

Cold-weather hiking leads to some of nature's most beautiful sights.

WINTER TREKKING in the Hocking Hills

By Dan Armitage

Any sight that can humble

a 17-year-old suburban kid, let alone get him to pocket his smartphone and get active, is notable among families such as ours. Turning the trail to suddenly face a tower of ice caught in mid-cascade did just that. Trapped as it was in Mother Nature's frigid grasp, the waterfall deep in the Hocking Hills was hushed and offered no audible hint of its presence, making the surprise view that much more dramatic. Despite there not being another soul in sight, we practically whispered our questions to the hiking guide who led us to the thick curtain of ice that draped the cliff before us.

"Can we climb around?" son Ethan asked, even as his mom stepped atop an SUV-size boulder and started snapping photos with her cellphone.

Thanks to adventure-travel assignments from *Home & Away* and other magazines, we've been fortunate to experience some of North America's classic hiking destinations over the years. Finding a scene so striking in a place so close to home, and a scant three miles from our base at The Inn & Spa at Cedar Falls, was a welcome surprise and the highlight of a winter weekend in a region better known for its fair-weather pursuits.

Hiking Haven The Hocking Hills area is a prime winter destination for active travelers, especially for those who participate in the most popular organized hike in Ohio. Each January for the past 52, Hocking Hills State Park has welcomed thousands of trekkers who brave

winter conditions to enjoy the famous hills and hollers in the quiet—if not always white—off-season during a free winter hike (see sidebar).

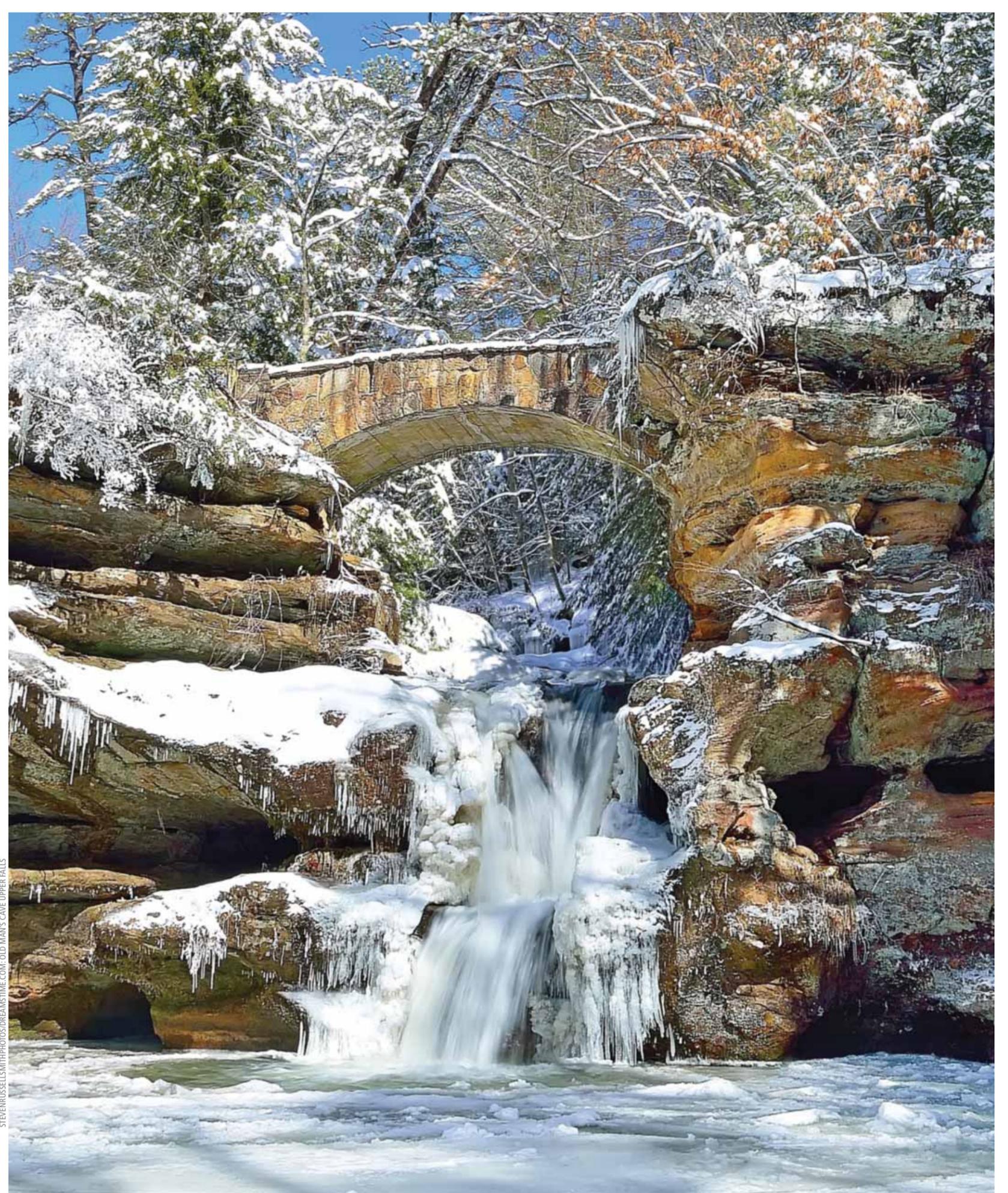
The six-mile trail between Old Man's and Ash caves covers classic Hocking Hills sights and scenery. Veteran area hiker Jim Stratton knows them well and notes that there are additional wonders awaiting those who wander the less-traveled paths through his favorite region of Ohio.

"It's a gem," Stratton said of the area. "That Ohio has such a place in such proximity to so much of the population is a blessing. Most visitors only scratch the surface, which is fine and often enough to thoroughly enjoy their time in the Hocking Hills and get an appreciation for what it offers."

For those who want to experience the Hocking Hills region in a deeper manner and learn about its history, geography, and the flora and fauna, nothing beats burning shoe leather in the presence of someone with experience hiking and studying the hills. For that, Stratton offers a shortcut.

Stratton started Hocking Hills Adventure Trek in 2011, a professional guide service matching experienced area naturalists with visitors who want to take a hike on the wilder side of the region. The popularity of the on-demand guide service soon led to an expansion in his coverage area statewide and a shortening of his company's

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STEVEN RUSSELL/PHOTOS/DREAMSTIME.COM; OLD MAN'S CAVE/UPPER HILLS

name to TrekNetwork. While he still specializes in hikes in the Hocking Hills, Stratton arranges custom-guided hikes anywhere in Ohio.

"We're a network of guides offering private, on-demand hikes across Ohio," Stratton said, adding that he appreciates receiving at least 24 hours' notice but has been known to turn around trips on short notice.

Learning While Walking Like all TrekNetwork's basic hike packages, ours lasted two hours and was brimming with information, thanks to guide Joe Brehm. A graduate of nearby Ohio University with a master's degree in environmental studies, the professional naturalist was impossible to stump as we hiked through the hemlocks and peppered him with questions about the types of trees that flanked our route—no easy matter considering all but the oaks and beeches were bare of leaves on that midwinter day.

As we hiked around the Big Spring area of Hocking State Forest, it was rewarding to be able to learn what was what, whether we inquired about a type of rock, a species of plant or "what's that?" when we came across scat on the trail.

Brehm had us sniffing bark and sampling seeds along the route, pointing out all the edibles a savvy walker could collect. During more fruitful seasons, TrekNetwork offers Edible Forest Hikes featuring the foraging of what is, or isn't, edible.

Our midwinter trail-scavenging options were scarce, which only made that evening's meal all the more welcome. Not having eaten anything but a palmful of wild seeds and a brace of CLIF bars between us since a bountiful breakfast at The Inn & Spa at Cedar Falls, (also acclaimed for its evening fare), we were pleased to find ourselves facing a seven-course meal

at the Glenlaurel. The distinctive Scottish inn and cottage property in Rockbridge is famous for its culinary offerings and its vintage links-style golf course.

Glenlaurel guests are offered self-guided winter treks without having to leave the distinctive hilltop estate property, which features a trail system of its own that leads hikers through woodlands and a gorge. By the time

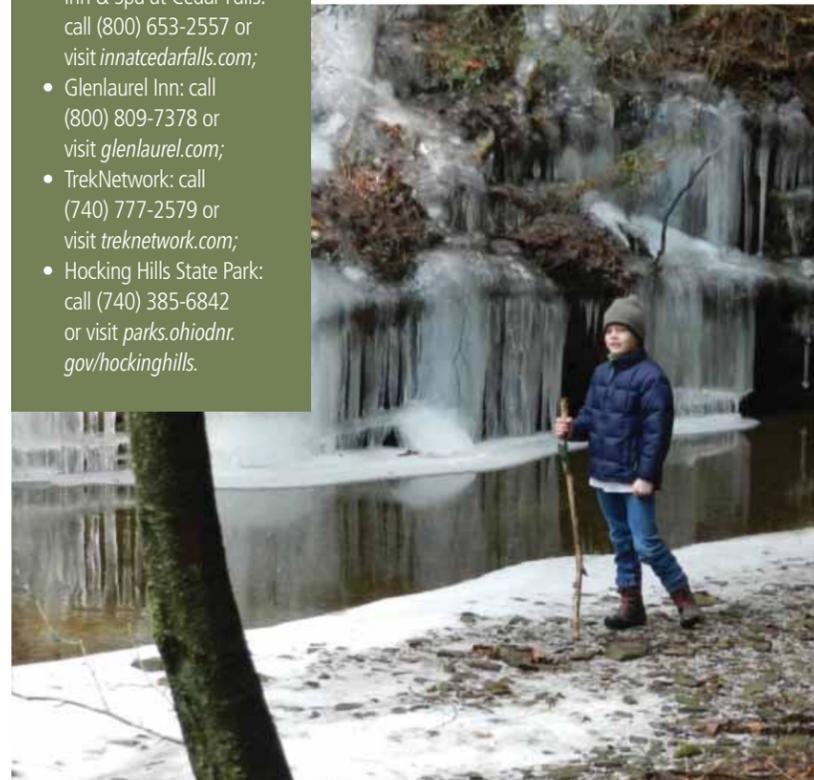
we settled in for our well-earned meal, however, hiking was the last thing on our minds. The house bagpiper gave Ethan a visible "start" when he slipped behind him and started filling the small dining room with the bagpipe's distinctive notes. We settled into a meal as memorable as our day had been exploring the winter wonders of the Hocking Hills. **H&A**

Dan Armitage is a regular contributor from Worthington, Ohio.

Planning Your Trip

For more information:

- Inn & Spa at Cedar Falls: call (800) 653-2557 or visit innatcedarfalls.com;
- Glenlaurel Inn: call (800) 809-7378 or visit glenlaurel.com;
- TrekNetwork: call (740) 777-2579 or visit treknetwork.com;
- Hocking Hills State Park: call (740) 385-6842 or visit parks.ohiodnr.gov/hockinghills.



Hike in the Hills

The 53rd annual Winter Hike will be **Jan. 20** starting from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. at Hocking Hills State Park. Considered the most popular single-day winter hike in the nation, the route will cover six miles, from Old Man's Cave to Ash Cave. Refreshments will be available at Cedar Falls for a donation. A shuttle bus will return hikers to the parking area at Old Man's Cave. For more information, call (740) 385-6842 or visit parks.ohiodnr.gov/hockinghills.