



REDISCOVERING  
54 DEGREES  
YEAR-ROUND

# NOT YOUR DADDY'S CAVERNS

*No, you can't modernize a cave, but the degree of fun in some dark, damp, cool spaces has been on the rise in recent years.*

Story and photos by **JOE TENNIS**

Luray Caverns is one of the most popular caverns in Virginia.

The story goes that two boys chased a rabbit in a hole in the Virginia mountains in 1879. A pretty deep hole, it turned out to be—deep enough that when they looked above them at some point, one of the boys got pretty excited.

“Carrots! Turnips!” he said. “We have found the bottom of a farm.”

They had no idea that they were looking at stalagmites and soda straws, hanging from a cave's ceiling. And who would have guessed their point of discovery would one day become part of the Endless Caverns near New Market, Virginia? Turns out, that's how many caverns have been discovered—by accident.

As for myself, I plotted cavern discoveries for more than a year, seeking stalagmites from Lookout Mountain, Tennessee, to the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.

“Have you been to any other caverns around here?” asks my joke-cracking Skyline Caverns tour guide, 18-year-old Kaylin Ketola, in Front Royal, Virginia.

“I've been to Shenandoah, Luray, Natural Bridge, Dixie,” I began, then started to add more names, like Appalachian, Bristol, Gap Cave at Cumberland Gap, Forbidden Caverns, Tuckaleechee, Grand, Ruby Falls, Organ Cave, The Lost Sea—WHEW!

“So all of them?” Ketola asks.

Well, not all. But I made rounds to about a dozen in my quest to find what's legendary, what's unique—and just how these old-school attractions are really not your daddy's caverns.

Cell phone cameras are constantly clicking in crowds, where millennials now capture what's millions of years old. Kids snap selfies with stalagmites and pose like dolls with dripstone.

“And you don't have to modernize something like this,” says Luray Caverns tour guide Katie Nauman in Luray, Virginia.

“The beauty of a cave speaks for itself,” says Connie Trompeter Browning, the owner of Dixie Caverns near Salem, Virginia. “It's breathtaking. Every time you see something unusual, it catches you.”