

Watkins Glen Gorge Trail Guide for Hikers

Introduction

[Watkins Glen Park](#) is a New York State Park that offers camping and hiking opportunities located about 30 minutes outside of Ithaca, NY. This wonderful state park encompasses a space surrounding Glen Creek which flows into the Southern area of Seneca Lake. The park's main entrance should be easy to find with the main road running directly through the park.

Watkins Glen State Park is located in the Finger Lakes region of New York State and makes for a great trip on your travels around the area! The greater Finger Lakes region offers deep lakes, unique gorges, and a ton of waterfalls with fishing and boating opportunities to delight all travelers.

Within Watkins Glen State Park, there is an unbeatable hiking trail that all visitors must try called the Watkins Glen Gorge Trail. This trail totals 1.5 miles in length but boasts nineteen waterfalls, and beautifully crafted stone staircases and bridges. It might sound like something out of a fantasy movie, but you can find all of this on a moderately difficult trail in New York.

Sections of the Trail

Entrance

If you're an avid hiker, you might be used to trailheads that start from a parking lot or randomly in a row of trees. Here at Watkins Glen State Park, you are welcomed by walking through an Entrance Tunnel and up a flight of stairs. The cuts made into the rock are over a century old, which is something to think about as you make your way through the tunnel. As soon as you emerge from the entrance tunnel you'll see your first waterfall near the Sentry Bridge. Once you reach Sentry Bridge you'll mark your entrance to the Watkins Glen Gorge for the first time. It feels monumental when you enter.

Cavern Cascade and Spiral Tunnel

As you continue your walk, you'll notice the flowing water that has carved the rock over the years. You'll walk up a series of rock steps and walk across some rocks. Be prepared for breathtaking beauty as you reach Cavern Cascade, this elegant waterfall falls right into the gorge. Cavern Cascade is the second tallest waterfall along Glen Creek and plunges 52 feet over a top of bedrock into the cavern.

At first, you see the waterfall from the bottom, and as you continue on the trail it makes a large ascent through the Spiral Tunnel which twists a total of 270 degrees on top of itself to reach the

gorge above the Cavern Cascade. This beautiful section of the trail is over just as quickly as it started, but don't worry there is so much more to see as you continue along the trail.

Narrows and Glen Cathedral

After the next tunnel visitors will reach a section of the trail called the Narrows. This area of the trail will feel different than the rest, as it's less waterfall and more greenery and gorge focused. While it seems to have its own ecosystem going on, the shady, cool, and moist air aids in plant growth. There are many ferns and mosses that grow here. This is the perfect space to take a quick break, catch your breath, and look around.

If the narrows are shady and cool, Glen Cathedral is sunny and breezy. This wide, open space is bright and full of wildflowers and shrubs. The gorge walls are large and open here instead of feeling small and cramped like many other areas of the hike. Continue appreciating the scenery here and take a break from moving through the trail for a second.

Central Cascade

As you continue on the hike and reach closer and closer to the top of the canyon, you'll reach your next waterfall called the Central Cascade. Here you'll find the tallest waterfall in the gorge, which plunges over 60 feet down below. Once you stop and admire its' excellence, you'll cross a bridge over the Central Cascade toward the Glen of Pools area, where the river creates "pools" in the rock. After appreciating this unique natural phenomenon, continue on until you reach the main attraction to the Watkins Glen Gorge Trail.

Rainbow Falls

Rainbow Falls is one of the most unique opportunities on the hike. Not only do you get to walk underneath Rainbow Falls, but you can spend a lot of time exploring the area around the waterfall. The story goes that it was named Rainbow Falls because if the light hits the water just right, all of the droplets will look like rainbows! This is truly one of those places that you have to see for yourself just how beautiful it is. You could spend hours staring at and reaching for the water. Spend as much time as you need here before you continue on, your hike is almost over.

Spiral Gorge

As you make your way past Rainbow Falls, you will see several plunge pools and smaller waterfalls. You'll cross another bridge and then you'll know you're in the Spiral Gorge area when you notice an abundance of ferns and mosses all around. There are several sculpted pools in the Spiral Gorge area and water dripping all around from the cliff edges that rise above.

How to hike the trail

Prepare to get drenched

Make sure that you come to Watkins Glen Gorge Trail with proper clothing and safe footwear for a day of hiking with water and slippery rocks. You are more likely than not to get drenched at some point on your hike. You will be walking on wet trails, underneath waterfalls, and near splashing water. If you don't want your clothing to be wet, make sure to wear waterproof or water-resistant clothing for your trip to Watkins Glen Gorge Trail.

Since you'll be doing a lot of walking on rocks and steps made from rocks, make sure you have hiking shoes, or other waterproof shoes meant for outdoor activities that will keep you from slipping while on your adventure. They will also keep your feet dry.

Go at your own pace

While this hike is a mile and a half, there are a lot of staircases and rising altitude with this hike which makes it considered a moderately difficult hike. There are several reasons you should go at your own pace. First, there is just so much to see here. If you want to make sure you have enough time to look around and appreciate all of the scenery, take all the time you need! Otherwise, make sure you aren't rushing through the hike or up the stairs so you do not fall or injure yourself. This hike is meant to be enjoyed marathon-style.

When To Go

Best Time of The Day

The best time of the day to go is in the mornings before large tour groups and crowds arrive at the park. Imagine arriving first thing in the morning and having several hours to explore the Watkins Glen Gorge Trail all to yourself without too many other people on the trail with you? You won't feel rushed at all. You can look around or take as many pictures as you'd like. It's a win-win!

The park also clears back up later in the afternoon (after 2pm). The bulk of the crowds come in mid-day so as long as you're there at the start of the day or the end of the day, you should avoid most of the large crowds.

Best Time of The Year

The trail is open from the end of May to the end of October and does close time-to-time due to flooding in the area. Other visitors have reported that October is a great time to visit with the fall

foliage and fewer visitors than in the summertime. Otherwise, the summertime is a good time to visit, other visitors have recommended visiting during the week if you want to avoid large crowds. It is definitely busier on the weekends with professionals visiting when they have off of work, so if you can take advantage of weekdays, that is your best bet.

Conclusion

The Watkins Glen Gorge Trail is a great space for visitors to reconnect with nature and see some of the great waterfalls that the Fingers Lake region of New York has to offer. On average, the trail can be completed in about an hour and a half to two hours. It's truly amazing how much you can see in just a short time.

Many travelers have mentioned they like to make an entire trip out of their hiking adventure and stay at the State Park campgrounds to round out the trip. The campgrounds offer 305 campsites with restrooms, hot showers, dump stations, and firewood for sale.

This is a great add-on to seeing the fantastic Watkins Glen Gorge trail, especially if you're driving far from out of town. The town of Watkins Glen also offers hotels, restaurants, and cafes. You won't be at a loss for activities once you arrive in the area for your fun trip.