

Highlighting Two Unique Springfield, Missouri Experiences

Few places in America offer a better setting to enjoy the beauty of nature than the Missouri Ozarks.

With its sparkling streams and lush green hills, the Ozarks offers an array of unique opportunities for educational, entertaining, up-close experiences with nature, two of which can be found in the Springfield, Missouri area. Both offer an excursion through the marvels of nature without “roughing it.” One is taking shape in the heart of the city, as new as tomorrow; the other, in the rolling countryside just outside Springfield, is older than memory itself.

Wonders of Wildlife, the American National Fish and Wildlife Museum, will open November of 2001. A 220,000-gallon shark tank, a 140,000-gallon freshwater pond, a live otter pool, bobcats, a 90-foot cave, and a walk in the Ozarks will be among the attractions in what founders have committed to make a world-class museum and aquarium.

Just a short drive from the museum, visitors looking for a real cave experience can find just that at Fantastic Caverns. They can see the cave’s beauty in a unique way, too. It is America’s only ride-through cave. Like Wonders of Wildlife, the Fantastic Caverns tour is an all-season attraction, impervious to winter cold and summer heat. Temperatures in the cave always hover near a comfortable 60 degrees.

The planners at Wonders of Wildlife envision it as nothing less than “the Smithsonian of the outdoors.” Visitors will learn in detail about the Ozarks outdoors and the animals that inhabit it, from playful beavers and otters splashing in a 140,000 gallon Community Pond to an abundance of fish and fowl and even predators such as the wily bobcat. Visitors will learn about the roles hunting and fishing have played in the history of the region and in the conservation of natural resources.

The Out to Sea Gallery features live game fish and collections of salt water fish, and Wonders of Wildlife visitors will be able to try fresh water and salt water fishing via video simulators. The Gallery includes a 220,000-gallon salt water tank that will be home to a community of game fish, including sharks, ray, tarpon, sea bass and more.

Visitors will find a recreated portion of an Ozarks' cave with wet walls, springs, stalagmites and stalactites, and narrow spaces for children to explore. Dioramas will show important indicator species that provide clues about the health of caves, including blind cavefish, crayfish and cave salamanders. There is also a colony of live bats.

Missouri is called the “cave state” for good reason – more than 5,600 known caverns exist in

the state, and more are being found every year.

Less than half-an-hour from Wonders of Wildlife, nature enthusiasts can find a first-hand cave experience at Fantastic Caverns.

Like Wonders of Wildlife, Fantastic Caverns also provides easy accessibility – visitors ride through the cave on a Jeep-drawn tram. No walking is necessary, making the cave an ideal stop for families with young children, older folks and those who use wheelchairs.

The mile-long, 55-minute tour route through the cave is brightly lighted so visitors can see the stalactites, stalagmites, flowstones and other of the countless formations that were thousands, perhaps millions of years in the making. Lying beneath the remains of a shallow, prehistoric sea bed, an ancient underground river took a winding course, carving the path for America's ride through cave.

This slow and gradual process yielded dramatic results. In addition to the countless mineral formations that can be seen today – each one unique – a complex underground ecosystem was created. It is home to a number of fragile species dependent on each other – and factors both above and below ground – for their survival. Among these are the rare and reclusive Ozarks blind cavefish, a tiny creature smaller than a finger that lives, undisturbed, in a portion of Fantastic Caverns that is not open to visitors.

The owners of Fantastic Caverns are committed to careful stewardship of the Ozarks' natural resources. Water quality is closely monitored and great care is taken to protect the cave's ancient, irreplaceable formations.

Convenient to dozens of other Ozarks attractions, Fantastic Caverns and Wonders of Wildlife offer an entertaining, comfortable, daylong experience with nature than can be found no place else.

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