

THE P • A • R • K • S

Featuring the fine stalking and camera skills of our own Becky Hinson on her visits to local wildlife preserves and parks



If your family enjoys hiking, the Ravine Gardens State Park is an excellent place to visit. Located at 1600 Twigg Street in Palatka, it's approximately a 35 minute drive from Magnolia. Point. Admission is \$5 per vehicle, but be sure to bring correct change as payment is made in an honor box.

Hours are from 8am until sundown for pedestrians and the paved loop, running around the gardens, closes one hour before sunset if you are in a vehicle.

Dogs are allowed. They must be leashed at all times on a six foot handheld leash and never left unattended. Pets must be well behaved and you have to clean up after them.



The Ravine is 146 acres of natural and formal gardens famous for housing eighteen different types of azaleas. The peak blooming season is January through March

depending on weather conditions.



This park is all natural and not caused by flooding or a sinkhole. The spring fed creek, at the Whitewater Branch, is a permanent feature with water bubbling up from underground carrying soil and sand to the St. Johns River.

There are four trails to hike depending on your desired level of activity. I made a full day of hiking and did all four. I don't recommend trying this route unless you are in good physical condition. It was an enjoyable hike but I must admit with exposed roots and steep banks, I did take a

couple of tumbles. The ravines are up to 120 feet with some banks at 45 degree angles so stick to the paved areas if you're not accustomed to vigorous exercise.

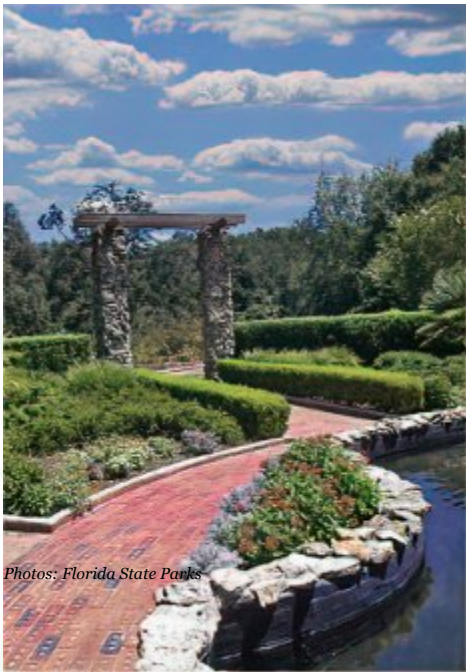
If you're looking for an easy trail, there are 1.8 miles of paved road running around the top of the ravine overlooking the spring fed stream. This path contains outlooks to view the scenery and is also open to walkers and bicycles. There are some steep elevations so beware unless you are in good physical condition.

The Whitewater Path at 0.72 miles is considered easy. Access to this path allows you to explore the bottom of the ravine. Keep in mind, the path is dirt and gravel and may be challenging if you don't exercise regularly.



Continued





Photos: Florida State Parks



Photo: Florida State Parks

If you're looking for a moderate hike, try the Springs Trail. It's only 0.6 miles and follows narrow ravine paths and historic stone stairs. Look out for exposed roots and steep slopes.



Ravine Gardens - 1941

For those of you looking for a longer hike, try the Azalea Trail. It's 2.5 miles and has incredible views of the ravines with suspension bridges. Beware of the numerous stone stairs, steep elevation changes and lots of exposed roots on narrow paths.

There are numerous areas to picnic along the paved ravine perimeter road if hiking isn't your thing. You'll find picnic tables and grills at no additional charge. Look for stairways and trail access into the ravines near each picnic area. Alcoholic beverages are not permitted.

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The paved road also offers bicyclists a great view of the gardens. Helmets are recommended for adults and required for all children 16 and under. If you're looking for a longer distance to cycle, check out the Palatka to St. Augustine Trail located over the bridge in East Palatka. There you'll find 19 miles of paved trail running through scenic routes and agricultural landscapes.

While I didn't see any birds or animals the day I visited, the scenery was incredible. It's not too late to see the azalea blooms so plan a trip soon! Don't forget to take some photos!

