THE IRON ROAD

Get a taste of rock climbing—with no experience necessary—at NROCKS Outdoor Adventures.

WRITTEN BY LORI KERSEY
Picture it. You’re standing on a suspension bridge strung 150 feet off the ground between two razorback edges of a rock formation high in the mountains of Pendleton County. You see treetops swaying beneath you with each shaky step.

Each year, thousands of outdoor enthusiasts flock to NROCKS Outdoor Adventures in Circleville, West Virginia, for their chance to cross that bridge and the rest of the three- to five-hour Via Ferrata, or “iron road,” course. Visitors hike breathtaking trails and climb rock faces using steel rungs—all while safely hooked to a cable that runs the length of the course and is anchored to the rock.

The origins of this style of climbing are hazy, but a via ferrata as we know it today dates back to World War I, when both Austro-Hungarian and Italian armies built protected climbing routes to transport troops and supplies through otherwise impassable mountain ranges. Today, via ferratas are mostly used by outdoor enthusiasts, a way for even the most inexperienced adventurer to experience the thrills of rock climbing.

Set in Stone
The via ferrata came to West Virginia in the early 2000s. Stu Hammett, an attorney living in Maryland, purchased 142 acres of the Nelson Rocks Preserve in 1997 with the goal of making it a climbing park. The rocks are part of the same River Knobs that include nearby Seneca Rocks and Champe Rocks. “There was some climbing already established there, but it was largely not very well explored or documented,” Hammett says.

He found the property in the time between two unrelated tragedies in his personal life—his father...
Hamnett, a rock climber who had suffered a fall a few years earlier that broke his back and left him with limited mobility, built trails and cabins on the property. But his climbing park did not catch on as anticipated. “I thought word would spread like wildfire because it was essentially a new climbing area being made available. But it was a lot slower than I was expecting.” He began looking for a way to boost his income and move to West Virginia full-time. That’s when he heard about the via ferrata at Torrent Falls in Kentucky’s Red River Gorge, the first to be built in the United States. Hamnett climbed the course in January 2002. “After I saw what they had—and how it was so solid from a safety standpoint and yet very exciting—I knew that I could do one at Nelson,” Hamnett says.

By June of the same year, he opened the via ferrata at Nelson Rocks—the nation’s second and West Virginia’s first and only. To install the route, Hamnett took on the role of general contractor and hired a crew of fellow climbers. Each was experienced in sport climbing, which requires drilling stainless steel bolts into the rock, as opposed to the traditional style where climbers use the rock’s natural cracks for hand- and footholds.

Things finally started falling in place once the Via Ferrata opened. Even from the first season, Hamnett was confident the venture was going to at least be able to support itself. John Hall, owner of Virginia-based Endless Horizons, bought the property in 2009 and expanded the operation. He rebranded the park as NROCKS Outdoor Adventures and, over a two-year period, added a welcome center, expanded lodging, and began offering zipline canopy tours.
“My feet would go out on the bridge, but my knees said, ‘if you take one more step I’m buckling, and then you’re crawling back on your stomach.’”

LaVonne Hamnett
The Via Ferrata remains NROCKS’ main attraction, with 10,000 to 15,000 people completing the course each year.

Follow the Iron Road

The minimum age for the route is 13 years old. David Huber, Endless Horizons’ director of program operations, says people in their 70s have climbed the Via Ferrata. Still, the route is not for the faint of heart, as Hammett’s wife, LaVonne, found out.

The Hammetts used to rock climb together before Stu’s injury. She tried the Via Ferrata and got only as far as the ledge leading to the bridge. “It wasn’t the height, but it was all the movement,” she says. “The bridge moved. The trees moved. The clouds moved. And what you take in visually, your brain reacts to it.”

“My feet would go out on the bridge, but my knees said, ‘If you take one more step I’m buckling, and then you’re crawling back on your stomach.’” LaVonne tried two or three times but never made it across.

The route has several areas near the beginning where people can get off, should they decide the heights are too much. Huber says the staff is good at gauging who might need extra help. “They’re trained to safely guide people to the ground,” he says. “It’s just part of the process, you know. It’s not for everyone.”

Very few people turn back, though, even if not everyone wants a second go at it. State Delegate Pat McGeehan of Chester tried the Via Ferrata during a family vacation to Canaan Valley a few years ago. McGeehan isn’t much of a thrill seeker—he was just planning on taking the kids to a petting zoo when his younger brothers came up with the idea of going to NROCKS.

“That’s the first time I ever went rock climbing,” McGeehan says. “It was exciting. The views were breathtaking. It definitely gives you a little bit of a workout.” While he enjoyed the experience, McGeehan says it may be the kind of adventure he experiences only once.

Others thrive on the adrenaline rush. Katie Welch, a 24-year-old EMT from Morgantown, has been rock climbing for more than five years, taking on crags at Seneca Rocks, the New River Gorge, and Coopers Rock State Forest. While a via ferrata might seem like a tamer experience than free-climbing a rock face, “from a rock climber’s perspective, I thought it was fun but still challenging,” Welch says. “I always felt safe. But at a couple points, even as a climber, it got a little exciting getting close to the edge.”

On the suspension bridge, Welch’s guide told climbers to take a moment to sit on one of the rungs. “That was such a cool thing, to sit down and there’s just you and the planks and all this open space,” she says. Welch said she’d recommend a visit to NROCKS to anyone. “It’s a great way to get into climbing.”