

Living Here

A GUIDE FOR THE REGION'S NEWCOMERS

Keep Kings Pinnacle in mind for a great hike

Gaston park's lesser known peak is more scenic, takes less time

It's a perfect afternoon to explore, so where should you go? If you're new to Charlotte, I suggest you head west to Crowders Mountain State Park in Gaston County.

The drive takes half an hour, and it's worth going up Crowders Mountain because at the top, on a clear day, you can see the city's skyline.

The state park, established in 1974, includes Crowders Mountain and also nearby Kings Pinnacle, which was acquired by the state in 1987.

"Most people don't realize we have two peaks," said Denise Marquez, a park office assistant who admits she's partial to Kings Pinnacle.

Kings Pinnacle, at 1,705 feet, is taller than Crowders at 1,625 feet. But Crowders is more familiar because it was the original peak in the park, and because of its touted view of the Charlotte skyline and its attraction to climbers (with cliffs ranging to 150 feet high).

COMMENTARY

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And to the west, you can see the foothills rising through the sun and haze. Hawks and other raptors find a sweet ride as the wind whips up the rocky cliffs.

Pinnacle Trail, up and back, took us less than three hours, and we took our time at the top, exploring one end to the other at the peak.

The Pinnacle hiking trail was lined with mountain laurel, rhododendron, evergreens and an occasional wildflower. The trails are marked for difficulty (easy/moderate/strenuous), so keep that in mind when considering everyone in your group.

There's nothing worse than having to drag a friend down a slope when their knees are getting weak. The Pinnacle trail, rated strenuous, is quite rocky, so make sure you wear hiking boots or very sturdy trail shoes.

Two easy ones are the Fern Trail and the Lake Trail, so head for those if your group is wearing light tennis shoes, or partied hard the night before.

Last week, my family went to the park, expecting to take the Crowders Mountain trail to see the skyline, something I hadn't experienced in years. After talking to a park ranger, we decided instead to climb Kings Pinnacle because we got a late start and didn't have four hours.

The Pinnacle trail is 1.7 miles one way, so it doesn't take as long as the 2.5-mile Crowders trail.

But Pinnacle is a rugged hike, and its trails more scenic and varied than Crowders. Even teenagers who grumble beforehand find themselves thanking you for taking them, after they see the interesting rock formations, green vistas and a great view from the top.

On Kings Pinnacle you see far-off farmland, businesses, churches, country roads, tiny cars crawling along Interstate 85 and, to the northeast, Crowders Mountain.

Unlike Crowders, Kings Pinnacle doesn't have a hunch of tall communications towers at the peak.

The park also has camping, and picnicking sites. We passed Boy Scout troops on their way back from a night of backpacking in the forest.

We didn't decide to drive to the park until noon last Saturday, but the hike was a successful outing. That night, my 13-year-old son asked if we could do more hiking like that.

I want to. Those ancient mountains and sheer cliffs sure beat the mystery and danger of video games.

How to get there: Crowders Mountain State Park is in Gaston County, just 25 miles west of Charlotte and 6 miles southwest of Gastonia. Take I-85 south to Exit 13, turn left off the exit and go to the traffic light. Then turn right onto U.S. 74 (Franklin Boulevard). Go two miles to the next traffic light. Turn left onto Sparrow Springs Road. Go 2.5 miles and then turn right; the park entrance will be on the right.

TIP: To avoid crowded trails, get there early. The park opens at 8 a.m. and closes at 7 p.m.