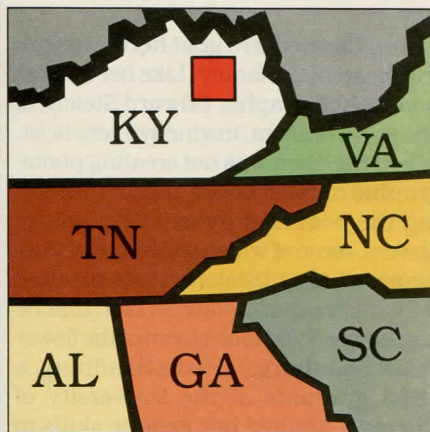


DOWN UNDER

In Kentucky, you don't have to be batty to be a cave dweller



By Anne Cassidy

It was not the final frontier of rocket ships and anti-gravity suits, but rather the frontier beneath our feet that I set out to explore at the Carter Caves Crawlathon, a weekend of intense caving at a state park in northeastern Kentucky. How intense was it? Well, that depended on each participant's level of experience and pluck.

For me, a novice, the weekend meant an industrial-strength hard hat, my oldest jeans, and hand-held flashlights. It also meant a bat's-eye view of splendidly twisted stone, three hours spent in virtually every position but upright, and an adventure that gave new meaning to the phrase "down and dirty."

Last year, more than 250 people attended the sixth annual Crawlathon, which takes place the last weekend in January. (This year, the event will be held January 29th to the 31st.) The Crawlathon really got rolling on Saturday morning,

An eerie underground scene, and only one of the countless things Crawlathon visitors see on a subterranean visit.

with expeditions through undeveloped caves and a workshop for beginners. The average trip lasted two to three hours, although some of the more complex explorations lasted two or three times that long.

For those who chose not to crawl, a walking tour through Cascade Cave was a gentle way to view the damp, subterranean wonders that included hibernating bats—some glimmering in crystals of moisture—and "soda straws," delicate formations created by the accumulation of mineral deposits contained in countless single drops of water.

There are at least 125 caves in the limestone-rich Carter County area, and they have housed items from cows to buried treasure. Now, many of the caves are protected by the state park system and accumulate only an occasional empty beer can or a single, forlorn knee pad or glove.

After a morning of upright cave exploration in Cascade Cave, I was ready to do some crawling. Ten of us, a mixed bag of proficiency levels, entered the

Bat Cave through the "back door" to peek at the sleeping animals. Unlike Cascade Cave, where rock formations were subtly illuminated by artificial light, Bat Cave's blackness was broken only by the lights we carried.

Horton Hobbs, our guide and a professor of biology at Wittenberg University in Ohio who has been mapping the Carter Caves system for years, proved his knowledge during the Bat Cave expedition. The going got rugged as we pushed into the bats' bedroom, where hundreds of the creatures slept on cavern walls and ceilings. (We could stay only a moment because the warmth from our lights and body temperatures would awaken the hibernating animals.) As we went further into the cave, the passages grew smaller and more gnarled, and I saw the wisdom of having a light attached to your hard hat; it frees the hands for crawling. I also began to wish I'd brought some knee pads other than the too-big ones that a fellow caver had generously lent me. But I never wished I hadn't visited this fascinating world.

By the end of our tour, I was muddier than I'd ever thought possible, but I wore those soil-crusting clothes like a badge of courage. That Saturday night, I enjoyed the Country Buffet dinner more than any meal I'd eaten in some time. There was a real feeling of camaraderie among the cavers, and, between courses, explorers table-hopped, trading their day's experiences.

When the weekend was ended, I'd learned that caving is a humbling experience. The world beneath our feet has a silent life of its own, and we who enter cannot help but be reminded that we're only visitors there. □

RECOMMENDED

HOTELS:

Carter Caves State Resort Park. In northeastern Kentucky, two miles north of the Olive Hill exit on Interstate 64. This facility is on park grounds, and is where most people stay when they come to the Crawlathon. The lodge has 28 rooms, plus 15 cottages, some with cooking facilities. It also fills up quickly during the Crawlathon, so reservations are a must. (800) 325-0059 out-of-state, or (800) 432-1210 in Kentucky. Moderate. AE, DC, MC, V.

Greenbo Lake State Park. In Kentucky you're never far away from another state park. This one is just a 40-minute drive from Carter Caves, if they are full. (800) 325-0083 out-of-state, or (800) 562-8708 in Kentucky. Moderate. AE, DC, MC, V.

RESTAURANTS:

Carter Caves Caveland Lodge In the state park, the dining room at the lodge serves three meals a day, and they pull out all the stops during the Saturday night of the Crawlathon, with the "Country Buffet," an all-you-can-eat extravaganza of lasagna, fried chicken, beef Stroganoff, and more. (606) 286-4411. Moderate. AE, DC, MC, V.

INSIDER INFORMATION:

The 1988 Crawlathon will be held on January 29th through the 31st. A brochure and registration information are available by writing John Tierney, Carter Caves Resort Park, Rural Route 5, Box 1120, Olive Hill, Kentucky 41164-9032. Or you can telephone Tierney at (606) 286-4411. The registration fee is \$4.