

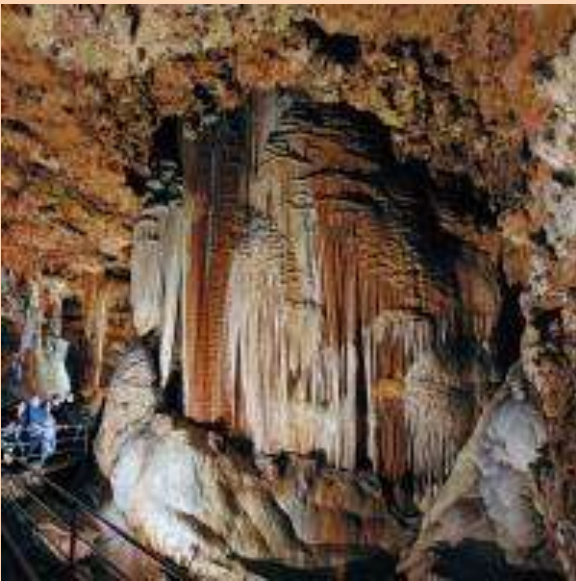
# Going Underground Sites to see *under* Missouri, a guide to Missouri's best caves



Giant Drapolite in Bridal Cave, Springfield ▲



One of countless connecting passages in Mark Twain Cave, Hannibal ▲  
◀ Massive cave formation in Meramec Caverns, Stanton



**With a year round temperature of 50-60 degrees, caves are unbeatable for escaping the summer heat or the winter cold.**

**With** 5380 known caves, including 22 show caves, Missouri can offer a wide array of underground cave experiences. Budding geologists, ecologists, biologists, historians, anthropologists, even paleontologists, will find something of interest in these Missouri caves. If the beaches and amusement parks are becoming too last summer, the answer to your family vacation this year may be to go underground.

## Meramec Caverns, Stanton

One of the best known caves in Missouri is Meramec Caverns near Stanton, a small town off of I-44. This show cave, a cave that has been developed for public tours, is considered the largest commercial cave in Missouri. It is famous for its gigantic rooms and its massive formations; but its most interesting feature is its history.

French explorer and trader Phillip Renault was the first white man to see the cave about 288 years ago. Osage legends told of a giant hole in the ground where Indians found refuge during bad weather. Renault's interest in the cave was purely mercenary. The walls of this giant hole, the legend told, were lined with veins of "glittering yellow metal." While he did not find the gold he hoped for, mining the glittering yellow saltpeter would have been profitable for somebody. Mining began, but ownership of the cave, and thus the mine, was disputed for the next 144 years...until the Civil War when the Southerners blew up a Union gunpowder facility housed in the cave. It was an explosive end to saltpeter mining in Meramec Cave.

No longer a mining operation, the cave was available for booking. Locals began to stage cave parties during the summer to escape the summer heat. Meramec was a popular place for these cave parties because a large room, large enough to accommodate large crowds and a sizable dance floor, was just 300 feet inside the front entrance. In 1898, Charles Ruepple purchased the cave and with a "dance committee" organized cave dance parties into the 1900s. That first large room became known as the Ballroom.

In 1933, Lester Benton Dill purchased the cave with the intent of developing it into a show cave. An avid cave explorer, Dill's discoveries brought the Meramec Cave the worldwide fame it enjoys today. Dill's spelunking adventures opened up seven different levels of caverns, one of which included a newly discovered room with a 70-foot tall drapery-like flowstone formation resembling a giant curtain. Dill named it "The Stage Curtain"

and booked shows to perform in the "Theater Room."

The discovery that secured the Meramec's place on the international list of famous caves was the unearthing of a room containing items belonging to Jesse James, leading to speculation that the cave had once served as the outlaw's hideout.

Today the crowds flock to Meramec to view the unique, massive formations and spacious rooms, and to hear the tour guides recite the history and legend that is Meramec Caverns' claim to fame.

**Also in the Area:** Meramec State Park also includes lantern tours of the less developed Fisher Cave. Just down the road from Meramec Caverns and State Park are the Onondaga Cave and State Park and the Cathedral Cave in Leasburg. Both state parks also offer canoeing, rafting, fishing, hiking, and camping, making the Meramec River area a prime vacation spot for families.



Photo of Meramec flowstone by Christie Ponder.

www.weatherfriend.com/travel/missouri

“...a 70-foot tall drapery-like flowstone formation resembling a giant curtain.”

## Mark Twain Caves, Hannibal

A completely different type of cave can be found further north in Hannibal. Another show cave since 1886, Mark Twain Cave is a labyrinth cave, comprised of a latticework design of long parallel and intersecting tunnels. Mark Twain, who had spent much of his boyhood exploring these tunnels said, *"It was said that one might wander days and nights together through its intricate tangle of rifts and chasms and never find the end of the cave."*

Like most caves, the Mark Twain Cave was discovered accidentally. In 1819, Jack Sims was hunting with his dog when the dog chased a rabbit into a hole leading into the cave. The cave was reportedly another one of Jesse James' hideouts, and it was used before the Civil War as a stop on the Underground Railroad. The cave was made internationally famous as the setting for Tom Sawyer's confrontation with Indian Joe in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

**Also in the Area:** If a walking tour of Mark Twain's hometown of Hannibal, MO isn't enough to stir your interest, perhaps a lantern tour of the wilder Cameron Cave, another labyrinth cave with 260 passages, is more to your taste.

## Bridal Cave, Springfield

The oldest cave in the Lake of the Ozarks region is not famous for its age, but for its legend. An Indian wedding ceremony held in the cave ended when the reluctant bride escaped and threw herself off a nearby cliff, later named, of course, Lover's Leap.

Despite the tragic ending to the first wedding held in the cave, the cave has always been a popular place for marriage ceremonies, hosting in the Bridal Chapel over the years more than 2075 weddings of couples from around the world..

Rated as one of the most scenic caves in North America, the Bridal cave has more onyx formations than any other known cave. Ongoing

### Dinner and a Cave?

For a truly unusual experience, the Missouri traveler can dine in at the **Caveman's BBQ and Steakhouse in Richland**. A dehumidifying pump removes nine pounds of water hourly, keeping the cave at a cool 69 degrees. The restaurant-in-a-cave sits high under a bluff, but a shuttle bus runs customers back and forth from the parking lot.



**"...hosting in the Bridal Chapel over the years more than 2075 weddings of couples from around the world.."**

exploration keeps turning up new discoveries such as Mystery Lake, a large underground lake. Two years of development were required before the crystal clear waters of the previously concealed lake were open to the public.



## GLOSSARY OF COMMON CAVE TERMS

**Cave coral (or popcorn)** - irregular clusters of calcium carbonate (the mineral calcite) which builds up on walls and existing formations as water slowly seeps out.

**Cave formation** - a crystalline deposit of calcite found in a cave, includes cave coral, columns, draperies, flowstone, soda straws, stalactites and stalagmites.

**Column** - a cave formation connecting the floor and the ceiling, created when stalactites and stalagmites grow together or when one of them grows all the way to the floor or ceiling.

**Drapery** - forms where drops of mineral-laden water trickle down the underside of an inclined ceiling, leaving a deposit which folds and curls like a curtain.

**Flowstone** - forms where a film of water flows over walls, floors or formations depositing sheets of calcite (resembles icing).

**Soda straw** - thin-walled hollow tubes about 1/4 inch in diameter. It forms as water runs through the center and deposits rings of calcite around the tip.

**Stalactite** - grows down from the ceiling as water deposits mineral layers over the outside of a plugged soda straw.

**Stalagmite** - grows up from the floor as water drips from above, often (but not always) grows beneath a stalactite. It has a rounded top, compared to the carrot shaped stalactite.

**Wild cave** - an undeveloped cave, often located in a secluded area. Only experienced cavers should enter a wild cave. No fee is usually charged, and there are no lights or pathways.

Information from Fantastic Caverns Website Study

Guide: <http://www.fantastic-caverns.com/studygde.htm>

## Fantastic Caverns, Springfield

**F**antastic Caverns is the only show cave that takes its visitors through by tram, making this the most accessible show cave in Missouri. Small children, the physically challenged and seniors alike can enjoy the wide variety of cave formations from the exercise-free seat of the Jeep-drawn tram.

First explored in 1867 by 12 women with lanterns who answered an advertisement for cave explorers, the cave features nearly every type of cave formation from flowstone to cave pearls. The observant eye will also see signs of cave life as cave crayfish, cave crickets, and grotto salamanders make their home in the cave. The cave is also one of the few places a cave explorer can find the rare, blind Ozarks cavefish.

**Also in the Area:** Bridal Cave is also in the Springfield area for visitors who can't get enough cave viewing. Bass Pro Shops Outdoor World attracts its own share of Springfield visitors. Branson and Silver Dollar City are less than an hour away for those who are ready to spend some time in the sun.



Above: Rimstone cradles a collection of cave pearls.

Left: The Jeep-drawn tram makes the cave tour accessible to everyone.



