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Bonne Terre Mine



The Bonne Terre Mine offers scuba diving and tours.
 (Laurie Skrivan/P-D)

While Onondaga and Meramec were created by natural erosion over thousands of years, Bonne Terre Mine was blasted and dug out by men, who did Herculean labor for very little pay. Once the world's largest lead mine, it closed in the 1960s. The owners

simply turned out the lights and left, and the mine slowly filled with water.

Doug and Cathy Goergens bought the mine and reopened it as a scuba-diving center in the 1980s. The water level is now controlled by electric pumps, and the top two levels of the mine are dry. Visitors can take an hour-long walking tour, which leaves every hour.

A visit to the mine is very different from the cave tours. The mine's tunnels are wide, built to accommodate mule-drawn ore carts. There are no geologic wonders to compare to a natural cave's. Instead, visitors see the first shaft the miners dug with pick and shovel in 1864, remnants of the once-extensive rail system, and other gear left behind by the long-vanished employees of the St. Joseph Lead Co.

The walking tour ends at the dock on the 17-mile-long underground lake -- a locale suitable for a villain's lair in a James Bond movie. Stone columns rise out of the water more than 50 feet to support the mine's ceiling. Floodlights both above and below the water provide eerie lighting. There are usually scuba divers on the dock, struggling into their wetsuits, hoods, and gloves, and you can watch, with envy or horror depending on your predilections, as they jump into the 58-degree water.

A boat tour begins from this dock. No one need fear getting seasick on this ride; the water is flat and motionless. It's also crystal clear. There are no fish in the lake, but occasionally a school of divers passes under the boat, their air-bubbles gurgling to the surface. As the boat winds slowly around the massive columns, passengers can see ore carts under the water and spindly catwalks far above it. The boat also passes the

Listing Information

Address: 651 East Oak Street
 Bonne Terre, MO 63628
 Phone: 573-358-2148
 Area: Outside Metro Area
 Hours: Walking tours:
 Friday 10:30 a.m. - 4 p.m.
 Saturday and Sunday 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m.
 All Major Credit Cards

Payment Methods:
 Entrance Fees: Walking tour: \$12 adults, \$6 children under 11; Combination boat and walking tour \$17.50 for all ages
 Disability Access: Yes
 Website: [Web site](#)
 Smoking Allowed: Yes



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framework of one of the elevators used to raise ore from the depths of the mine.

At one point, the guide directs tourists to peer up into the darkness overhead, and you can see a spot of dim light -- a hole through to the surface.

After the tour, as folks drive through Bonne Terre toward the highway, they may get the uneasy feeling that the entire town rests on a thin crust of earth over this vast hollow.

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