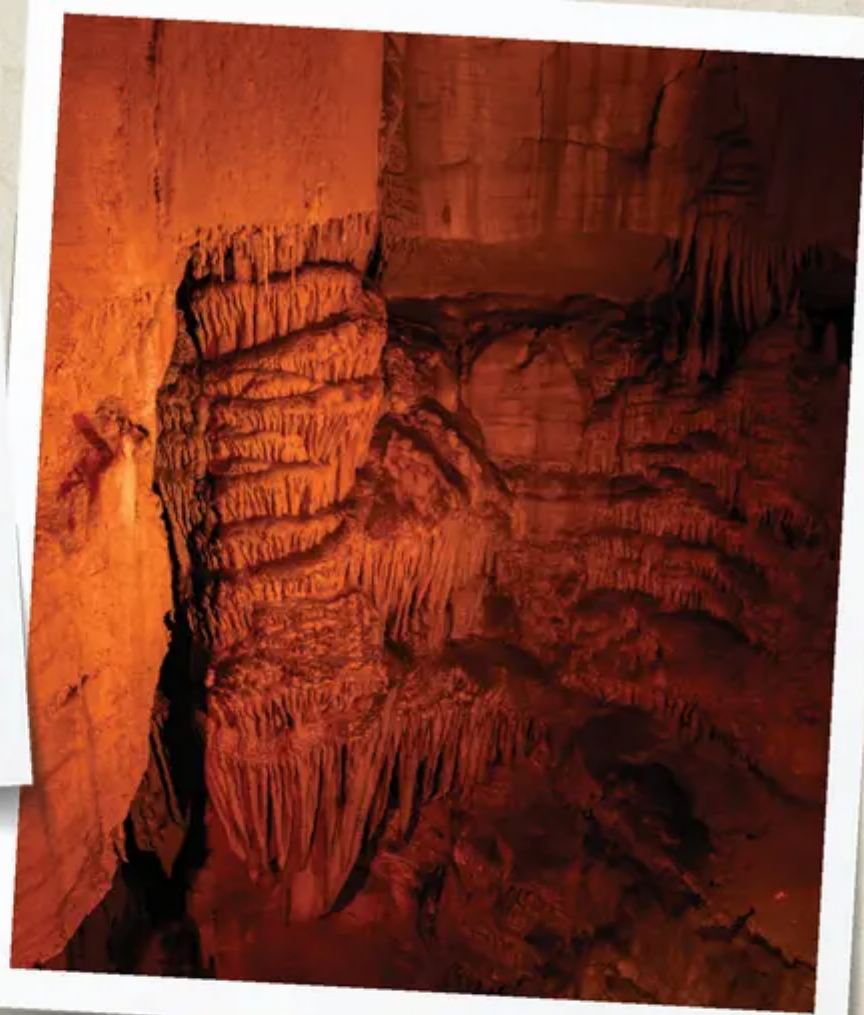
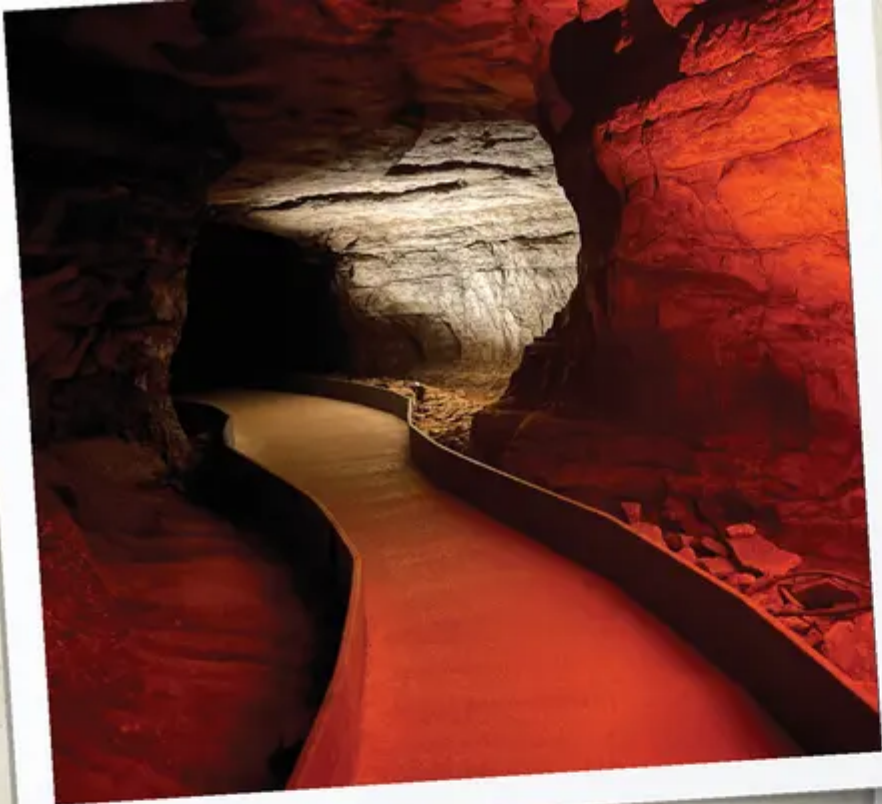




MAMMOTH CAVE NATIONAL PARK

By Caroline Eubanks





Set in eastern Kentucky, Mammoth Cave National Park was established on July 1, 1941 and takes its name from its size, not the prehistoric creature. Scientists believe that the first part of the world's longest known cave system started forming 10 million years ago. Indigenous people mined the minerals inside the cave as far back as 1200 BCE and petroglyphs can be found inside the cave. Burial sites have also been discovered. In the 1800s, saltpeter was mined by enslaved men, later to produce gunpowder for the War of 1812. African American men were also among the first explorers of the cave. In 1842, 10 individuals with tuberculosis entered the cave in hopes of being cured, but it was deemed an unsuccessful experiment. From 1933 to 1942, the Civilian Conservation Corps helped develop the area to prepare it to become a National Park Site, joined by local support in passing legislation to join the park system, now encompassing

nearly 83 square miles. Before Mammoth Cave was designated a National Park, it was home to 30 communities of people. When the land was acquired by the National Park Service in 1941, the historic buildings were preserved, including churches and cemeteries now open to visitors. They provide a glimpse at what life was like in rural Kentucky during this time. Inside the park's boundaries are 130 animal species, including endangered and endemic species like the gray bat and the Kentucky cave shrimp, which live in the underground rivers. Mineral deposits of limestone, shale and sandstone are found within the park, along with chert, which was used to make Native American tools.



What to See and Do at Mammoth Cave

The rock formations and passageways have long attracted tourists. "Frozen Niagara" is one popular sight, with rock resembling the flow of a waterfall. "The Church" is another grand cavern that feels like a cathedral's interior. While it's one of many caves in this part of the state, the park is also an UNESCO World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve. And unlike many of our National Parks, it's free to visit, but that is for the surface areas of the park. There are fees for touring the caves and for camping.

Activities at Mammoth Cave National Park vary based on the time of year you go. Cave tours are the most popular option and vary in length and range from a fully accessible wheelchair tour to adventure tours that take visitors to the tight spaces of the caverns. The tour prices also vary, but buying in advance is highly recommended. Ranger-led programs are also an important part of any visit. They include guided hikes and talks about different aspects of the endemic plants and animals that call the caves and surrounding acreage home, as well as stargazing in the International Dark Sky Park.

Hiking is another top activity, with more than 60 miles to explore. The Mammoth Cave Railroad Bike and Hike Trail follows the 1888 rail line that once brought visitors to the cave before ending service in 1931. Some of the cars have been saved for visitors to see. The trail is nine miles long and perfect for hiking or biking. Because the Green and Nolin rivers run through the park, water-based activities are plentiful, including the state's first water trail.

Local outfitters provide the necessary gear for canoeing and kayaking, including the required flotation devices. Fishing is also offered, where you might catch catfish, bass or perch. And while not exactly an activity, a ride on the Green River ferry is an interesting way to cross the park. Dining is rather limited inside the park, especially during the low season, so you'll likely have to get outside the park to explore. Bowling Green is the closest city and has a number of dining options and attractions. Start at the National Corvette Museum, where the famous car has been made since 1953. The Downing Museum & Baker Arboretum is a fine art museum and botanical garden with over 600 species of plants.

Where to Camp at Mammoth Cave

Within the park, there are three frontcountry campgrounds: Mammoth Cave, Maple Springs and Houchin Ferry. Mammoth Cave is the most convenient to the park and visitors center, with 111 sites in total that includes tent, group, RV and accessible sites. Maple Springs is six miles away and is best for groups and horse camping, with seven sites. Houchin Ferry is 15 miles away, set alongside the Green River with 12 tent-only sites. There are also 13 backcountry sites accessible only by foot, horse or canoe. Permits are required. Book via recreation.gov. The Lodge at Mammoth Cave is the park's main lodging with hotel-style rooms and historic CCC-era cottages (mammothcavelodge.com). Historic Wigwam Village No. 2 in Cave City has been a roadside favorite since 1937, with rooms inspired by teepees (historicwigwamvillage.com).

