

This summer, be cool in a cave

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Looking for someplace to beat the heat this summer? Visit one of the many colossal caves around the Lower 48 states, where you can chill, enjoy underground splendor, give the kids a thrill, and on the way maybe explore a part of the country you haven't seen before.



How cool are they? Thanks to their natural insulation, many keep average temperatures in the 50s or 60s. But there are extremes, like New Mexico's Ice Cave — www.icecaves.com — where a collapsed lave tube on the flank of Bandera Volcano protects a deposit of year-round ice. This cave and volcano are about 100 miles west of Albuquerque, in a region that is home to several tribes, and it has its own trading post where you can shop for hand-crafted pottery, silver jewelry and Navajo rugs. For other sights to see in the area, click on "Ancient Way — Route 53."

On the other side of New Mexico, Carlsbad Caverns — www.nps.gov/cave — features an 8-acre Big Room and has tours available to other underground areas. It's not quite as cold as Ice Cave, with a reading of 56 degrees. Check "Plan Your Visit" for tour details and the section titled "Things To Do," where you learn about the cave's famous bats. Carlsbad is about 300 miles from Albuquerque, 150 from El Paso, Texas, and 100 miles from Roswell, of UFO fame. The outdoor folks at

GORP have more info — <http://tinyurl.com/3xzwdg> — including the park's wilderness area.

Bigger? Mammoth Cave in south-central Kentucky — www.nps.gov/maca — has more than 365 miles of explored corridors, according to the Web site. There might be more. Click on "Plan Your Visit" for information on tours and a few things you can do on the surface in the park, including camping, canoeing on more than 30 miles of the Green and Nolin rivers, swimming, fishing, riding horses and hiking. For hot days, the temperature underground averages 54 degrees. Outside the park, Cave City — www.cavecity.com — has places to eat, sleep and shop.

Maybe you're headed to Branson, Mo., for the theaters and music. The entrance to Marvel Cave — www.marvelcave.com/index.html — is in the Silver Dollar City theme park — www.bransonsilverdollarcity.com — an alternative to the area's indoor entertainment. On the Arkansas side of the Ozarks region, Blanchard Springs Caverns — <http://tinyurl.com/3xugcl> — offers spectacular rock formations and a constant 58 degrees.

The rugged Black Hills region of western South Dakota holds several scenic caverns, including the complex Wind Cave — www.nps.gov/wica — where you should follow "Photos & Multimedia" through "Multimedia Presentations" to the video clips of the cave scenery. After your tour in the 53-degree subterranean environment, explore the park's 30 miles of surface hiking trails and see its bison herd (stay inside your

car; they're not tame). Elsewhere in the Black Hills, Jewell Cave — www.nps.gov/jeca — is 139 miles long and takes its name from its crystals of calcite and other minerals. Above ground, Black Hills & Badlands — www.blackhillsbadlands.com — can show you enough things to see and do to keep you entertained for the rest of your vacation and then some.

In the East, Virginia also has a variety of caves open to visitors, including Shenandoah Caverns — www.shenandoahcaverns.com — where the mineral formations include one named Breakfast Bacon. Look under "Nearby" for links to other things to see and do in the neighborhood, including battlefields, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, golf courses and fishing. And look for the link to the Shenandoah Wine Country Tour. A short drive north, near the northern end of the Skyline Drive at Front Royal, Skyline Caverns — www.skylinecaverns.com — is always 54 degrees underground, and boasts formations called anthodites, which it describes as "Orchids of the Mineral Kingdom."

There are plenty more caves, from Oregon to Florida, and there's bound to be one within an easy drive. Visit the National Caves Association — <http://cavern.com> — where you can search by zip code or by state to find entries such as New Hampshire's Polar Caves, Oklahoma's Alabaster Caverns, Oregon's Sea Lion Caves and Arizona's Kartchner Caverns, discovered only in 1974.

