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KAZAKHSTAN | FRIDGE-FREEZERS | TURKEY | ARUNACHAI PRADESH (INDIA)



THE OUACHITA MOUNTAINS

Arkansas' well-earned moniker of the "Natural State" is a nod to its playground of mountains, forests, and streams, natural resources which hikers, motorcyclists, mountain bikers, campers, and, of course, overlanders put to good use. The Ozarks, in northwest Arkansas and southern Missouri, are the better known of the state's two mountain ranges. But a little farther south, just beyond the Arkansas River Valley, are the Ouachita Mountains, an east-to-west arrangement of parallel ridges that stretch into Oklahoma, with elevation topping out at about 2,700 feet. Solitude is the norm in this relatively undeveloped region of the Ouachitas, typified by striking rocky outcroppings and dramatic mountaintop views. While this route traverses the range over three to four days, the area affords plentiful opportunities for exploration beyond the trail.

GENERAL INFORMATION

While Lewis and Clark were venturing up the Missouri River in pursuit of the Northwest Passage, a lesser-known expedition commissioned by Thomas Jefferson was plying the waters of the Ouachita River from the south to explore the interior of the new Louisiana Purchase. “Ouachita” is the French spelling of the word “Washita,” which referred to the indigenous people of the area. The 1804-1805 expedition of William Dunbar and Dr. George Hunter penetrated from Natchez, Mississippi, all the way to the hot springs on the eastern edge of the Ouachita Mountains. Those springs, which Dunbar and Hunter found had long been an important site for people seeking its medicinal qualities, are now encompassed within Hot Springs National Park. The exploration of Dunbar and Hunter provided the first scientific examination of the landscapes, flora, and fauna of early northern Louisiana and southern Arkansas and gave us the first written record of the Ouachita Mountains.

Dunbar wrote in his journal on December 9, 1804: “...further on, the lands on either hand arose into gently swelling hills, clothed chiefly with handsome pine-woods: the road passed along a valley frequently wet, by numerous rills and springs of excellent water which broke from the foot of the hills: as we approached the hot-springs the hills became more elevated and of steep ascent and generally rocky; those hills are here dignified by the name of mountains, altho’ none of those yet in view exceed 4 or 500 feet; it is said that mountains of more than five times the elevation of these hills are to be seen in the Northwest towards the sources of the Washita (sic) river; one of those has been called the glass, Chrystal or Shining mountain, on its surface is to be found vast numbers of large hexagonal prisms of very transparent colorless chrystal...”

Today those quartz crystals are still mined in the Ouachita Mountains, a large portion of which lies within the boundaries of the Ouachita National Forest, a 1.8-million-acre preserve in Arkansas and Oklahoma. The Ouachitas’ unusual east-west orientation creates a dichotomy of ecosystems: the south-facing slopes are exposed to the sun and tend to be drier and covered with pine forests and oak woodlands. The northern slopes, protected from direct sun and consequently more cool and moist, grow a diversity of hardwoods. Atop the ridges, trees are often stunted by wind, frost, and fog, growing no higher than 20 feet. In 1819, English naturalist Thomas Nuttall commented on the stunted oaks as he crossed these same mountains.

THE DRIVE

This route traverses the Fourche and Kiamichi ranges of the Ouachita Mountains east to west for 225 miles, beginning near Perryville, Arkansas, and ending near Talihina, Oklahoma. Top up gas tanks at Perryville, as there is no fuel until Mena, about 165 mostly off-pavement miles to the west. Although the roads are easy-to-moderate dirt and gravel for most of the distance, some ascents become steep, rocky, rutted, and narrow. On the western end, the K-Trail, in particular, offers a challenge. For much of its distance, the route parallels and often intersects the Ouachita National Recreation Trail, a 223-mile through-hiking trail crossing the mountain range.

Leaving the pavement on the eastern edge of the Ouachita National Forest, the route starts just off Arkansas Highway 9 at Forest Trail 132, about 14 miles south of Perryville. Air down here for a softer ride on the rocky roads. The trail quickly ascends and runs along the north slope of Wildcat Mountain, offering the first of many long views of the parallel ridges of the Ouachitas. A narrow, leaf-covered trail runs along the North Fork of the Saline River, then the route follows a spur to an overlook of Lake Winona and campsite atop Crystal Mountain, at 1,699 feet. There’s room for one vehicle and tent here, maybe two in a pinch, and the view is breathtaking, with lichen-covered, stunted oaks protruding from the rocky promontory. If you’re not lucky enough to nab this site, dispersed camping is available throughout the national forest, and there’s also the option of driving a short distance to the Lake Sylvia Recreation Area. No quartz crystals catch the eye on Crystal Mountain, but there’s public crystal hunting at Crystal Vista, south of Mount Ida, Arkansas.

From Crystal Mountain, the route runs through Flatside Wilderness, then traverses the spine of Cedar Mountain and veers off to another appealing campsite at Forked Mountain Bluff, a rock overhang blackened by fires of previous campers.

Soon the site of the Oak Mountain Lookout Tower offers an interesting spot for a break and a little exploration. Although evidence of the tower itself is no longer apparent, foundations and a collapsed stone wall remain, along with a concrete commode, in fine condition, from a long-gone outhouse.

The trail climbs over Powell Mountain (1,795 feet) on a rough, brushy road which leaves a little Texas pinstriping in the paint. Once off the mountain, it’s a short jaunt to another gem of a campsite, this one on the northern shore of Lake Ouachita, a reservoir created by the damming of that same Ouachita River that Hunter and Dunbar explored. On the cold, clear night of our visit, coyotes howled across the cove and a fingernail moon reflected in the still waters. A heavy fog enshrouded the lake the next morning, encouraging us to linger until the sun burned away the mist. From there, the trail continues to the hamlet of Story, on Arkansas Highway 27. The Bluebell Cafe and Grocery seems to be the only going concern in town, with a set of once-operable gas pumps now offering only false hope. Bluebell is a popular resupply depot for through-hikers on the Ouachita Trail and a source of a hot meal for the mostly local lunch crowd.

After this brush with civilization, the trail heads back into the forest, soon coming alongside Fiddlers Creek then popping out on U.S. Highway 270 for a brief stint of pavement to Big Brushy Recreation Area. Back into the hills, the road climbs to the top of Grapevine Mountain at 2,103 feet, then winds down into Mena, a city of 5,500 with fuel, food, and lodging. We shamelessly indulged in the benefits of big city life with a luxurious night at the Janssen Place Bed and Breakfast and pizza at The Ouachitas, a coffee roaster and eatery in downtown Mena.

From Mena, the trail picks up on Arkansas Highway 88, aka Skyline Drive. This turns into a glorious 54-mile paved journey along the spines of Rich and Winding Stair mountains known

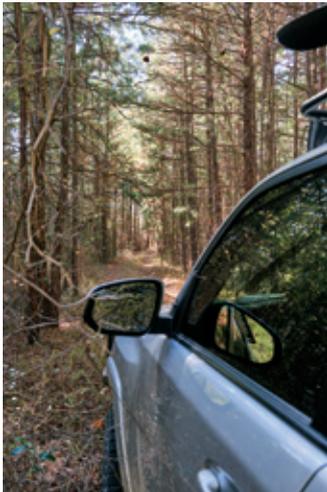
WAYPOINT



LEFT COLUMN
34°50'52.3"N, 92°53'44.9"W
34°37'59.4"N, 93°52'55.3"W

RIGHT COLUMN
34°41'21.7"N, 93°21'50.7"W
34°50'55.8"N, 92°49'11.8"W
34°37'35.3"N, 94°48'43.5"W

OPENING PAGE
34°50'17.2"N, 92°56'12.6"W



34°47'14.4"N, 93°16'59.6"W, 34°34'56.7"N, 94°14'5.6"W

as the Talimena National Scenic Byway. Along the byway are Queen Wilhelmina State Park, Talimena State Park, and other camping areas, as well as abundant scenic overlooks and access points for the Ouachita Trail and other footpaths.

Our trail, however, leaves the pavement about 16 miles from Mena, turning south down the mountainside after reaching Rich Mountain's summit at 2,681 feet. The rocky zigzag of a dirt road ends up on another paved highway for a short distance then picks up the county road that will become the infamous K-Trail as it travels west into Oklahoma. The "K" stands for Kiamichi, the mountain whose crest the route traverses. Its notoriety stems from both its tendency to destroy tires and scratch paint jobs thanks to its surface of sharp rocks and encroaching vegetation and from ongoing controversy over access. Part of the trail is in the national forest, part of it is not, and getting a straight answer about where it's proper to drive is difficult. As a result, although the traditional route of the K-Trail extends to the western edge of the Kiamichi near Clayton, Oklahoma, our route leaves the trail at the Indian Highway junction, about 23 miles west of the Three Sticks Monument at US Highway 259. It's a very slow drive, and camping regulations are uncertain along this segment. Clearly, some do camp at the Kiamichi Lookout Tower, about nine miles west of 259. It's best, however, to make an early start and get off the K-Trail before dark. At Indian Highway, it's an easy paved drive north toward Talihina, with fuel, food, and lodging, or back east into the national forest for camping in the Pashubbe Trailhead area, near the beautiful Kiamichi River.

ACCESS

FROM PERRYVILLE, ARKANSAS travel south 14 miles on Arkansas Highway 9 to Forest Road 132 and turn west.

FROM TALIHINA, OKLAHOMA travel south on US Highway 271 for 4.8 miles to Indian Highway. Continue south on Indian Highway for 7.4 miles to the K-Trail and turn east.

Logging, hunting leases, and changes in national forest usage regulations all factor into access. Obtain and examine national forest Motor Vehicle Use Maps and seek out local knowledge as well. Improvisation may occasionally be required when roads are closed for various reasons.

LOGISTICS

TOTAL MILES 225

SUGGESTED TIME 3-4 days

LONGEST DISTANCE WITHOUT FUEL 165 miles

FUEL SOURCES

PERRYVILLE, ARKANSAS 35°0'19.728"N, 92°48'3.416"W

MENA, ARKANSAS 34°34'59.268"N, 94°14'8.556"W

TALIHINA, OKLAHOMA 34°45'6.372"N, 95°2'52.224"W

DIFFICULTY (2.0 out of 5.0)

The majority of the route follows easy to moderate forest and county roads, with the exception of rough, rocky, and steep terrain on mountain ascents. High-clearance four-wheel drive with low range is strongly advised.

WHEN TO GO

Spring, fall, and winter are good times to go. Heat, humidity, and insects make summertime less enjoyable but not intolerable. Winters are generally mild and offer great views during "leaf-off," but late fall has the advantage of comfortable temperatures and colorful foliage.

PERMITS AND FEES

None except where otherwise noted.

SUGGESTED CAMPSITES (All in Ouachita National Forest)

CRYSTAL MOUNTAIN

Accommodates 1-2 vehicles

Scenic overlook

34°50'17.232"N, 92°56'12.588"W

LAKE SYLVIA RECREATION AREA

Thirty-eight campsites, \$15-25 per night

34°52'2.208"N, 92°49'20.712"W

FORKED MOUNTAIN BLUFF

Accommodates 4-5 vehicles

34°51'48.996"N, 93°2'5.82"W

LAKE OUACHITA

Accommodates 2-3 vehicles

34°41'21.732"N, 93°21'50.724"W

PASHUBBE CREEK TRAILHEAD

Multiple primitive campsites along main road

34°39'12.672"N, 94°37'22.944"W

CONTACTS

OUACHITA NATIONAL FOREST JESSIEVILLE/WINONA/FOURCHE OFFICE
(501) 984-5313

OUACHITA NATIONAL FOREST MENA/ODEN OFFICE (479) 394-2382
 OUACHITA NATIONAL FOREST OKLAHOMA RANGER DISTRICT
 (580) 494-6402

RESOURCES

OUACHITA NATIONAL FOREST fs.usda.gov/main/ouachita/home
 CRYSTAL VISTA fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fsm9_039424.pdf

It is recommended that the traveler utilize redundant GPS devices (like a phone and a dedicated GPS), along with paper maps and a compass. This track, along with all other Overland Routes, can be downloaded on our website at overlandjournal.com/overland-routes/ 



Cartography by David Medeiros (mapbliss.com)

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Overland Route descriptions are intended to be an overview of the trail rather than turn-by-turn instructions. We suggest you download an offline navigation app and our GPX track, as well as source detailed paper maps as an analog backup. As with any remote travel, circumstances can change dramatically. Drivers should check road conditions with local authorities before attempting the route and be ready to turn back should extreme conditions occur.

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