Chillin' at Chicot

The Times visits Louisiana's largest state park.

By Josh Caffery
Photos by Terri Fensel

About half an hour north of Lafayette by car, the terrain begins to shift. More pine trees rise along the roadides and where there was sheer horizontality before, the land starts to undulate softly. Just above Opelousas, Louisiana 167 snakes off from Interstate 49, through 20 minutes of cane fields and into downtown Ville Platte. An even smaller thoroughfare, Louisiana 3024, hits 167 at a bend in the road and winds seven miles north to the entrance of Chicot State Park.

Built around 2,000-acre Lake Chicot, Chicot State Park is Louisiana's largest state park and sits almost directly in the center of Louisiana. This central positioning lends Chicot a mixture of the best of Louisiana's outdoor environments. The lazy swamps and bayous of Southern Louisiana curl pleasantly around the gentle hills that mark the margins of northern Louisiana, thus offering park visitors not only good fishing, but good hiking and camping as well.

Twenty-two miles of trails run through the bottomland forest of the park, encircling Lake Chicot and leading to various sites for primitive camping. There is also a 5.8-mile horse trail. Although the sweltering heat of the July days seems to have discouraged any hikers from Chicot's trail system this afternoon, a number of the park's approximately 200 camping spaces are occupied with recreational vehicles whose license plates identify them as being from places as far flung as Ontario, Canada and New Hampshire, as well as from various locations within Louisiana. All of the camping spaces, called "spurs," are equipped with water and electricity, which comes in handy for RV owners looking to insulate themselves from the heat with the convenience of mobile air conditioning.

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Campers and locals escape from the heat in the park's public swimming pool.

The park is divided into three main areas: South Landing, North Landing and East Landing. The South Landing contains about half of the camping spurs, as well as 27 cabins, picnicking areas, an area reserved for group camping and a boat-launching area which includes a fishing pier and a dock where aluminum john-boat may be rented.

Connected to the South Landing by a tree-covered road, the North Landing holds the other half of the campsites, a second boat launch and the Conservation Lodge, which may be rented for groups of up to 14. A longer, 400-foot fishing pier extends over the clear water and abundant cypress trees of Lake Chicot.

The East Landing, the least developed area of the park, can be reached from an alternate entrance of Louisiana 106. It also features a dock and a boat launch, as well as a barbecue pavilion and a meeting room.

Besides the obvious beauty of Lake Chicot, it is also renowned for its fishing. Record sac-a-lait, bluegill and goggle-eyed perch and largemouth bass have been caught here, although the word is that the fishing has suffered since the real heat of the summer set in.

"It's probably too hot," says Christie Moran, who has taken the afternoon off to enjoy a peaceful afternoon on the fishing pier of the North Landing, only to be accosted by a nosy journalist. "Even for the fish." Snagging her line in a tangle of cypress limbs, she decides to pack it in and try another place.

At the boat launch of the South Landing, Jeremy Poche, 10, seems to be faring better. Employing plump, still-squirming segments of worm body, he hooks perch after shiny perch, tossing the little fish generously back in the water.

"We had some crickets, but a raccoon ate them all," says Jeremy's father, Donald Poche. One nibbled edge of the Styrofoam worm container indicates the wily raccoon tried to get at the worms as well.

"Yeah, he tried," says the younger Poche, plucking the hook from the jaw of another over-eager perch. "I don't think he liked the worms, though."

Adjacent to Chicot is the Louisiana State Arboretum, a nature preserve and botanical garden in 300 acres of beech-magnolia forest. Well-maintained, pebbled trails lead through the Arboretum, complete with informative plaques about vegetation and the wildlife one is likely to see in the area. A range of topography, from flat forest to precipitous (for Louisiana) hills, makes the Arboretum one of the best places in Louisiana to see a wide variety of vegetation.

So if you're sick of the AC this summer, Chicot State Park is the place to be. Saddle up your pony, hook up your RV or gas up your boat — and rediscover why they call Louisiana the Sportsman's Paradise.

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