River Gorge Romp–Paddle Georgia 2025

June 20—Tennessee River

Distance: 12.4 miles **Starting Elevation: 635 feet** **Ending Elevation: 630 feet**

Pit Stops: **Mile 5.2—**River Canyon Adventure **Mile 9.2—**Pot Point Campsite **Mile 12.4**—Raccoon Mountain Boat Ramp

Points of Interest

Mile 0—Tennessee River Place—Our campsite for two nights was originally the home of Jim Crittenden, the founder of the Eyear One Hour optometrist stores in the 1960s, which ultimately expanded to outlets in five states. Crittenden famously shaved half of his beard for his store's half-price sales and appeared in commercials with the same beard died purple. A Chattanooga native who sold peanuts at the city's minor league baseball stadium as a child, he was instrumental in bringing the Chattanooga Lookouts baseball team back to town and was an owner of the team for several years. The 135-acre property is now owned by the Little family which manages it as a wedding and events space and working farm.

Mile 1—Williams Island—Splitting the channel adjacent to Tennessee River Place and marking the entrance to the Tennessee River Gorge is this two-mile-long 450-acre island. Its name comes from Samuel Williams (1807-1898) who acquired and farmed the island after the removal of the Cherokee in 1838, but he was far from the first to make use of the isle. Archaeological research conducted on the island dates human occupation to 12,000 B.C. A Mississippian-era (1000-1650 A.D.) village with temple and burial mounds and multiple houses, occupied portion of the island. In 1839, the island was one of the first stops of Jacob Cummings, a Black man enslaved on a Moccasin Bend farm, in his flight north to freedom. In the late 1800s, he was interviewed about his life and journey: "Ole Smith [his enslaver] kept beating us around. He gave my ole mother 200 lashes because the cats got part of the fish he had caught and she was getting ready for him. Then he was going to beat every one of us devils for he had a melon patch…but one was missing…and he said he'd beat us all till he got the right one…Well, I went down to the lower farm and I made up my mind. I went across to the island in an injun canoe and stayed about two days…The woman that lived on the island…told me that she thought they was comin' to search the island, and so I walked to the other end…I bound my clothes up in a bundle and tied'em on my head and went in. I never swam more easily than that half-mile and took right up Walden's Ridge." With assists from residents in both the south and north, Cummings ultimately made his way to Canada where he became an agent on the Underground Railroad. The island continued to be occupied into the 1900s. Harmon Jolley, whose mother was among several tenant farmers on the island, wrote: "In the early 1930s, my grandfather built a flatboat, and moved the family and all of their possessions to the island. They were one of nine families there, and lived in a small wood-frame house…When they weren't helping with chores, they would sit on the riverbank and watch the steamboats and barges going by. Mother told me that my grandfather would not let them venture to the south end of the island, where moonshiners operated." Today, the island is owned by the State of Tennessee and managed by the Tennessee River Gorge Trust. A dock and boat-in campsites are available on the east side of the island. And, it is still cultivated. You'll likely pass grazing cows as you make your way downstream. Just beyond the tail of this island, had you been traveling this river prior to 1913, you would have encountered "Tumbling Shoals," the first of numerous navigational hazards in the gorge. In 1869, when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers surveyed the river, the crew lost topographer, Edward McDermott, when he "drowned while attempting to pass the shoals in a small boat." The same survey called Tumbling Shoals the "most important obstacle to navigation" between Chattanooga and Muscle Shoals in Alabama—a distance of some 200 miles. Today, you'll see no evidence of this obstacle.

Mile 2.2—Buzi-Unicem Cement Plant—On river right is the dock for this cement plant that has operated on this site since 1923. The facility is now part of an Italian-owned cement and ready mix producer.

Mile 3.4—Boat Ramp—On river right is a public boat ramp and dock. At this point, you've entered the Tennessee River Gorge proper. Rising immediately on your right is Signal Mountain (ele. 1703 feet) while Walden Ridge (ele. 1810 feet) rises to the west downstream—both are part of the Cumberland Plateau or Cumberland Escarpment. On river left, Raccoon/Elder Mountain (ele. 1878 feet) shelter the gorge. Along the brow of most of these ridges are massive cliffs of sandstone. The sandstone, being more resistant to weathering and erosion, stands the test of time, but the more erodible rock—shales, limestones and dolomites—get washed downhill giving rise to the forested slopes. Oddly, geologists believe that millions of years ago, the craggy brows we see today were valleys and the valleys of today were, in fact, the mountaintops, consisting of highly erodible limestone. As the crow flies, the journey across the gorge is but 8 miles, but the Tennessee's tortured route through this confined passage is 26 miles.

Mile 4.4—Riverside Canyon Estates—On river left, you'll see a sign and then a dock advertising this upscale development in the heart of the gorge. While much of the land fronting the river and along the slopes and plateaus is protected public land, much is not, as is evidenced by the riverfront development along the northern shore here. The Tennessee River Gorge Trust reports that 17,000 of the gorge's 27,000 acres have been protected.

Mile 5—The Suck—On river right enters Suck Creek which tumbles down a gorge between Edwards Point and Walden Ridge over Class IV-V rapids popular with local creek boaters. The creek's name comes from a feature on the river that struck fear in the heart of boatsmen. Indeed, the name "The Suck" is seen on maps from the early 1800s. In January 1864, Harpers Weekly published a description of the hazard: "The river at the Suck is about 300 yards wide and very deep, but the current is so rapid that steamers can not head against it and are obliged to be pulled up by a windlass. The water runs comparatively smoothly until within a short distance from the "Suck" when it breaks into waves and dashes against the rock on the left, flinging foam high in the air." While The Suck was located near the mouth of Suck Creek, river runners of the 1800s referred to the next several miles of the gorge collectively as "The Suck" with colorful names for the numerous obstructions: The Kettle, The Skillet, The Boiling Pot, The Pan and Deadman Eddy. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers later targeted the Suck and other shoals through the gorge for "improvement," constructing wing dams and armoring the river banks, but the hazard wasn't fully eliminated until the completion of Hales Bar Dam in 1913. The hazards were so notorious, they inspired the Johnny Cash song "The Whirl and the Suck." Downstream of the mouth of Suck Creek is our pit stop for the day at River Canyon Adventures, a local outfitter that provides kayak/paddleboard rentals.

Mile 8.6—Pot Point Cabin—On river right is this cabin that is owned by the Tennessee River Gorge Trust and used by the trust as a vacation rental. The portion of the cabin that is of original construction dates to 1835 and consists of hand-hewn logs and planks salvaged from a flat boat that wrecked in the Boiling Pot. Trails lead from the cabin, along the riverside, and up the slope of the Cumberland Plateau. Along the way to the 24,000-acre Prentice Cooper State Forest, the trail passes numerous historic moonshine stills. Once atop the plateau it connects with trails leading to Snoopers Rock, an overlook that provides iconic cliff-top views of the gorge. The lookout derives its name from the days when law enforcement used the rock to "snoop" on the moonshiners hiding in the hollows below. Prior to construction of dams, the river here was constricted to just 200 feet in width by two points of land, after which the river expanded to 500 feet in width. The change created massive eddies, "making it extremely difficult for ascending boats to get through the narrowest portion of the channel without being swept on to the point," according to an 1869 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers survey. The engineers noted that at high water the velocity of the water through the "Boiling Pot" was 15 miles an hour.

Mile 9.2—Pot Point Campsite—On river right here is a paddle-in campsite for river travelers developed by the Tennessee River Gorge Trust. It features a tent platform, picnic table and outhouse. Bring your own toilet paper! The outhouse may or may not have that necessity. Look for the circular Tennessee River Pot Point Campsite sign.

Mile 12—Raccoon Mountain Pump-Storage Facility—On river left is the intake for this pump-storage hydro-power facility operated by the Tennessee Valley Authority. During periods of low power demand, water is pumped from the river up more than 1,000 vertical feet to a 528-acre reservoir atop Raccoon Mountain. When power demand is high, water is released through a tunnel drilled through the mountain. That descending water turns four electric-generating turbines capable of producing 1,616 megawatts of power daily. Built between 1970 and 1978 at a cost of more than $300 million, TVA considers Raccoon Mountain its "largest hydroelectric facility."