



Shedding Light on the Best Cave Experiences in the U.S.

National Caves and Karst Day Is June 6, and These Places ROCK

Thursday, June 6 is **National Caves and Karst Day**, an annual celebration of geologic features that humans have stumbled upon (often quite literally) and have been exploring for hundreds of years.

The concept of a “cave” is pretty familiar. But what, exactly, is “karst”? It’s the term used to describe a landscape that has been formed by the dissolution of rocks like limestone. On that landscape, you’re likely to find plenty of springs, sinkholes, natural bridges and – you guessed it – caves!

It just so happens that MBPR represents some of the most karst-y places in the United States, including destinations in Kentucky (home to the longest known cave system in the world), Missouri (the “Cave State” is among its many nicknames) and Virginia (4,400 known caves ... and counting!).

Each cave is unique and distinctive, and no two are alike. So don’t make the mistake of assuming that if you’ve seen one cave, you’ve seen them all. We like to think that if you’ve seen one cave, you’ve seen one cave ... and then you’ll want to see many more.

Here are some of our favorites to get you started:

[Bowling Green, KENTUCKY](#)

[Mammoth Cave National Park](#)

Town of Mammoth Cave

We’re starting off with a biggie ... truly. Mammoth Cave, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve, is the longest cave system in the entire world. At least 426 miles have been explored so far, and there’s no end in sight. Back in the early 20th century, anyone could just crawl around in the cave, but a fateful accident in the winter of 1925 – an event referred to as the “entrapment of Floyd Collins” – led to the National Park Service taking over and putting safety measures into place.

As we approach the centennial of that incident, the NPS is planning commemorative tours and activities. And it should be noted that in 2024, the only way into the cave is with a park ranger as your escort. [Public tours](#) range from a fully wheelchair-accessible option to one guided by lantern-light and still another that requires participants to scoot through on their hands and knees. No matter which tour interests you, be sure to book ahead; many fill up weeks in advance.

The national park rests on 52,000 acres, which means there’s as much to do above ground as there is to keep you occupied below the surface. You can hike, bike, fish or take a tour on horseback. But our favorite option involves exploring the dark in a completely different way ... by participating in one of the park’s ranger-led stargazing events at this official “Dark Sky” park.



Lost River Cave
Photo Credit: Visit BGKY

Lost River Cave

2818 Nashville Road, Bowling Green

What sets Lost River apart is that it's the only natural underground boat tour in Kentucky, so it can be visited by guests of all ages (even babies can ride!) and degrees of mobility. Visits begin with a 25-minute outdoor wading tour and end with a 25-minute boat tour inside. On the cave tour, participants can glimpse the famed "blue hole," which gets its color from the abundance of limestone in the area.

This site was used as a hunting ground for Native Americans, a Civil War campground for both Union and Confederate soldiers, a rumored hideout for Jesse James, and even a wacky nightclub in the 1930s. Paying homage to those nightclub days, Lost River will soon begin offering "Cave Karaoke." The acoustics here are dramatic, and guests will get both a tour and plenty of entertainment.

Before you leave the site, be sure to visit Lost River's above-ground butterfly habitat. From Memorial Day through Labor Day, the staff releases butterflies each day.

Branson, MISSOURI

Marvel Cave

399 Silver Dollar City Parkway, Branson

This popular cave was the impetus for one of the country's most celebrated theme parks. The Herschend family acquired Marvel Cave in 1950, and over the years added entertainment, food and rides above ground. Today, Silver Dollar City is one of the most award-winning parks in the country, and every admission ticket includes entrance to Marvel Cave.

Dipping to 383 feet below the ground at its deepest point, Marvel is the deepest cave in Missouri. And though the Osage people discovered the site around 1500, the first commercial cave tours started here in October 1894, which makes it Branson's first official tourist attraction. And the bragging rights don't end there.

The cave is a National Natural Landmark, and every Silver Dollar City visitor passes by its entrance on their journey into the park. Many head underground to see such natural wonders as a 40-foot-high waterfall and the 20-story-tall Cathedral Room. It's inside that enormous room that five hot air balloonists earned the record for flying the most balloons underground in 1994. To exit the cave, explorers ride a funicular, which boasts a bend of 167 degrees, the most extreme turn executed by any such vehicle in the world. It was designed by Casey Jones Jr. (yes, the son of the engineer made famous in the ballad), and its installation in the mid-1950s involved blasting out a 218-foot-deep tunnel.



Marvel Cave

Photo Credit: Silver Dollar City

Talking Rocks Cavern

423 Fairy Cave Lane, Branson West

In our introduction, we referenced the fact that one of Missouri's nicknames is the "Cave State." That's because there are 7,500 recorded caves around the state, and Missourians have been bragging about these natural wonders for hundreds of years.

Hour-long tours of Talking Rocks leave throughout the day. Guides take visitors along concrete walkways underground, sharing details about the history of the area and explaining its unique geology. The caverns remain a steady 63 degrees all year long, giving visitors a place to cool off in the summer and warm up in the winter ... and always beat the rain.

The site is also home to a mini-golf course, nature trail, gemstone mine, maze and picnic areas.

[Shenandoah County, VIRGINIA](#)

[Shenandoah Caverns](#)

261 Caverns Road, Quicksburg

As the only caverns in Virginia to offer elevator service, Shenandoah is an especially appealing option for kids and guests with limited mobility. (But please note that the tour is about a mile long and is not officially deemed “accessible.”) Paths are wide and even, and ceilings are tall, which makes this cave less intimidating for those who may be nervous about going underground.

Visitors of all ages take delight in the cave’s collection of “Breakfast Bacon,” which are formations that look uncannily like the popular meat. Shenandoah Caverns are also unique in that they were formed by both underground rivers and seismic activity; often caverns are formed by one element or the other, but not both.

The caverns’ former owner, Earl Hargrove, ran a company that designed window displays for major retailers, and guests can see several of those displays in the admission building before or after their cave tour. Right down the street is [American Celebration on Parade](#), a 40,000-square-foot warehouse full of parade floats that were also designed by Hargrove and his team. They’ve been featured in generations of Rose Bowl parades and presidential inaugurations.



Shenandoah Caverns

Photo Credit: Shenandoah County Tourism

Karst Walk

3329 Old Valley Pike, Strasburg

If going fully underground isn’t appealing, we suggest a short walk around the wooded area surrounding the visitor center in Strasburg. This is a self-guided trail that explores the site formerly occupied by Crystal Caverns. Interpretive signs guide visitors along a path that provides glimpses into small openings of the cavern below. Suffice to say: Watch your step!

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