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- Bonne Terre Mine, (314) 731-5003.
- [Fantastic Caverns](#), (417) 833-2010.
- [Rock Bridge Memorial State Park](#), (573) 449-7402.

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Roads to Adventure

Notes From Underground

“Conner’s Cave, it turns out, requires no permits and provides no guides ... warning intrepid entrants to carry three light sources. I had one, so I officially was on an adventure.”

Bruce Leonard Jr.
Trailer Life
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Many years ago, when I first encountered the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky, I was mesmerized by his work *Notes from Underground*. I couldn’t describe exactly what about the novella grabbed me — was it the author’s choice of language that lulled me into an appreciative trance? Or did the narrator’s zig-zagging logic, his total self-absorption and his twisted heroism appeal to me in my wide-eyed, isn’t-college-great days? I still can’t provide an answer, just as I can’t tell you with any degree of confidence (despite having read it many times) what the book is actually about. I’m content to say that the work as a whole is impressive, mystifying and magical.

Notes from Underground entered my thoughts recently as I stepped beneath the surface in southeastern Missouri’s Bonne Terre Mine and saw what human determination can accomplish. In the novella, the *Underground Man* claims that an intelligent man can succeed at nothing, since a thousand reasons why he can’t do something enter his head and prevent him from taking action. Conversely, a dim-witted person, he claims, can eventually run through a brick wall, since he doesn’t know he shouldn’t be able to make it to the other side. If the *Underground Man* is correct, Bonne Terre Mine — this hollowed-out expanse, this man-made, multi-tiered monument to sweat-of-the-brow labor — must have been made by the biggest bunch of morons in world history because it is such a major accomplishment.

As I descended the steps into the former lead mine, accompanied by fellow tourists of all ages, I had to remind myself time and again that the wide-open spaces that the guide escorted us into had been excavated from solid earth. This is not a cave, with nature having done the shaping, folding, collapsing and weathering. No, despite Missouri being known as the Cave State, this particular room-after-room subterranean example of the will of man was carved from limestone, chisel-stroke by chisel-stroke, stone by stone, oar-cart by oar-cart, beginning in 1864. Lead is the reason this National Historic Site exists, since miners muscled this metal out of the earth by the ton, yet tourism and scuba diving keep it relevant today.

A guided, hour-long walking tour, which is not tricky but does involve numerous



Bruce Leonard Jr. is a contributor to *Trailer Life*.

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steps, follows the Old Mule Trail, allowing visitors to see how mining tools progressed during the mine's operation. In the year-round 62° F temperature, oar carts, scaffolding, grating, staircases and the million-gallon lake that now serves as one of the world's most interesting scuba-diving locations all create plenty of oohs and aahs. Guests may simply stand and stare, amazed, at the giant earthen pillars that hold up the ceiling — the ceiling which to those not on the tour is the ground on which they walk.

A weekends-only boat tour allows life-jacketed guests to peer down into the crystal-clear water, to spy the No. 1 elevator, submerged ore carts and cable-wrapped pillars. Occasionally, boat tourers will see wet-suited divers swimming by, exploring the 24 dive trails that helped earn Bonne Terre Mine the No. 10 spot on National Geographic Adventure's list of America's best adventures. Visitors will also hear about the miners who up and quit once the mine got electricity, since they could then clearly see just how high and dangerous the catwalks they had been working on were.

Another Missouri attraction that does more than scratch the surface is Fantastic Caverns, southwest of Bonne Terre on the northern outskirts of Springfield. Appealing most to travelers who prefer not to get their hands (or feet) dirty, this cave tour serves as a perfect primer for first-time spelunkers or just fans of the softest soft adventure.

Offering all the shimmering colors, fascinating formations and historical insight that one might expect from a mine-based Disney ride, the 50-minute Fantastic Caverns tour explores the cave in comfortable Jeep-drawn trams, allowing everyone the opportunity to explore a bit of Missouri's underground. Prism-hued stalactites stretch downward to the upward-reaching stalagmites, water and calcite working their millenniums-old magic. The tour guide and a short film shown at the turn-around point explain the history of the cave — its formation, its discovery in 1862 by a farmer's dog, its initial exploration by 12 local women and its various uses over the years, from hideout to speakeasy to country-music-concert venue.

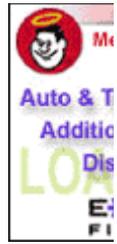
RVers with a hankering for subterranean submersion can practically head in any direction in the state to get their fill of underground emptiness. I headed north to Columbia, one of my favorite towns (if only for the downtown coffeehouse, Lakota). After the man-made "cave" of Bonne Terre and the "no-reason-to-fear" experience of Fantastic Caverns, I was grateful for the less-structured caving excursion that Conner's Cave in Rock Bridge Memorial State Park afforded. The 2,200-acre park features streams, sinkholes, caves and a natural bridge, many of them reached by the wooden, and easily negotiated, Devil's Icebox Boardwalk. In addition to the plentiful geologic attractions and the calm-inducing scenery, the park once harbored a small settlement that flourished for more than 50 years. Today, the park provides sustenance to hikers, bicyclists, equestrians and, in winter, cross-country skiers.

Down the wooden stairs I went, toward the not-so-gaping maw of Conner's Cave. Accompanied by a few people who had ventured into this particular netherworld before, I felt comfortable, at least so far as knowing that these fellow cavers could notify my family if I plunged to the center of the Earth. Conner's Cave, it turns out, requires no permits, provides no guides, offers no tram rides, features no lighting system and serves up only a single sign by way of caution, warning intrepid entrants to carry three light sources. I had one, so I officially was on an adventure. I folded myself into the entrance, with thoughts of Dante and his circles of hell running through my head. Halfway to the moss-laden slash that opened to the sky, where the light shined through and where my fellow explorers were standing upright, I realized that my right foot was wet. I chose this opportune moment to turn on my flashlight and found that I was standing in a puddle. Or was it a stream? It was Bonne Femme Creek, I would learn later. I inhaled the sunlight as if taking a last breath, then ducked into the cave proper.

Wet and slick. Unsure footing. What was that? Slightly disoriented. Low-hanging rock. A little spooky. Chilly and silent. What's in the crevices? Rabid bats? Blind lizards with big teeth? Anson Mount's career?

The word "dank" came to mind. Then I asked out loud, "How great is this?"

"Really great," came the echo.



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