

Rum Runner's Lane inside Jewel Cave in South Dakota

Down Under

Explore the coolest caves in the Midwest

BY KIT BERNARDI

Caves store valuable data about our planet's geologic and atmospheric past and present in their decorative formations called speleothems — stalactites, stalagmites, drapery, cave bacon and more — created over millennia by dripping water and minerals. Each cave is its own ecosystem. And, all capture the imagination.

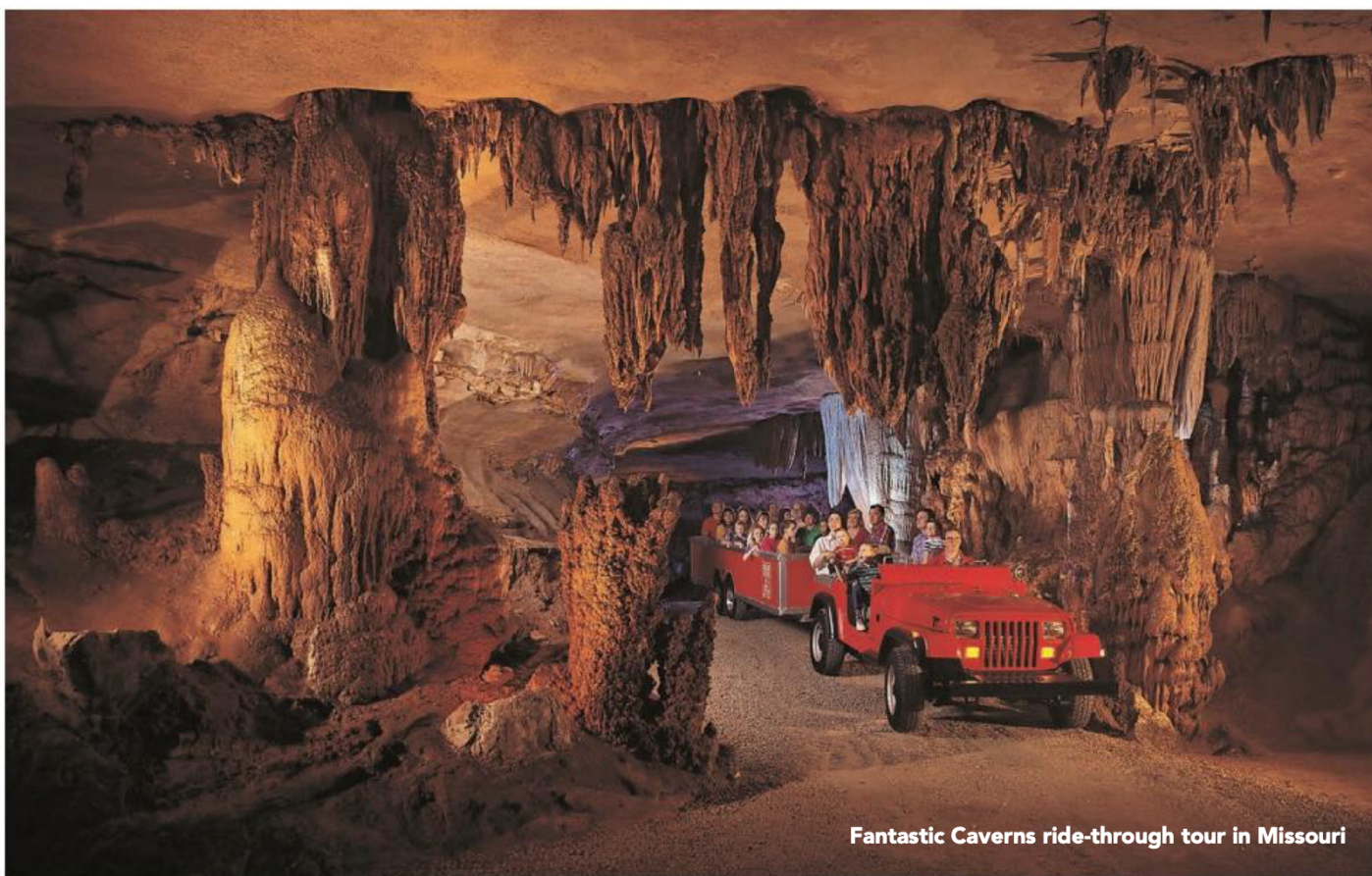
“Midwest caves were formed in limestone deposited in tropical seas roughly 350 to 450 million years ago. The diversity of formations within the region's caves makes them exceptional,” says geologist Richard Slaughter, director of the University of Wisconsin Geology Museum in Madison.

When the summer temps spike, consider touring these cool Midwest caves, which average 50 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit year-round:

SOUTH DAKOTA

Two National Park Service caves are within a 30-mile radius in the Black Hills National Forest. Guided walks in **Wind Cave National Park** ([nps.gov/wica](https://www.nps.gov/wica)) explore narrow, vertical passageways covered in the world's best example of boxwork formations, made of thin slivers of calcite that form a honeycomb pattern. The seasonal candlelight tour is especially popular.

Established in 1903, Wind >



Fantastic Caverns ride-through tour in Missouri



Jewel Cave National Monument is filled with crystals such as dogtooth spar.

of the Oglala Lakota tribe believe their ancestors emerged from Wind Cave to inhabit the earth's surface.

The world's third-longest cave, with 200 mapped miles, **Jewel Cave National Monument** (nps.gov/jeca), gets its name from translucent, calcite crystals called spar formed around 15 million years ago when the cave was underwater. "Just imagine walking through a giant geode

Cave National Park is home to the world's sixth-longest cave and includes 150 miles of surveyed passages. A series of cave lakes 500 feet underground are home to more than 4,000 bacteria species. People

rock's center," says Mike Wiles, chief of resource management. Jewel Cave's seasonal Wild Cave spelunking tour offers the public a glimpse of one-of-kind, delicate hydromagnesite balloons.

Bonus: Both caves are within 40 miles from family-friendly **Rush Mountain Adventure Park** (rushmtn.com), named after Rushmore Cave, which was discovered in 1876 during South Dakota's gold rush. Visitors can tour the cave, zip line and ride the state's only roller coaster running 3,400 feet down the mountainside at speeds up to 30 mph.

MISSOURI

According to the Missouri Caves and Karst Conservancy, 7,300 documented caves riddle the state's underground, including Meramec Caverns, Ozark Caverns, Fisher Cave and Onondaga Cave. **Fantastic Caverns** (fantasticcaverns.com) is the nation's only ride-through cave tour. Propane-powered Jeeps pulling passenger trams trace an ancient riverbed as guides point out formations including crystalized, milky cave pearls dotting clear pools.

Fantastic Caverns' first documented explorers were members of the Women's Springfield Athletic Club. They named the Hall of Giants cavern for its massive, spiraling columns. Some endangered wildlife call the cave home, including rare species of salamanders, crayfish and bats. And to honor the cave's discovery by a farmer's hunting dog in 1862, dogs are welcome on tours.

WISCONSIN

Cave of the Mounds National Natural Landmark (caveofthemounds.com) is a subterranean classroom, fossil bed, nature preserve and >



Visitors are allowed to touch the walls in Dancehall Cave in Iowa.

even date destination. The site's popular Cave After Dark events for the over-21 crowd include self-guided tours and themed receptions in the visitors center with live music and a cash bar.

"This is an ideal teaching cave because science, geologic time and nature all come together," says general manager Joe Klimczak.

Guided tours of the 1 million-year-old cave follow paved walkways past colorful speleothems, shimmering pools and fossils. The rock star fossil



Prospecting for gemstones in Bluespring Caverns Park

is a 400 million-year-old, 6-foot-long, cephalopod squid-like mollusk, Klimczak says.

On the surface, visitors can bike forested trails and fossil hunt in a former 1830s limestone quarry, search for semi-precious stones and follow a geologic interpretive path. Other events include family fossil trick-or-treating, holiday caroling, live music and wine tastings.

IOWA

At **Maquoketa Caves State Park** (iowadnr.gov/places-to-go/state-parks), established in 1921, spelunkers of all experience levels can crawl through 15 caves embedded in wooded bluffs.

"We're different from other caves because you can touch the walls and feel stalactites," says park manager Ryland Richards.

The only cave visitors can stroll through is 1,500-foot-long Dancehall Cave, named for dances held here in the 1900s. Interpretive center artifacts indicate that Native American Sac and Fox peoples were the first to gather in the cave. In their language, Maquoketa means "we have bears;" during winter, it's 600 bats that hibernate inside.

INDIANA

Caves and cornerstones put southern Indiana's Salem Limestone geographical formation on the map. The U.S. Capitol Building, Pentagon and the Empire State Building are some edifices constructed of Indiana limestone quarried from this deposit also laced with caverns. Four comprise the **Indiana Cave Trail** (indianacavetrail.com): Bluespring Caverns, Marengo Cave, Indiana Caverns and Squire Boone Caverns.

Visitors to **Bluespring Caverns Park** (bluespringcaverns.com) can ride flat-bottom boats on the nation's longest subterranean river. Guides point spotlights into misty blackness at speleothem and into the river revealing blind Northern Cavefish. Above ground, hike to the Emery and Ruth Bolton Natural Area, where there's a 90-foot-deep, 10-acre-long sinkhole, the largest in the state. ■