

Shine a Light on Ohio's Deep Dark Tourism Secret

Ohio has a natural wonder that continues to mystify visitors 112 years after its accidental discovery. From "soda straws" that defy gravity to the "palace of the gods," Ohio Caverns is a thrilling spectacle that has been dubbed one of the six best caves overall in the US, as well as America's most colorful caverns.

"Many folks remember us as that nostalgic family daytrip that sparked intrigue and much conversation on the way home in the station wagon," said Eric Evans, manager of Ohio Caverns.

Well, thanks to the economy, family daytrips of yesteryear are the thing to do this year. Only before the family gets home, they have already posted their wondrous pictures on Facebook.

Many people are rediscovering Ohio Caverns or seeing it for the first time because like the family daytrip it has made something old new again. The originally discovered portion of caverns was closed for 72 years before reopening for the "historic tour." Over the past decade, visitors were treated to a colorful natural rotunda named "the palace of natural art" and "the giant's coffin" that had been off-limits all that time.

"I love it when I get a mixed reaction from adults who haven't been here since they were children but are now sharing the experience with their kids," said Evans. "They revel at the sights that have been preserved as they remembered and gush at the new additions like our giant, outdoor gem mining sluice."

Nestled in the west central Ohio countryside, this 35-acre park offers a top-notch playground, pavilion and other amenities that allow families or groups to spread out and enjoy a picnic, Frisbee and unwind for a day.

You can't say, "Been to one cavern, been to them all" until you've seen the rarities throughout Ohio Caverns.

The major highlights inside the caverns feature the Crystal King. This is the largest and most perfectly formed pure white crystal stalactite found in any cave. It measures nearly five feet long after 200,000 years of growth. Other unique stalactites are called helactites. These resemble straws hanging from the ceiling but somehow defied gravity and bent and twisted in weird directions. One of the more intriguing formations is the "old town pump" which looks just like it sounds right down to the dripping water.

These are the only known caverns in the country where dual or double formations are found. They are formations of iron oxide tipped off with milky white calcium carbonate. It is a mystery as to why the two minerals remain distinctly separate, refusing to blend colors. One of the beauties of these caverns is wide-array of color. In addition to black and white, stalactites, stalagmites, columns and other formations come in a variety of color that include hues of yellow, orange, red, blue and purple. The climax of the guided tour is the "palace of the gods" and its colorful display of translucent crystals. As each tour group exits, they hear the same sound of music as every visitor before them dating back to 1928 – [Beautiful Ohio](#).

The regular tour of the underworld spans 45 minute and one mile reaching a depth of 103 feet and temperature of 54 degrees. Many primitive forms of sea life are fossilized into the ceiling from the Devonian period and Paleozoic Era. Occasionally life darts from the crevices above and flutters at panicked tour goers. It's never planned, but arguably welcomed as a bat sighting cements the experience.

Once the tour returns to the world above, there are two more major things to explore. One is a gift shop that is really spacious and offers a plethora of subterranean treasures to commemorate a casual trip or become a valuable addition to the collection of a seasoned geologist. Many make the trip just to shop the store. But something no family should leave without is a bag or two of mining rough. It comes in three or five pound bags, each seeded with gemstones, minerals, fossils or arrowheads. In fact, some may say, this is where the real fun begins. For outside, as long as it's above freezing temperatures, is a giant wooden gem mining sluice.

Along with a bag of mining rough, would-be miners are supplied with the necessary mining equipment and supplies to sift through the bag of rough as water streams down the multi-tiered wood chutes from the wood water tower above. Quickly, new miners adopt mining styles of their own as they pan for hidden bounty.

If the economy has you looking around your own backyard this year for those inexpensive old-time fun family daytrips you grew up cherishing, consider a short drive to West Liberty, Ohio and see a natural wonder that has attracted visitors from around the globe for more than 100 years.

You can take a journey into the earth year round at Ohio Caverns. From April 1 – October 31 it is open from 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. It closes at 4:00 p.m. November 1 – March 31. The 45-minute regular tour is available daily but the 1 ½ hour historic tour requires a group of 10 or more people to register in advance. The normal tour costs \$12.50/adult and \$7 per child 5-12 years-old. The historic tour costs \$18.50/adult and \$12.50 per child 5-12 years-old. Value passes and special group and school rates are available. Ohio Caverns is located at 2210 East State Route 245 in West Liberty, Ohio. You may begin your plunge into Ohio Caverns at www.ohiocaverns.com or by calling 937-465-4017.