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The Dam That Unleashed the “Beast of the East” Turns 50

FAYETTEVILLE, W.Va., June 16, 2016 - The Summersville Dam was built for flood control in 1966, but it is the dam's much sexier and economically fortuitous purpose - initiated 20 years later - that is celebrated for 22 days every fall during “Gauley Season,” when the dam unleashes the “Beast of the East” and the best whitewater rafting in the world.

Situated in a region known as the [National Parks of Southern West Virginia](#), the area is rich in natural beauty and cultural significance. Beginning in the 1960s, a handful of adventurers also discovered that in addition to the region's natural beauty, its New and Gauley Rivers were prime for whitewater rafting, at the time a burgeoning industry.

River guide and founder of Mountain River Tours, Paul Breuer is credited with first making the Gauley River viable to commercial rafting in the 1970s. By 1986, a group of commercial rafters and several private paddlers who had been passionately promoting the expanding industry on the Gauley and New Rivers envisioned a secondary use for the massive Summersville Dam. By initiating a series of calculated water releases during fall weekends, they could create a rafting experience with the biggest and baddest rapids in the world and bring tourism dollars to a region largely dependent on coal mining.

All it would take was an Act of Congress to do it.

An Act of Congress

Whitewater rafting leaders who recognized the potential of the dam successfully lobbied Congress to pass legislation permitting the Army Corps of Engineers to schedule the release of lake water on September and October weekends to specifically benefit the rafting industry. The group demonstrated that such a move would put hundreds of people to work and generate millions of tourism dollars annually. Among those visionaries were Breuer and Dave Arnold, co-founder of [Adventures on the Gorge](#) (AOTG) and founder of a whitewater rafting company called Class VI.

“The whitewater rafting industry is normally dependent on the whims of Mother Nature, but the Gauley Season is a happy and decidedly predictable exception,” said Arnold, whose Class VI whitewater rafting company merged with Breuer's Mountain River Tours and an outfitter called Rivermen nine years ago to create Adventures on the Gorge, a full-service adventure resort situated on the New River Gorge. “Since the huge rapids of the Gauley are created by a calculated, precisely timed, human-controlled release of water into the river, rafting enthusiasts can bank on an exciting ride that will test their skills and feed their adventurous spirits.”



President Lyndon Johnson was on hand for the dedication of the Summersville Dam in 1966.



Ladybird Johnson spoke at the dedication.



Rafters put in just below the dam during Gauley Season.



Several Class V rapids are created when water is released, including Pillow Rock.

About the dam that was nearly named "Gad"

Located on the Gauley River in West Virginia's Nicholas County, the dam was constructed over a six-year period beginning in 1960 and ending in May of 1966. Under the auspices of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Western Construction of Sioux City, Iowa, built the dam at a cost of \$48 million.

With 12 million cubic yards of rock and dirt, the dam is the second largest rock-fill dam in the eastern United States. It is 2,280 feet long and 390 feet tall, and it was built with one 1,555-foot long, 29-foot diameter tunnel that splits into three howel-bunger valves at the downstream end for release. In 2001, a two-year project was completed that resulted in water being diverted from one of the valves and through two turbines that generate up to 80 megawatts of electricity. When the hydro-electric plant is operating, the discharge from the turbines is released below the water level making it much less impressive than the original tube.

The dam was dedicated Sept. 3, 1966 by President Lyndon Johnson. Although tradition dictates that dams are named after the closest town, the nearest hamlet - now under water - was called "Gad." Local lore says that the president and his wife, Ladybird Johnson, balked at calling it the "Gad Dam," but most people agree that Gad was not under serious consideration long before the dedication for obvious reasons.

During his dedication remarks, President Johnson spoke of the great need for dependable water supplies... "while our population continues to increase, the amount of water presently available remains the same as it was 5,000 years ago. As we look out at this magnificent new dam and reservoir to our backs, I have renewed hope that still other resources - the power of science and the determination of man - will, along with a little prayer and a good deal of dynamite, empower us to quench the thirst of generations to come."

In addition to creating world-class rafting, the dam also created Summersville Lake, the largest lake in the state with 2,700 acres of surface water and 60 miles of shoreline. The lake is popular for boating, fishing and swimming as well as rock climbing, standup paddleboarding and kayaking.

The Summersville Convention & Visitors Bureau is organizing an event celebrating the dam's 50th anniversary Aug. 19 - 20. Free to the public, the [Summersville Dam Jubilee](#) will include a rededication ceremony, fishing tournament, triathlon, live music, a boat parade and fireworks.

The Beast of the East - what to know

This year, the Beast of the East - the oft-used label for the river during Gauley Season - will be unleashed beginning Friday, Sept. 9, and the season continues every Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday through Sunday, Oct. 16 (with the exception of Friday, Oct. 14).

The River's two navigable segments - the Upper and Lower Gauley - feature a combined total of about 26 miles and some 100 rapids. The rapids - with creative or descriptive names such as Lost Paddle, Shipwreck Rock and Pure Screaming Hell - range from Class III rapids (medium waves with possible drops up to five feet) to V (large waves, drops and rocks and other hazards).

Glamping on the Gauley

One of the most popular ways to experience the Beast of the East with Adventures on the Gorge is the [Gauley River Overnight](#) (minimum age 15), a two-day package that includes an overnight at the resort's permanent campsite, Canyon Doors, that features wood-fired hot tubs, modern bathrooms with showers and meals prepared by an expedition-trained chef and served riverside. The trip is priced at \$360 per person for the Friday/Saturday and Saturday/Sunday packages and \$319 per person for the Sunday/Monday overnight. The trip includes a lunch and dinner on the first day and breakfast and snack on the second day. Like all AOTG trips, travelers are also provided with helmets, life jackets, paddles, boats and professional

guides. Travelers should provide their own tents and sleeping bags or rent them from Adventures on the Gorge.

Other Gauley adventures

Other options include a full-day [Lower Gauley River Adventure](#) (minimum age 15) and a full-day [Upper Gauley River Adventure](#) (minimum age 14). Pricing is \$189 per person on Saturdays, \$159 on Fridays and Sundays and \$114 on Mondays. The price drops \$25 on weekends in October. There is also an [Upper Gauley Express](#), [Gauley River Reverse Two-Day](#), [Gauley River Marathon](#), [Double Upper Gauley One-Day](#) and [Double Upper Gauley Two-Day](#).

For more information, travelers should call 1-855-379-8738 or visit www.adventuresonthegorge.com. Travelers can find out more about Adventures on the Gorge and learn about specials and other offers by connecting on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#), signing up for AOTG [e-newsletter](#) or following the AOTG [blog](#).

About Adventures on the Gorge

[Adventures on the Gorge](#) is an adventure resort located on more than 1,000 acres along the rim of New River Gorge near Fayetteville, W.Va. The resort is in a region with three national parks units.

The resort provides an array of outdoor experiences including whitewater rafting on the New and Gauley Rivers; aerial adventures including two zip lines, the world's highest Bridgewalk and an aerial adventure park; rock climbing; rappelling; kayaking, stand up paddleboarding, fishing, mountain biking and hiking. The resort also features a variety of accommodations, restaurants and shops.

Travelers can find out more about Adventures on the Gorge [online](#), calling 1-855-379-8738, connecting on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Google+](#), [TripAdvisor](#), [YouTube](#), and [Vimeo](#) and signing up for AOTG [e-newsletter](#).

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