

THE TRAVEL MAGAZINE OF MISSOURI

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# Show-Me

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River of Life  
Hiding Out in a  
Treehouse Cabin

Making Movies  
in the Heartland

Fall 2006 • \$3.95



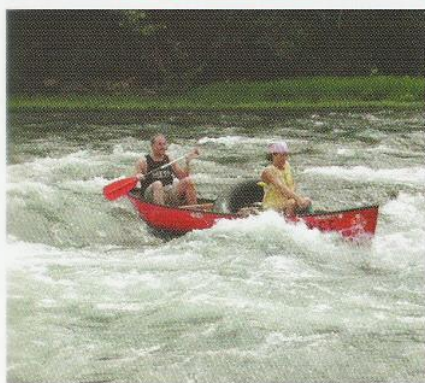
Also: Canoeing the Mighty MO • Lewis & Clark Return • Devilish Locales



# RIVER of LIFE

Treehouse Resort  
offers physical,  
mental renewal

text & photos by GARY FIGGINS



"Dad, are we lost," Matthew called up from the back seat of the van.

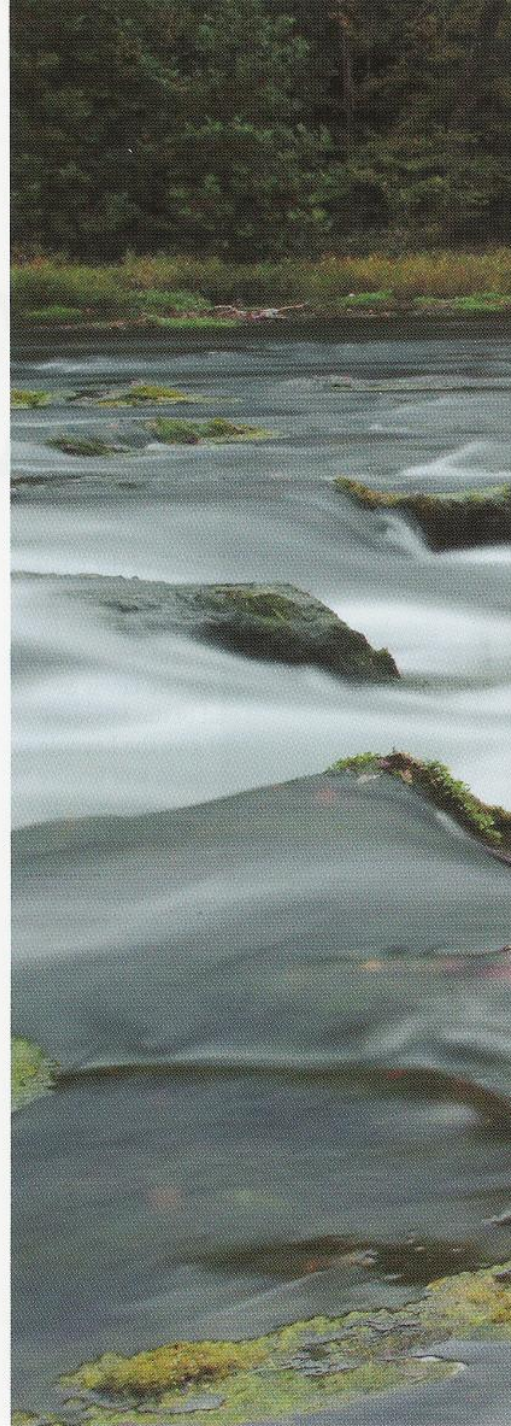
We had been driving a rolling, winding two-lane road since leaving Highway 60 nearly an hour earlier, when our host had called to check on us.

"No," I replied, not very sure of myself, but not wanting to create a panic. "We have a map and this," I said, holding up my new handheld GPS (global positioning satellite) receiver. I occasionally stopped to compare its screen to the map lying open in the passenger seat, unable to determine why the two did not match up.

"Then why did we just turn around for the second time?" he persisted. "I think we're lost."

For a six-year-old, he was really beginning to sound like his, well, like someone we both knew. At least he wasn't telling me to stop and ask directions, which was a good thing, since the only living creatures we had seen since lunch were some wayward cows pasturing alongside the road.

For a couple of years, Matthew and I had been taking these father/son trips, and he had been talking incessantly the past week about spending the night in a treehouse. I had just returned from another trip a couple of days earlier, and the prospect of driving four hours had almost prompted me to cancel this one. Within 10 seconds of floating the idea of waiting a few weeks, I knew I would regret it. Better off getting it over with, I



told myself.

Now, we were nearly three hours into our trip, and I wasn't exactly sure how much longer it would take to reach our destination—The River of Life Farm. I pulled off the road to look at the map again.

"Maybe you should stop some place and ask directions," I heard from the back seat.

Tossing the GPS into the passenger





seat, I took a closer look at the map and discovered that Highways 181 and 14 were one and the same, at least on this stretch. Not long afterward, we found ourselves gliding through the small town of Dora. A few short miles later we came upon our next landmark—The Crossroads, an old general store located quite literally at a crossroads in the middle of nowhere.

One more corrected wrong turn

placed us on a gravel road that dove into the forested hills. After what seemed an eternity—but was probably no more than 15 minutes—the van peeped out from under the wooded canopy onto a worn path that ran alongside a tall grass lowland. Just over a slight rise, we saw our destination.

I let out a sigh of relief, and as if in reply, the GPS alarm sounded to notify us that we had arrived.

**(ABOVE)** The Falls provides a stunning display of nature's solitude during an early autumn morning. **(OPPOSITE, TOP)** The writer's son, Matthew, relaxes in the bow as the current carries the canoe along the North Fork of the White River. **(OPPOSITE, BOTTOM)** Canoeing the North Fork is not complete without "shooting the Falls."





## THE RIVER OF LIFE FARM

Our host, Myron McKee, greeted us in a soft-spoken voice that symbolizes his entire demeanor. A man of undeterminable age, Myron projects a nurturing wisdom far beyond his years, a characteristic I later discovered came at a price. Myron was seven years old when his father tragically drowned while trying to cross the swollen White River on horseback on his way to work at the family sawmill. Ironically, it was John

Calvin McKee who first conceived the idea of a trout resort on the North Fork of the White River. The death of Myron's four-year-old brother nearly a year later drove his mother out of the Ozarks with him and his little sister in tow. The family made their way to Phoenix, although Myron eventually ended up in California foster homes.

Seventeen years after leaving his family's original home, Myron and his wife, Ann, returned to the Ozarks to

make their home on 10 acres of North Fork land given to him by an uncle. He received another 80 acres when that same uncle died in 1982.

More than a decade later, Myron found himself unemployed, something that caused him to view his surroundings with new eyes. At the center flowed a river that had taken a father from a needy family a lifetime earlier. But what Myron and Ann saw was a river of life.





(ABOVE) Treehouse cabins such as this one overlook the North Fork of the White River, providing access to what is commonly referred to as the "miracle mile" of trout fishing. (RIGHT) Visitors to River of Life Farm can hike up a small mountain to take in the scenery from Inspiration Point and the River of Life Spring.

## THE FALLS

Deciding to take advantage of what remained of the afternoon, Matthew and I climbed into a canoe, shoving into the gently-flowing North Fork and immediately catching sight of "The Falls," a three-foot-high rock ledge that serves as a mid-stream obstacle course for canoeists and kayakers. As we neared the plunge, I considered the photos Myron had shown us not 15 minutes earlier, and then I look down at the expensive camera that hung around my neck. My insurance agent would love this story, I told myself. Paddling furiously from his perch in the bow of the canoe, Matthew did an admirable job lining us up before abandoning his paddle and clinging to the sides of the boat. There really wasn't much else to do. A few seconds later, we were "shooting the falls," with the expert abilities that could only be displayed by people who had never before been in a canoe.

October had brought with it much more bearable temperatures than the previous month, and the autumn colors were just beginning to peak from the surrounding forest. A summer drought had lowered the river level, but it still flowed enough to easily carry us with it.

The North Fork is spring-fed by the eighth-largest spring system in Missouri and can be floated year-round.

## THE NORTH FORK

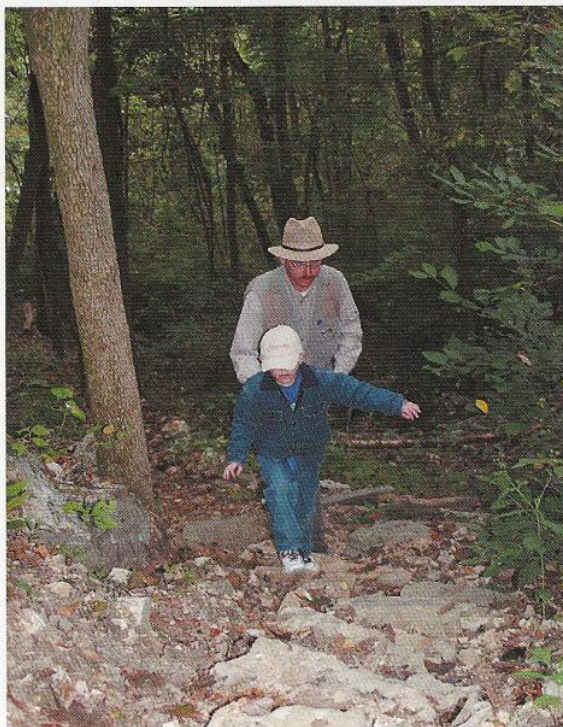
Known as the "miracle mile" of trout fishing, the Falls and the North Fork of the White River are located in a Wild Trout Management Area, accessible by land exclusively from ROLF. When Myron first pitched the idea of a fishing resort to an association of trout enthusiasts, he found that most of the fishermen viewed his river access as a gold mine.

It just so happened that on our trip, the Missouri Department of Conservation was undertaking the somewhat strange task of estimating the trout population by shocking the fish unconscious with low currents of electricity, causing them to float to the top to be counted.

Around each bend, we encountered some small patches of rapids, created by the river forcing its way around jutting gravel bars. Occasionally, we beached the canoe and waded through the shallow waters, seeking unique rocks or shells and even chasing a couple of crawdads. The brief stops to play in the water were welcome respites that provided us the opportunity to lose ourselves in this natural paradise.

When we weren't walking the banks, we were counting the rainbow trout that swam just below the surface of the clear, cold waters. At times, they seemed so plentiful that we might have easily reached over the sides of the boat and hauled a couple in.

Nearly three hours after first putting in, we reached the take-out point, where a couple of fishermen were enthusiastically pulling in one rainbow after another, oblivious to any size or quantity restrictions. Little did they know that their luck was about to end; the conservation agents and their bolts of electricity were just around the bend.





## THE TREEHOUSES

Arriving back at the Farm, we were given directions to the Tree Top Cedar Chest Cabin, the newest of the six "treehouse" cabins located on the 275-acre mini-resort. We grilled hamburgers on a charcoal grill set up on the covered deck, eating outdoors as we listened to the river just beyond a band of trees.

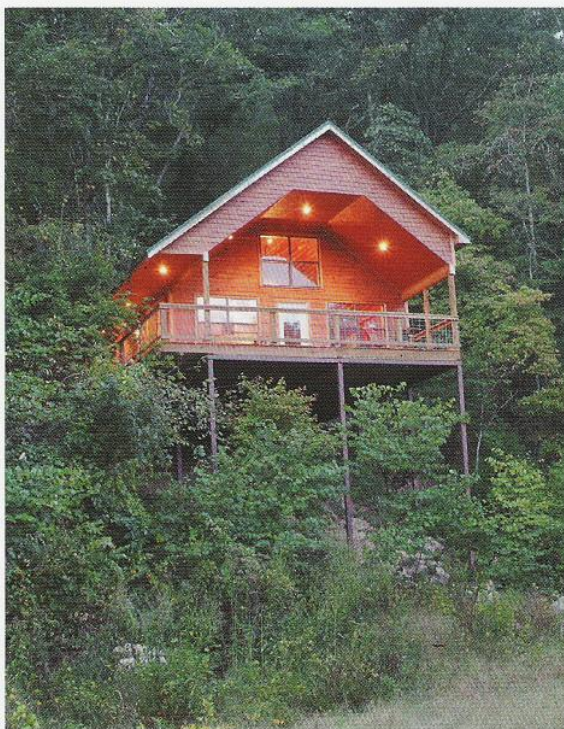
We explored the surrounding grounds after dinner, stopping to chat with some New Yorkers who were staying in another treehouse cabin down the road. The family had traveled to Missouri for a wedding in St. Louis, and had discovered the River of Life Farm on the internet. Myron had earlier explained that the majority of his guests, some from as far away as Europe, find the ROLF by accident while surfing the internet.

Our new acquaintances were staying in the Treehouse Cabin, a stunning example of ingenuity and craftsmanship. The first of the treehouse cabins to be built, this cabin sits on the edge of the river and is actually built around a couple of trees. The cabin sleeps six with a master bedroom with a queen-size bed and a loft with a queen and two twin beds. The cedar stairs leading to the loft are truly a work of art.

Other cabins include the Treetop Hideaway, also built on the river's edge; the Mountain Log Cabin Lookout, offering a private view of the Falls; and the Tree Top Loft Cabin. The Eagle's Nest Lodge features 1,000 square feet of space, perfect for a trout fishing vacation. The lodge features a stone fireplace and a second story deck overlooking the North Fork. The Fisherman's Room, located below the Eagle's Nest, includes a bunk bed and is an economic alternative for one or two fishermen.

The Chalet is a newly-remodeled two-story bungalow with two full baths, two bedrooms, a sleeper sofa and a deck that provides an astounding view of the Falls.

We bid farewell to our new acquaintances



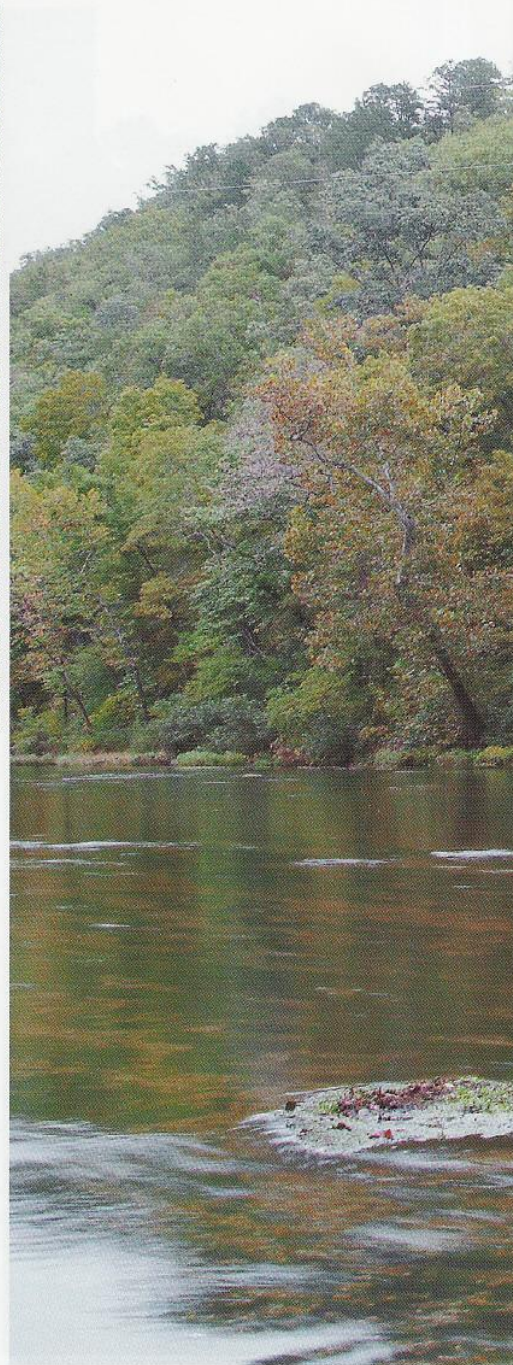
(ABOVE) The Tree Top Cedar Chest features an oversized Jacuzzi, full kitchen, living area, queen bed and deck. (RIGHT) A float trip down the North Fork of the White River provides a stunning view autumn foliage.

and headed back to our cabin, where a shower and jacuzzi awaited. We lay in the queen log bed, looking at the night sky through the windows covering the front of the cabin. It wasn't long before we were both sound asleep.

## THE SERENITY

We awoke at 5 a.m., trading the shorts and short sleeves of the previous day for long pants and jackets. Matthew was anxious to try his hand at fishing, and I wanted to photograph the Falls before sunrise.

The temperatures had taken a dive overnight, and we could see our breath in front of us as we walked toward the Falls. We spent the next hour photographing this lone spot of the river before Matthew put his line in. The fish that had been in abundance the day before were nowhere to be found on this chilly morning. Later in the morning, Myron explained that the fish were probably less



active due to the stress of being shocked the day before.

Since fishing was useless this day, we set out on a hike up to Inspiration Point and the River of Life Spring hidden somewhere in the mountain above our cabin. The three-quarter-mile marked trail is steep at times, but is generally easy enough for most people to climb. With the Mark Twain Forest surrounding the private resort, wildlife is plentiful.





## THE END OF THE TRAIL

Learning that a honeymooning couple would be arriving later in the afternoon, we cleared our things from our cabin and went to say farewell to our host, who was preparing to take a small group upriver for a morning float back to the Farm.

As with most vacations, the trip home brought with it a feeling of sadness. I had nearly cancelled this experience because I was tired, and I was returning

home freshly renewed. Matthew watched a DVD and colored a picture to send to our hosts during the four-hour trip back home. Mostly, though, he just talked about our adventure, and it occurred to me just how few fathers get the chance to spend this kind of time with their sons.

*Cabin rates range from \$135-\$185 per night for the first two people. In addition, a new conference center offers facilities for*

*business retreats.*

*River of Life Farm donates a percentage of its profits to the James Project, a non-profit organization that provides financial assistance to widows and orphans of Third World countries. The McKees help oversee the administrative work for the project. For more information or to make reservations, call toll-free 888-824-2398 or visit [www.riveroflifefarm.com](http://www.riveroflifefarm.com).*