email [Bathje@AdventureServe.org](mailto:Bathje@AdventureServe.org); and **Renny Gautier**’s Palisades Adventures for canoe and kayak rentals from a facility at High Bridge outside of Wilmore, (859) 858-0712.

More information and a copy of the *Jessamine County Kentucky River Boating Guide* can be found at [kentuckyriverblueway.com](http://kentuckyriverblueway.com). The Blueway Trail is a 42-mile stretch of the Kentucky River that makes up Jessamine County’s southern border running from Valley View to Brooklyn and aims to provide greater recognition of the river basin and its tourism and recreational opportunities.

For other exploration opportunities in the area, consider Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Camp Nelson Heritage Park, Tom Dorman Nature Preserve, Jim Beam Nature Preserve, Raven Run Nature Sanctuary, nearby distillery tours and Hickman Creek. Visit [kentuckytourism.com](http://kentuckytourism.com) for additional ideas.