

UNDERGROUND ADVENTURE

The author and her family explore the labyrinthine wonders of an Oregon lava cave. • By Kathy Shiels Tully

UNTIL THAT MOMENT, I never knew how dark “pitch black” could be. Just a moment before, I’d been gazing at my husband, Joe, and our two daughters, Bridget and Katie, then 15 and 11, standing in front of me. Now I couldn’t even see my feet. It was eerily quiet. Where was everyone?

Katie’s nervous laugh broke the silence. Then our guide,

Nick Shealey of Wanderlust Tours, told us we could turn our headlamps on again. We flicked on the lights affixed to our red hard hats, and the scene sprang back to life.

We were deep underground in a lava tube, one of many formed by volcanic activity thousands of years ago in this area outside Bend, Oregon. Nick had been showing us just how dark and dangerous spelunking, or cave exploring, can be without light.

“My heart’s beating fast,” whispered Katie. Mine was pounding, too. That mix of exhilaration and fear makes spelunking feel like being on a roller coaster—except the ride is all in your mind.

● A family stands ready to start spelunking in a remote region of the Oregon high desert.



● Headlamps on helmets provide the only light inside the cave, where visitors must navigate over and around rocks and boulders. Below, an ancient collapse of the lava tube formed a crater, which now provides access to the cave via metal stairs from the desert above.

ONLY A HUNDRED OR SO of the thousands of caves hidden across the U.S. are open to the public (see “Get Down Under,” page 52). Many of these “show” or “commercial” caves don’t call for serious spelunking skills, such as being able to rappel down crevices, cross gushing streams, or crawl through foot-wide spaces. The only things needed are comfortable shoes, a sense of adventure, and a small measure of bravery.

Exploring the high desert lava tube we were in doesn’t require rappelling or squeezing through tight spaces either, but the cave is still considered wild—unaltered by humans, except for the entrance gate and stairs. Because Wanderlust has an exclusive permit for private tours, it prefers not to disclose the cave’s name and exact location.

Our expedition began at the company’s office in a Bend business center, where we piled into a van with 15 like-minded adventurers for the half-hour drive to the cave entrance. We ranged in age from 9 to 79 (the tour is open to ages 5 and up), with varying degrees of spelunking experience. One family of six had caved around the world. Another—grandparents with their energetic 9-year-old grandson—were first-timers. We were somewhere in the middle, having already visited



three commercial, family-friendly sites: Polar Caves and Lost River Gorge, both granite formations in New Hampshire, as well as the showstopping Minnetonka Cave in Idaho, with its dramatically lit stalactites and stalagmites. This was our first time in a wild cave.

TWENTY MINUTES OUTSIDE of town, Nick turned onto a gravelly trail through desolate desert dotted with sagebrush. The excited chatter among us died down. “Where is he taking us?” Bridget mouthed silently.

In the middle of nowhere, he parked the van, and we all piled out. Grabbing our helmets, we followed a dirt path into the desert for another few minutes before finally arriving at a crater-size hole in the ground, a collapse of the original lava tube.

A metal staircase stretched down to the grassy floor some 16 feet below. One by one, we descended to



IF YOU GO

Wanderlust Tours is located in Bend, OR. It offers two tours daily. \$65 adults, \$55 ages 5-11; 541-389-8359; wanderlusttours.com

the cave’s opening, gated and locked for security.

Nick asked if we felt the drop in temperature, explaining that inside the cave it’s about 45 degrees year-round—a good reason to dress in layers, or bring an extra sweater, when spelunking. Then we put on our spelunking helmets, Nick checked the fit on each and unlocked the gate, and the adventure began.

ONCE INSIDE, our eyes opened wide in wonder, taking in what was visible of the labyrinth of trails, spanning ▶



This Oregon cave, nearly 60 feet tall in places, formed thousands of years ago when flowing lava hardened from the outside in, leaving behind tubes. Below, a guide points out jewel lichen on the basalt walls. In other areas, mineral deposits create washes of white, orange, and purple.



The calm was palpable until Katie, sensing motion, yelled, “Bat!” triggering a false-alarm chain reaction of haunted-house shrieks, followed by laughter. Bats are, indeed, a huge part of the ecosystem in the surrounding area, Nick told us, devouring three to four times their weight daily in moths, mosquitoes, and other flying insects, but they don’t arrive in this cave until hibernation season in October.

Later, walking out into the bright sunlight, Bridget let out a loud sigh of relief. “I did it!” she exclaimed triumphantly. The ride was over. And we can’t wait for the next one.

thousands of feet and disappearing into pure blackness beyond the reach of daylight and our headlamps. Rocks of all sizes lay on the dusty gray surface, and here and there massive basalt boulders blocked the path. It looked like we’d be walking on the moon.

In some spots, the ceiling was as low as five feet; in others, it towered to 60. Carefully walking, creeping, and crouching, we made our way through the narrower passages. Katie and Bridget hesitated at first, but soon they and the other younger kids got the hang of it and moved into the lead.

White, orange, and purple mineral washes marked the walls in some areas. As we ventured deeper, Nick pointed out lines marking the layers of successive lava flows thousands of years ago. Before we knew it, we had descended 60 to 100 feet below ground—without handrails, walkways, or spotlights to guide us.

meet the family

Kathy Shiels Tully and her family live in Melrose, Massachusetts.



GET DOWN UNDER

Not quite ready for a full-on spelunking adventure? “Show caves” offer reassuring amenities such as walkways, railings, and floodlights. Find one near you at cavern.com, the website of the National Caves Association. Here are a few of our favorites:

Howe Caverns, Howes Cave, NY:

Formed by flowing water over millions of years, this popular limestone cave features stalactites, stalagmites, and rippled flowstone along a twisting, turning path. Lantern, flashlight, and adventure tours available by reservation (prices vary). Traditional Tour: \$25 ages 16-64, \$21 ages 12-15, \$13 ages 5-11, free ages 4 and under; howecaverns.com

Polar Caves Park, Rumney, NH:

Visitors can explore nine granite boulder caves, formed 50,000 years ago by a retreating glacier. Wooden stairs and walkways provide access. Early May through late October. \$16.50 ages 11 and up, \$11.50 ages 4-10, free ages 3 and under; polarcaves.com

Indiana Caverns, Corydon, IN:

Just opened to the public in 2013, this 41.5-mile cave system includes subterranean rivers, waterfalls, shallow pools, and troglobites (cave-dwelling species), plus a wealth of Ice Age bones. Tour includes an underground boat ride. \$19 ages 13 and up, \$10 ages 4-12, free ages 3 and under; indianacaverns.com

Mammoth Cave National Park, Mammoth Cave, KY:

More than 400 miles of chambers, labyrinths, and interconnected ecosystems comprise the world’s longest known cave system. Tours range from short strolls to a six-hour adventure (ages 16 and up) requiring belly crawling, climbing, and canyon-walking. Prices vary; nps.gov/mac