

A MEANDER THROUGH SEVERAL SHOW CAVES in PENNSYLVANIA and VIRGINIA, USA

John Brush

During a visit to the Appalachian area of eastern USA in October 2011, Marjorie Coggan and I made time to visit several show caves. There are many show caves in the area to choose from and the ones we visited were selected almost at random, generally being those that were close to our intended route. However, we did make a special trip to Luray Caverns, a place that has been on our “must do” list for some time.

Each of the four caves had its own unique features and most offered a full package of attractions, only some of which had anything to do with caves or karst.

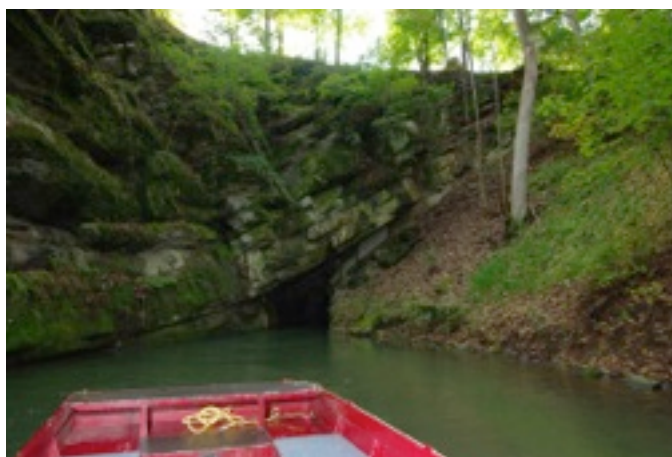
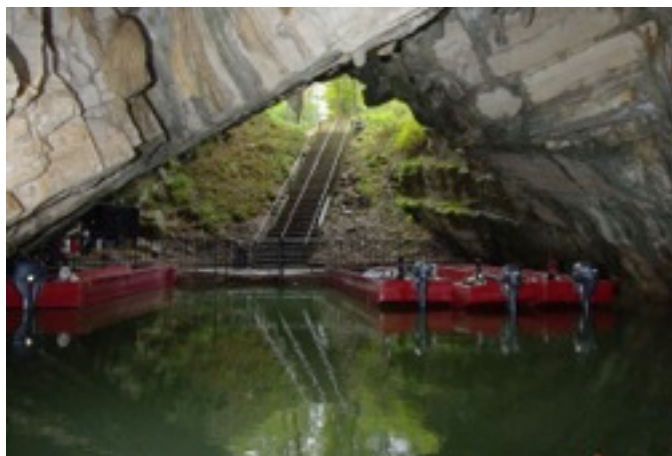
Penn’s Cave

Penn’s Cave in central Pennsylvania is billed as “America’s only all-water cavern and wildlife park”. We ignored the wildlife park and bought tickets for the last cave tour of the day. Pushing past the extensive range of merchandise in the gift shop, we wandered down into the entrance doline. Perhaps because it was last tour of the day, there were just 5 of us who descended the flight of steps to water level where we met our young guide. Once we were all seated in the motorised punt, the guide coaxed the wheezing outboard into life and we were off. At first I wondered why the boat was heading along the large river in reverse but later, on the return trip to be precise, I came to realise that by going backwards, the exhaust fumes were carried into the cave ahead of us, so we had fresh air, at least on the outwards trip. We were the only boat in the cave, but judging from the 4 or 5 moored at the entrance, it must be much busier at times. On such occasions, the exhaust fumes from the two-stroke outboards must be awful.

The spacious stream passage is generally 5-15 metres wide and varies in height from less than 2 metres up to an estimated 20 metres. In places stalactites dangle above the water. About two thirds of the way along the river there is a huge chamber, perhaps as much as 30m high, with an inclined bedding plane roof. We were told there is a side entrance into this chamber and it was not unknown for people to see a puma wandering about. Well, so the guide said.

Beyond the large chamber, the stream passage narrows to a boat-sized tunnel that was dug by the cave owners in the 1920s to bypass a sump and so increase water flow into their reservoir for power generation purposes. Today, the tunnel adds to the boat trip experience and also allows the exhaust fumes to drain from the cave.

The cave has some massive decoration, mostly in the large chamber and in high meander niches above the river, but none of it is particularly stunning. However, it is the boat trip along the large stream passage that is the star attraction.



Top: Main entrance to Penn’s Cave.

Middle: Punting along the streamway in Penn’s Cave.

Bottom: Artificial outflow entrance to Penn’s Cave, dating from the 1920s.

Lincoln Caverns and Whisper Rocks, Pennsylvania

Lincoln Caverns offers two caves for the price of one. It also offers a range of programs for students, junior cave explorers and cave photographers and there is an interesting self-guiding (and free) karst walk. In addition, each Halloween, Lincoln offers special Ghosts and Goblins tours where one of the caves is turned into a virtual haunted house complete with witches, dismembered bodies, huge spiders, snakes, evil-looking bats, a tangle of synthetic cobwebs, and of course ghosts. We were just a few days too early for this special tour, but did get to see all of the paraphernalia set up in the cave. It apparently takes 2 weeks of solid work to set up everything – and presumably days more to remove it all again a few weeks later. For all the effort involved, the special trips must be a real money spinner. Hidden behind all the polyester gossamer, it appeared that the cave is essentially a joint-controlled phreatic fissure system. As there is not a lot of decoration, it would not be surprising if some visitors felt a little disappointed if they were to see the cave outside the ghosts and goblins season. The second part of the tour is to Whisper Rocks Cave. This appears to be a separate upper level part of the Lincoln Caverns System and contains some clean, active and attractive decoration displays. It was discovered by Myron Dunlavy, the father of the current owner, in 1941 and opened to the public 20 years later.

After our visit, Anne Dunlavy, the cave owner and current President of the US National Caves Association, mentioned a recent visit by “some guy from Australia” who offers tours through “his cave” in the Klingon language. She found this quite intriguing. Your fame spreads far and wide, Dan!

What Lincoln Caverns lacked (?) in terms of the ancillary surface attractions that are commonly bolted on to many

show cave operations in eastern USA, it made up for with its range of educational and special interest programs. However, it still boasted the largest gift shop in the area.



Top right: Upset the guide at your peril in Lincoln Caverns

Bottom left: Huge carnivorous bats, deformed humans and entangling spiders' webs, all part of the ghosts and goblins experience in Lincoln Caverns.

Bottom right: The fortune-telling room in Lincoln Caverns.

Natural Bridge of Virginia

The impressive Natural Bridge is some 70m high and 30 metres wide and has long been a dramatic natural landmark in Virginia. It claims a number of historic associations including that it was once owned by Thomas Jefferson, that it was surveyed by a young George Washington, and that it was crossed by Civil War soldiers. Today, US Highway 18 runs over the top of the bridge but thick vegetation and tall paling fences block the views. In any case, the bridge is best viewed from below. It is just a short (150 metre) downhill walk from the car park and visitor centre, but if that is too arduous, there are regular shuttle buses.

The operator claims the bridge was “shaped by Mother Nature over hundreds of years” perhaps in deference to local creationist beliefs.

Once an attraction in its own right, today the bridge is just a small part of the full ‘attraction package’ which includes a butterfly house, a wax museum, a toy museum, a nature trail and a reconstructed Indian village, not to mention an immense gift shop, a hotel, a conference centre and a cave.

The cave, or “The Natural Bridge Caverns” as it is impressively named is located about 1km north of the bridge. The operator claims the caverns are “the deepest caves on the east coast” and this seems to be their main claim to fame. The ticket office and modest gift shop are housed in a small log cabin, which, as we discovered, has a very leaky roof when it rains. Compared with the imposing two storey visitor centre and museum buildings at the bridge just down the road, this gives the impression of being the poor sibling of the operation. From the cabin, a wooden ‘tunnel’ leads into the hillside where a lengthy excavated tunnel provides easy access to the cave. There is a reasonable amount of decoration in the cave and there are some nice passages, but the feature that struck us most was the extensive lampenflora ‘gardens’. It seems that many of the floodlights in the cave are switched on in the morning



and not switched off again until after the last tour of the day. At least the lampenflora added a bit of colour to the cave. On the positive side, our guide gave the best interpretive commentary that we have yet experienced in a privately owned show cave in America.



*Top right: Flowstone cascade in Whispering Rocks cave.
Bottom left: The imposing Visitor Centre and gift shop building at the Natural Bridge of Virginia.
Bottom right: The Natural Bridge of Virginia.*

Luray Caverns, Virginia

Luray is another well-known natural landmark in Virginia and it has been raved about in countless books and magazines over the years. So what a disappointment it was to actually go there. Luray is yet another privately owned show cave operation offering a full range of attractions and activities. Too bad if you just want to see the cave, as the only ticket on sale covers access to the cave, a local history museum, a car museum and a garden maze. There are also shops, restaurants and a golf club.

In theory, cave tours start every few minutes. Just buy your ticket as you enter the gift shop and queue in front of the doorway into the cave and wait. Supposedly there is a limit of 20 or so visitors on each tour, so with all those people milling around, we were guaranteed of just a short wait. Or so we thought. For some unknown reason we waited and waited. After about 30 minutes, the waiting throng of 50-60 people was let loose into the cave. In the first chamber there was some jockeying for position and a foreign tour group of 20 or so, who appeared not to understand simple directions such as "move up closer", "keep moving", "do not touch the decorations" and "stay on the path" caused some stress to concerned people towards the rear of the group. Up front, the young guide was unaware of, or just turned a blind eye to, all of this. We were stuck near the back of the group, which is normally not such a bad thing, but on this tour it meant that we heard almost nothing of the commentary and at one point were left in complete darkness when the lights, probably on a timer, switched off and left half a dozen of us in complete darkness. Gee honey, it really is dark in these caves.

Ignoring the crowd around us, we tried to admire the cave. However, it was difficult. While there was plenty of decoration and from a distance some of it looked impressive, but up close much of it was dry, dull and exfoliating.

A unique feature of the cave is its "stalacpipe" organ which was installed in the large and appropriately

named Cathedral Chamber in 1957. At first glance, it looks like a fairly ordinary organ console with a bank of four keyboards. However, what makes it special is that each key controls a strategically placed solenoid that dongs a small hammer onto a stalactite hanging somewhere in the chamber. It was designed and built by Leland W Sprinkle Senior, who apparently took years to grind or snap each stalactite to play the desired note. According to the Luray website, only two stalactites were found to be in tune naturally and "it took Mr Sprinkle 36 years of frustrating research, design and experimentation to bring his dream to its present state of perfection". One hopes the organ doesn't need retuning very often.

All too soon, we were ushered out of the cave and free to wander about in the various Luray gift shops and museums. All in all, Luray was quite an experience, but not the one that we had imagined.



Luray Caverns

Above: The Totem Pole Room.

Below left: Our tour group was way too large.

Below centre: The Saracens Tent drapery.

Below right: The Double Column.

