

For a cool retreat from summertime temperatures, try Oklahoma's ...

Alabaster Caverns State Park

by Keith Bridwell

Lost somewhere in the time and space of the gentle hills of northwestern Oklahoma, near the entrance to that state-span-handle region (affectionately known as "No-Man's Land"), is Alabaster Caverns State Park - a cool, damp and welcome retreat from the outside temperatures of this sun-baked land.

Only three-quarters of a mile of the caverns are open to public use, but even that short distance takes almost an hour

to traverse as part of a tour group.

Depths reach 80 feet below the surface, and signs warn tourists not to attempt the trip if you have limiting physical considerations.

Baloney!

The only factors which might prevent you from enjoying the slow-paced tour are: (1) bad knees, and/or (2) a heart muscle which is too weak to get you from your vehicle to the cavern entrance. If you're in reasonably good health

(even for a 90-year-old), you'll handle the walk just fine.

The only other limiting factor might be claustrophobia, because once you're inside, you'll be there for a while!

Alabaster Caverns State Park is located east of State Highway 50, north of Woodward and just south of Freedom, Oklahoma, and is open year-round, except for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Tours begin on the hour from a central staging point near the souvenir shop.

The park office is open from 9:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. year-round, and tours are offered until 5:00 p.m. during summer months.

The 3/4-mile-long cavern maintains a temperature of about 50 degrees, so a light jacket may be appropriate.

It is touted as the largest natural gypsum cave in the world open to the public, and is the centerpiece of a 200-acre park, which also features 20 campsites, nature and canyon trails, volleyball and horse-shoes.

Visitors will see selenite formations, rare colors of alabaster (including the unique black), bats from five different species (Cave Myotis, Western Big-Eared Bat, Eastern Pipistrelle, Western Big Brown Bat and Mexican Free-Tailed Bat), and an occasional mud-covered wild caver crawling out of one of the undeveloped caves.

Five undeveloped caves in the park may be explored by having the required safety equipment, and by obtaining a permit from the park office. Wild caving is only permitted March through September.

The caverns were created 200 million years ago when the area was covered by an inland sea. As the water evaporated, deposits of gypsum were left behind.

Lantern tours of the cavern as well as viewing of enormous bat flights are available, but are limited in size and require prepayment and advance reservations, as do special two-hour cavern tours available to photographers.

The park's gift shop also serves as an educational center, and offers information on the history and geology of the area.

The park has a trail system consisting mainly of four trails. Raptor's Roost trail, named for the birds of prey that can be seen as you walk along the rim of the canyon, is suited for hikers of all ages.

The more challenging trails include Little Black Bear trail, Old Two Toes trail that crosses the canyon, and the Freedom Trail (a 3/4 mile interpretative trail along the bottom of the canyon, providing the best displays of flora and fauna.).

The first known exploration of Alabaster Caverns occurred in 1889. The area had been homesteaded during the Cherokee Outlet Run of 1893. In 1928, Charles Grass purchased the land, and in 1953, transferred ownership to the state of Oklahoma.

Indians and outlaws camped and hunted in the tree-

lined Cedar Canyon many years ago.

Tour fees are free to those five and under, \$5 for those six-12 years, \$8 for those 13-61 years, and \$6 for those 62 and over.

For additional information, telephone the park at 580/621-3381 or toll-free at 1-800-654-8240.



The entrance to Alabaster Caverns. The part of the caverns open to the public extends for 3/4 mile, and reaches a depth of 80 feet. - Indexfoto



A project providing lighted handrails and other lighting has just been completed in the caverns. - Indexfoto



The park's educational center provides details of the five bat species which occupy the caverns. - Indexfoto



A gentle creek (once a roaring river) runs through the caverns, and surface water also seeps through the cavern roof, providing constantly high humidity. - Indexfoto



A huge opening near the end of the 3/4-mile-long caverns was established long ago as a "fallout shelter" to protect staff and visitors in the event of a nuclear attack. - Indexfoto