Headline: Mark Twain national forest a tranquil setting

Deckhead: Destination highlights trip on Ozark National Riverways Drive

It takes more than words to describe Mark Twain National Forest. Up close and personal are the best ways to absorb all it has to offer.

Comprised of 1.5 million acres of public land, more than 750 miles of trails and 350 miles of perennial streams, it’s an ideal destination for those seeking to find balance on their next trips. Excitement and relaxation collide. Adventurous days conclude with soothing evenings, creating an elixir destined to satisfy any traveler’s wanderlust.

Trails wind through various sections of the forest, attracting thousands of visitors annually. Hike, backpack, horseback ride or mountain bike on these magical pathways in the Ozark Highlands, which stretches across Missouri and Arkansas.

Rivers and streams meander through acres of natural beauty, providing locations for swimming, floating, kayaking and canoeing. Experience intense whitewater rafting or float down a lazy river – all of levels of difficulty are covered.

Mark Twain National Forest boasts 19 Natural Areas, which retain their exquisiteness through careful protection and management, and seven Wilderness Areas that have minimal impact from human development. It’s nature at its finest on one of the U.S.’s most ecological friendly stages.

Visit Bell Mountain, where elevations reach as high as 1,702 feet above sea level. Hughes Mountain features unique rock formations like those found around Devils Tower in Wyoming. Taum Sauk Mountain State Park offers majestic views of rolling countryside – a mystical playground for leaf-peepers.

Proximity is another attribute. Ozark National Riverways Drive runs through the heart of the forest. Also known as State Route 19, the roadway leads visitors more than 42 miles through southeastern Missouri. Drivers will cross the Current and Jacks Folk rivers – two of the best floating waterways in the U.S.

Round Spring Cave is a geological treat. Park rangers conduct two-hour tours. Wear sturdy shoes and bring a jacket. Round Spring, meanwhile, is 55 feet deep, rising in a circular pool of water before flowing under a bridge to join the Current River. Some 26 million gallons of water flow from it daily.

More than 300 caves have been identified within the boundaries of the park, ranging from rock overhangs to one with nearly seven miles of identified passages. Eight caves, including a sinkhole, have been designated as outstanding natural features.

The Alley Community is highlighted by the Alley Mill, a red barn equipped with a waterwheel in the middle of a plush green forest. It’s where grain was ground to provide bread more than a century ago. Guests can tour the mill – from top to bottom – to witness its antique persona and learn how grain was transmitted, processed and ground into a fine flour suitable for baking.

As a day’s activities conclude, relax at the campground or lodge and gaze into the night sky. The area’s limited light pollution opens a doorway to outer space. Star constellations illuminate the setting. Find the Big Dipper. The two stars in the bowl point to Polaris, the North Star. It’s an astronomical pinball machine destined to light up a day during its darkest hours.

Travelers interested in visiting Mark Twain National Forest and Ozark National Riverways Drive should follow this advice from the legendary wordsmith:

“You can depend on your eyes, when your imagination is out of focus.”

Cutline: GREEN WITH ENVY – The beauty of the Ozark Mountains is captured from the Mark Twain National Forest. Image: sschremp. Adobe Stock.