

Underground playgrounds

KELLY WILLIAMS, Correspondent

Interested in checking out the beautiful stalactite and stalagmite formations in the Southeast's caverns and "show" caves? Here are nine located in North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee.

The Lost Sea

SWEETWATER, TENN.

This underground body of water between Knoxville and Chattanooga is not technically a "sea." It's a 4 1/2 acre lake, and the 75-minute guided tour includes a ride in a glass bottom boat. You walk half a mile from the entrance to the 800-by-225-foot lake room; along the way, you pass the famous Council Room, where a range of Indian artifacts have been found, including pottery, arrowheads, weapons and jewelry. Parts of the cave were mined for bat droppings used to make saltpeter (an ingredient of gun powder). In 1939, bones of a jaguar from 20,000 years ago were found in the cavern. Today, those bones are on display at the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

Overnight tour/camping packages are available; call for details.

Get there: 6 hours, 45 minutes. Take Interstate 40 west to Asheville, then Interstate 75 (at Knoxville, Tenn.); take I-75 south to Tenn. 68 (at Sweetwater, Tenn.); take Tenn. 68 north (Lost Sea Pike) to Lost Sea Road.

Hours: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily; longer hours March-October.

Admission: \$13.95; \$4 for ages 5-12; 4 and younger, free. Group rates.

Details: (423) 337-6616; www.thelostsea.com.

Forbidden Caverns

SEVIERVILLE, TENN.

Despite the name, you can explore this natural underground complex by driving 5 1/2 hours west.

Years ago, Indians lived in the caverns and used flint found inside to make arrowheads, knives and scrapers. During Prohibition (and




In Sweetwater, Tenn., guests board glass bottom boats to tour the Lost Sea, the world's second largest underground lake.

AP Photo by Wade Payne

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More Info

National Caves Association: www.cavern.com.

National Park Service: www.nps.gov.

National Speleological Society: www.caves.org.

U.S. Geological Survey: www.usgs.gov.

Tips for Cave Visitors

Some of the caverns travel underground for miles. If you're the type who is uncomfortable being stuck in an elevator, exploring show caves and caverns may not be for you.

Keep in mind that the temperature in most caverns is a cool 58 degrees, no matter the season. Even in summer, a light jacket or sweat shirt should be worn. Boots and socks also are recommended.

Most sites allow photography, so bring your camera.

Don't even think about trying to break off a piece of rock to bring back as a souvenir. That's a major no-no. Your photos will have to suffice.

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until 1943), the caverns were used for moonshining. The not-too-obvious source of water (the underground lake beneath English Mountain) and the isolation of the site made it ideal for making illegal beverages.

It became a tourist attraction in the 1960s. The temperature is always 58 degrees. Popular stops on the one-hour walking tour include Rock Candy Mountain, a popular stalactite formation. You'll see calcite formations that are still growing, and a wall of "cave onyx" -- calcium carbonate -- that the cavern proprietors say is the largest such wall in existence.

Get there: 5 hours, 30 minutes. Take I-40 west to Asheville, then U.S. 411/Tenn. 35. Turn left on Blowing Cave Road.

Hours: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. daily, April-November.

Admission: \$12; children \$6. Group rates.

Details: (865) 453-5972; www.forbiddencavern.com.

Boone's Cave Park

LEXINGTON

Proof that Daniel Boone once lived in the area is scarce, but legend has it that the 16-year-old frontiersman and his family settled in Davidson County in 1750. Boone supposedly hid from Indians in a cave on the Yadkin River on grounds near his home. Another story is that his family lived in this particular cave their first year in the area.

The cave goes back 80 feet and sits in a 110-acre park near the community of Churchland. The main room, right inside the entrance, has a 5 1/2-foot ceiling and measures about 10 by 15 feet; two smaller rooms are farther in. Get a taste for Boone's and early settlers' lifestyles by seeing an exhibit, "A Delicious County: Yadkin Valley, 1670-1770," at the Davidson County Historical Museum, in Lexington (about a 20-minute drive from the park). The exhibit includes info on the cave; it continues through June.

Get there: 3 hours. Take I-40 west to I-85 south just beyond the Yadkin River. Take N.C. 150 north to Boone's Cave Road, turn left.

Hours: 8 a.m.-5 p.m. daily; open until 8 p.m. May-September.

Admission: Free.

Details: www.davidsoncountync.com.

Linville Caverns

MARION

North Carolina's only "show" caverns are at the base of Humpback Mountain in Linville Valley. They opened to the public in 1939. The caverns, which extend about 2,000 feet into Humpback, are on three levels; only the middle one is open to visitors. There are 11 chambers to see, including the popular Wedding Scene and Tobacco Leaves formations.

The rock is limestone, and mineral-packed water that has dripped down over the centuries has created stalactites -- limestone-based "icicles" -- and stalagmites (similar ground-up formations created from drips that landed on the cavern floor). Where stalactites and stalagmites meet and join, mineral columns are formed. You'll see them here.

Custom-designed lighting allows you to appreciate the caverns' splendor, but be aware that these caverns are slightly cooler than others, with a year-round temperature of 52 degrees.

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Keep your eyes open for Eastern pipistrelle bats hanging from the ceiling. Don't disturb them. They're hibernating. In the subterranean creeks are three types of trout. Toward the back is a "Bottomless Pool" at least 250 feet deep.

Guided 30-minute tours leave every few minutes; the last starts five to 10 minutes before closing.

Get there: 4 hours. Take I-40 west to Asheville; then N.C. 226 north through Marion to U.S. 221; continue north for 18 miles; the cavern's entrance is on the left at the base of the mountain.

Hours: 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Saturday-Sunday; open daily in March. Open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily April-May, September-October; 9 a.m.-6 p.m. daily June-August.

Admission: \$6; \$4 for ages 5-12; \$4.50 for 62 and older; 4 and younger, free. Group rates. Wheelchair accessible; no children in strollers or backpacks.

Nearby: Linville Mountain Gem Shop, Linville Falls.

Details: (800) 419-0540; www.linvillecaverns.com.

Caverns of Natural Bridge

NATURAL BRIDGE, VA.

Natural Bridge Park's main draw may be its natural stone span, but the grounds also contain the Saltpeter Cave, where ammunition was made during the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812 and the Civil War. Admission includes a 45-minute guided tour into one of the East Coast's deepest public-access caverns. It descends 34 stories. You walk down. The major show areas include the Colossal Dome Room, Mirror Lake, Well Room and Canyon Room. All are 54 degrees year-round.

If you're a history buff, check out Natural Bridge itself and look for George Washington's initials. He carved them into the bridge when doing land survey work in 1750.

Get there: 3 hours, 45 minutes. Take I-40 west, then exit 261 toward Hillsborough. Turn right at N.C. 86, cross into Virginia. Take Va. 265 north ramp toward South Boston. Merge onto U.S. 29 north. Merge onto U.S. 501 north. Turn left onto Va. 130, which becomes U.S. 11/South Lee Highway; follow signs.

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. March-November.

Admission: \$10; \$6 for ages 5-11; 4 and younger, free.

Details: (800) 533-1410; www.naturalbridgeva.com.

Tuckaleechee Caverns

TOWNSEND, TENN.

Legend holds that the Cherokee knew of these caverns and tried to hide them from white settlers, who nevertheless discovered them around 1850. The caverns were opened to the public in 1931, then closed due to the Depression. The caverns were reopened in 1953; the next year, the famous Big Room was discovered. It's more than 400 feet long, 300 feet across and 150 feet deep; stalagmites there reach lengths of 24 feet. The milelong guided tour includes the 200-foot-high Silver Falls, a double waterfall.

Get there: 6 hours, 30 minutes. Take I-40 west to Asheville, then U.S. 441 (near Kodiak, Tenn.); take U.S. 441 south to U.S. 321; go west on U.S. 321 to Townsend; follow signs.

Hours: 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday-Sunday.

Admission: \$12; \$6 for ages 5-11; 4 and younger, free.

Details: (865)448-2274; www.tuckaleecheecaverns.com.

Dixie Caverns

SALEM, VA.

Dixie Caverns, six miles from Roanoke College, may be more famous for its onsite pottery shop. The

cavern tour takes 45 minutes, and is largely horizontal. You only descend 10 feet, but the quarter-mile tour route goes inside the mountain behind the entrance. You'll see seven or eight rooms on your visit. There's also a Rock & Mineral Shop on the property, and the nearby Antique Mall showcases wares from more than 40 dealers.

Get there: 3 hours, 45 minutes. Take I-40 west to U.S. 220 north toward Roanoke. Merge onto I-81 toward Bristol. Take Va. 647 exit (near Roanoke); follow signs.

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily; 9:30 a.m.-6 p.m. June-October.

Admission: \$10; \$5 for ages 5-12; 4 and younger, free.

Details: (540) 380-2085; www.dixiecaverns.com.

Bat Cave Preserve

HENDERSON/RUTHERFORD COUNTIES

No, not the place where Batman and Robin spiral down the pole as they become the Caped Crusaders. This cave in the 186-acre Bat Cave Preserve is in Hickory Nut Gorge, on land owned by the Nature Conservancy. It is accessible only through that organization's field trip program (details at www.nature.org/northcarolina). The Bat Cave is the largest known granite-fissure cave in North America, with a main chamber 300 feet long and 85 feet high. Millions of years ago, the cave formed through rock splits, boulder movements and other motions of the earth. Most other caves form when water dissolves rock. To protect the area's critically endangered Indiana bat, the cave is closed to the public most months to allow the bats to hibernate undisturbed.

Tours are offered June through the beginning of August. Reservations required.

Get there: 2 hours, 30 minutes. Take I-40 west to I-85 south then to U.S. 74 (near Kings Mountain); take U.S. 74 Bypass west to N.C. 9; take N.C. 9 north to U.S. 64 (at Lake Lure); take U.S. 64 west to Bat Cave.

Hours: Public tours by appointment, June-August. Reservations: (828) 749-1700.

Admission: \$12.

Details: (919) 403-8558; www.nature.org/northcarolina.

Chimney Rock Park

CHIMNEY ROCK

No doubt you've seen pictures of this massive, isolated rock or glimpsed it in the 1992 movie "The Last of the Mohicans." Chimney Rock stands within a 1,000-acre park that has been open to the public since 1902.

The cave here isn't drip-created. It's a fissure cave, formed when a slab of rock fell from the main mountain and slid to the cliff base, eventually leaning back against the mountain and creating an opening.

It's called Moonshiner's Cave, and on the self-directed park tour you'll see a wooden sign that says it is named after the illegal distilling industry, which flourished in Hickory Nut Gorge (though there's no proof that moonshiners used this one). Bats? Not known to roost here.

Want the feel of a cave without going into the ground? Needle's Eye is a unique rock formation that is not a cave but contains a narrow passage through a vertical split in the granite. Wend your way through Needle's Eye along 185 stairs.

The Opera Box is a horizontal opening in the cliff with a rock overhang; it offers spectacular views of Lake Lure and Hickory Nut Gorge. If you're more than 4 feet, 6 inches tall, you'll have to duck to enter it.


Get there: 2 hours, 30 minutes. Take I-40 west to I-85 south, then to U.S. 74 (near Kings Mountain); take U.S. 74 Bypass west to N.C. 9; take N.C. 9 north to U.S. 64 (at Lake Lure); take U.S. 64 west through Bat Cave to Chimney Rock.

Hours: Ticket plaza open 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. daily (weather permitting); park remains open 90 minutes longer. Open an hour longer during daylight-saving time.

Admission: \$14; \$6 for ages 6-15; 5 and younger, free. Group rates.

Details: (800) 277-9611; www.chimneyrockpark.com.

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More places to go

Ernst Kastning, a professor of geology at Radford University in Radford, Va., is one of the East Coast's foremost experts on cavern formation in the United States. He's a good choice to explain why so many caverns can be found in northwest Virginia, West Virginia and eastern Tennessee.

"The Allegheny Mountains were created out of limestone, a highly soluble rock," he says. "When water flowed through these mountains, it created a mild acid, which eventually cut through the limestone and created the caverns within the rocks. Conversely, the Blue Ridge Mountains were created out of a specific nonsoluble rock; therefore, caves did not form within them."

If you want to tour more imposing caves, you may want to visit these places, which are a little farther afield.

VIRGINIA'S SHENANDOAH VALLEY

CRYSTAL CAVERNS at Hupp's Hill, Strasburg.

Admission: \$10; \$8 for students/seniors, military; 5 and younger, free. Tours at 11 a.m., 12:30, 2 and 3:30 p.m. and by appointment.

Details: (540) 465-5884;
www.waysideofva.com/crystalcaverns.

SKYLINE CAVERNS, Front Royal.

Admission: \$14; \$7 for ages 7-13; 6 and younger, free.

Hours: 9 a.m.-4 p.m. daily; longer hours spring-fall. Details: (800) 296-4545;
www.skylinecaverns.com.

LURAY CAVERNS, Luray.

Admission: \$19; \$16 for 62 and older; \$9 for ages 6-12; 5 and younger, free.

Hours: 9 a.m.-4 p.m. weekdays, until 5 p.m. weekends; longer hours April-October.

Details: (540) 743-6551;
www.luraycaverns.com.

ENDLESS CAVERNS AND RV RESORT, New Market.

Admission: \$16; \$8 for ages 4-12; 3 and younger, free.

Hours (through June 14): 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily; longer hours June 15-Labor Day.

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Details: (800) 544-2283; www.endlesscaverns.com.

SHENANDOAH CAVERNS, Shenandoah Caverns.

Admission: \$19; \$16 for 62 and older; \$9 for ages 6-14; 5 and younger, free.

Hours: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily through April 14; longer hours April 15-through October.

Details: (540) 477-3115; www.shenandoahcaverns.com.

GRAND CAVERNS REGIONAL PARK, Grottoes.

Call for ticket prices and hours: (888) 430-2283. Open seasonally; guided tours April-October; otherwise, weekends only.

Details: www.uvrpa.org/grandcaverns.htm.

WEST VIRGINIA

LOST WORLD CAVERNS, Lewisburg.

Admission: \$10; \$5 for ages 6-12; 5 and younger, free.

Hours: 10 a.m.-4 p.m. daily through April; longer hours May-October.

Details: (866) 228-3778; www.lostworldcaverns.com.

ORGAN CAVE, Ronceverte.

Admission: \$13.25; \$6.36 for ages 6-12; 5 and younger, free. Single person/private tours: \$21.25. Tours (through March) at noon and 2 p.m. Monday-Saturday; open daily with longer hours, April-October.

Details: (304) 645-7600; www.organcave.com.

SENECA CAVERNS, Riverton.

Admission: \$9; \$8.25 for 62 and older; \$5.50 for ages 6-12; 5 and younger, free.

Hours: 10 a.m.-4 p.m. daily; longer hours April-October.

Details: (800) 239-7647; www.senecacaverns.com.

SMOKEHOLE CAVERNS, Seneca Rocks.

Admission: \$10; \$5.50 for ages 5-12; 4 and younger, free.

Hours: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. Details: (800) 828-8478; www.smokehole.com.

TENNESSEE

BRISTOL CAVERNS, Bristol.

Admission: \$10; \$5 for ages 5-12; 4 and younger, free. Hours (through Oct. 31): 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Saturday, 12:30-5 p.m. Sunday.

Details: www.bristolcaverns.com.

APPALACHIAN CAVERNS, Blountville.

Admission: \$9; \$6 for ages 4-11; 4 and younger, free.

Hours: 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Saturday, 1-5 p.m. Sunday.

Details: (423) 323-2337; www.appalachiancaverns.com.

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