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Mammoth Cave National Park

By Dennis Gaub for KOA Kompass

When you drive Interstate 65 through western Kentucky, you travel a long-settled landscape, its features well-known and described in detail.

But there's an exception – a kind of "New World" that lies below the ground.

Awaiting your exploration is Mammoth Cave National Park, which encompasses the world's largest cave system: some 380 miles of underground passages. And, more mileage will likely be added as cavers continue to survey connections to dozens of caverns outside the park boundaries.

A Mammoth expert agrees that its vast expanse and seemingly unlimited potential for further discovery gives the park a different ambiance than its more familiar surroundings.

"It's a New World [but] not a terribly harsh world," said Dr. Stanley Sides, who has been caving at Mammoth for 42 years and is credited with surveying much of its underground terrain. He also teaches a summer course about the history of exploration of caves in the Mammoth region, which Western Kentucky University has offered most years since 1984.

Sides, an oncologist from Cape Girardeau, Missouri, first explored Mammoth as a 19-year-old college student, and he's been a regular visitor ever since. He is past president of the Cave Research Foundation, a non-profit group that supports exploration of caves in national parks and graduate research.

Sides said he and other veteran cavers "think of darkness as not harsh – we think of it as sort of soft and gentle. And these caves are fairly forgiving."

Mammoth's caves are relatively warm: about 57 degrees. By comparison, Carlsbad Caverns stay at 72 to 75 degrees, so cavers need to carry extra water and avoid overheating. Caves in the northern U.S. and Canada are much colder, typically 48 to 54 degrees.

You don't have to spend decades exploring Mammoth, as Sides has done, to appreciate it.

"A visit to Mammoth Cave National Park is basically a way of seeing just small fragments – the easily-traversed fragments – and at the most you see about seven miles of passage of over 350 miles total. And you just get a small glimpse of how vast the cave is," he said.

"You don't see many cave formations – there are certainly prettier caves – but the geologic setting of Mammoth Cave leads it to be by far the world's longest."

Opportunities for exploration abound, even during the winter.

From November 1-March 15, 2005, [six tours are offered](#) on varying schedules, designed for people of varying physical abilities.

Another idea is to take a Winterscape Hike.

Weather permitting, you can explore the park at ground level by hiking 70 miles of trails that cover rugged hills and valleys.

Other [surface recreation options](#) include horseback riding, canoeing and fishing in the Green and Nolin rivers, riverside camping, taking a cruise on the Miss Green River II and bicycling

on a designated trail. The visitor center offers educational programs about the park's natural features and wildlife.

Who knows? You might leave Mammoth changed for life, as Sides was after his first visit in December 1962.

He had grown up caving in southeast Missouri and had surveyed many of the 640 caves in Missouri's Perry County. Four of them are over 15 miles long.

"But once you go to them for a while, you've sort of seen them all," Sides said.

"You can go to Mammoth Caves all your life and you'll never see it all. You'll never get your arms around the entire system," he said.

Sides recalled his first trip to Mammoth, which began with an invitation to some caving from a friend going to college in Ohio. Sides didn't have a car at the time but found a way to get to Kentucky.

For his first trip, Sides was rated a knowledgeable caver by others in the group. So, he was placed on a crew led by someone known as a mountaineer and "a great caver."

And his enlightenment began.

"I was used to going in, surveying a couple hours, and then eating a sandwich and coming out on the surface by mid-afternoon. And going out and drinking beer and partying, and that was a cave trip in Missouri.

"In Mammoth Cave, we didn't even stop to eat anything until late in the day and didn't get out of the cave until 2 to 3 a.m. What's more, we went in an area where there was exposure to deep vertical shafts, and this guy just waltzed around them, just climbed around them. It was all I could do to make my way around these deep shafts. And he just acted like there was no barrier. We surveyed there for hours - four of us - and I was hooked."

The next day, Sides' group went on another trip and experienced the same thing.

"We went in planning not to come out until early in the morning. At 2 or 3 a.m., we hiked across a mile of park back to the car where we were staying. And I knew this was caving not like anything I had done in Missouri, and that's what hooked me on Mammoth." Sides said.

The closest KOA to Mammoth is the [Horse Cave KOA](#).

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