

This Day in History... October 22, 1977

New River Gorge Bridge

On October 22, 1977, the New River Gorge Bridge opened to motorists in West Virginia. The longest single-span arch bridge and highest roadway bridge in the world at the time of its completion, it cut a treacherous 40 minute drive down to just one minute.

The New River Gorge area boomed with coal mining towns during the late 1800s. As the industry faded in the 20th century, families moved on and a lush hardwood forest reclaimed the steep gorge. Those who remained endured a 40-minute drive over narrow, winding mountain roads to cross the river, discouraging interstate traffic and business growth.



The New River is considered the third oldest river on earth, estimated to be between 260 and 325 million years old. And uncommonly, it flows northward.

West Virginia's Division of Highways stepped in during the early 1970s to help. A bridge over the gorge would not only benefit the small number of locals, but also completed Corridor L of the Appalachian Development Highway System. Corridor L removes 40 miles from the north/south trip between Highways 79 and 64/77 (such as if you were traveling from Pittsburgh, PA, to Charlotte, NC). Construction began in June 1974 and the total cost of the bridge was \$37 million. The bridge was built with COR-TEN steel, which when exposed to the elements rusts in such a way as to create a stable barrier that prevents internal corrosion. Because of this, it never requires painting, which saves the state millions every year. In all, the bridge contains 88 million pounds of steel and concrete.

Opened to traffic on October 22, 1977, the 3,030 feet long, 1,700 foot span, 669 foot wide, New River Gorge Bridge shortened the 45-minute trip down to just one minute. At the time it was completed, the bridge was the longest single-span arch bridge in the world, a record it held for 26 years. Today it's the fifth longest, though still the longest in the United States. It was also the highest at the time it opened and today is the third highest in the US, standing 876 feet above the river.

On average, 13,775 vehicles traveled across the bridge daily in 2020. The area has become a popular destination for outdoor adventurers, with "Bridge Day" the highlight of the year. On that day, the bridge is temporarily closed to traffic. On the third Saturday of October, about 100,000 spectators watch as several hundred parachutists make an 876-foot jump from the bridge and parachute 876 feet down into the canyon. West Virginia's largest single-day event is so well attended automobile traffic is rerouted during the jumps.



One of the largest extreme sports events in the world, Bridge Day has been an annual tradition since 1980.

Built to spur economic growth in West Virginia's isolated Appalachian Mountains, the New River Gorge Bridge has become the region's star attraction and one of the most photographed places in West Virginia. Thousands of people flock to the area each year, drawn by the spectacular steel-arch bridge and the recreational activities that have grown around it. Among these are a two-foot-wide catwalk directly below the bridge, bridge walk tours, rafting, and more.

In 1978, the 72,000-plus acres around the bridge were made a national river, and in 2020, it was redesignated the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve. The bridge itself was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2013.



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