



PHOTOS BY ERIC HOFFMAN, CHASE WAITS, AND JOHN W. STALLSMITH

Thousands of people take part in the annual Winter Hike.

WINTER WHITE

Hocking Hills dazzles with coats of ice, snow



Photo workshops are popular during the winter.



The luxurious Glass House has been open only since December.



The ice formations are a photographer's dream.



The ice towers at the bottom of waterfalls can be enormous.



Winter brings a special beauty to Hocking Hills.



The Inn & Spa at Cedar Falls is rustic yet sophisticated.

BY MIKE KELLY
SPECIAL TO THE BLADE

LOGAN, Ohio — Hocking Hills is not exactly a well-kept secret, as evidenced by the fact that the area draws close to 3 million visitors a year, which is more people than visit national parks in the Everglades and Death Valley combined.

The ruggedly beautiful area, about 50 miles southeast of Columbus, includes thousands of acres of steep, thickly forested hills, big sandstone and shale rock formations, misty waterfalls, deep gorges, steep cliffs, and recessed caves. Perched on the edge of the Appalachian foothills, the area is one of the most scenic in the Midwest.

Outdoor activities such as hiking, canoeing, mountain biking, and rock climbing are popular from spring through fall in these parts, and from September through early November, visitors pack the dozens of cabins, cottages, and lodges in the area to take in the riotously colorful fall foliage, which is as spectacular as anything to be found in the mountains of New England.

But winter puts a whole new face on Hocking Hills. Its craggy hills are smoothed by blankets of white, the trees glisten with ice, and giant icicles cling to the cliffs. The waterfalls at Old Man's Cave, Cedar Falls, Conkle's Hollow, Ash Cave, and Cantwell Cliffs become frozen sheets of sparkling crystal. Up close, the geometric whorls and patterns in the ice look like elaborate works of abstract art.

Winter hiking, cross-country skiing, and bird-watching (no leaves to block the view) become the activities of choice, though in recent years, a number of day spas have opened around here, and it seems every other cabin in the woods has its own hot tub, so plenty of folks are content to pamper themselves and enjoy the wintry scenes through the nearest window.

Still, hardy souls revel in the frosty season which lingers into March. Hocking Hills has long attracted artists, and there are dozens of galleries and crafters' shops in the area, many of them open year-round.

About a four-hour drive from Toledo, Hocking Hills is a terrific place to relax and rejuvenate at any time of the year, but there are those who would contend that late winter really brings out the best in it. And you know, it's pretty hard to argue with that point of view.

INFORMATION: Hocking Hills State Park, 740-385-6842 or <http://bit.ly/edNr3V>; The Inn & Spa at Cedar Falls, 800-653-2557 or www.innatcedarfalls.com; 4 Seasons Hideaways, 740-407-1059 or www.4seasonshideaways.com