

Cathedral Caverns Inspire Awe

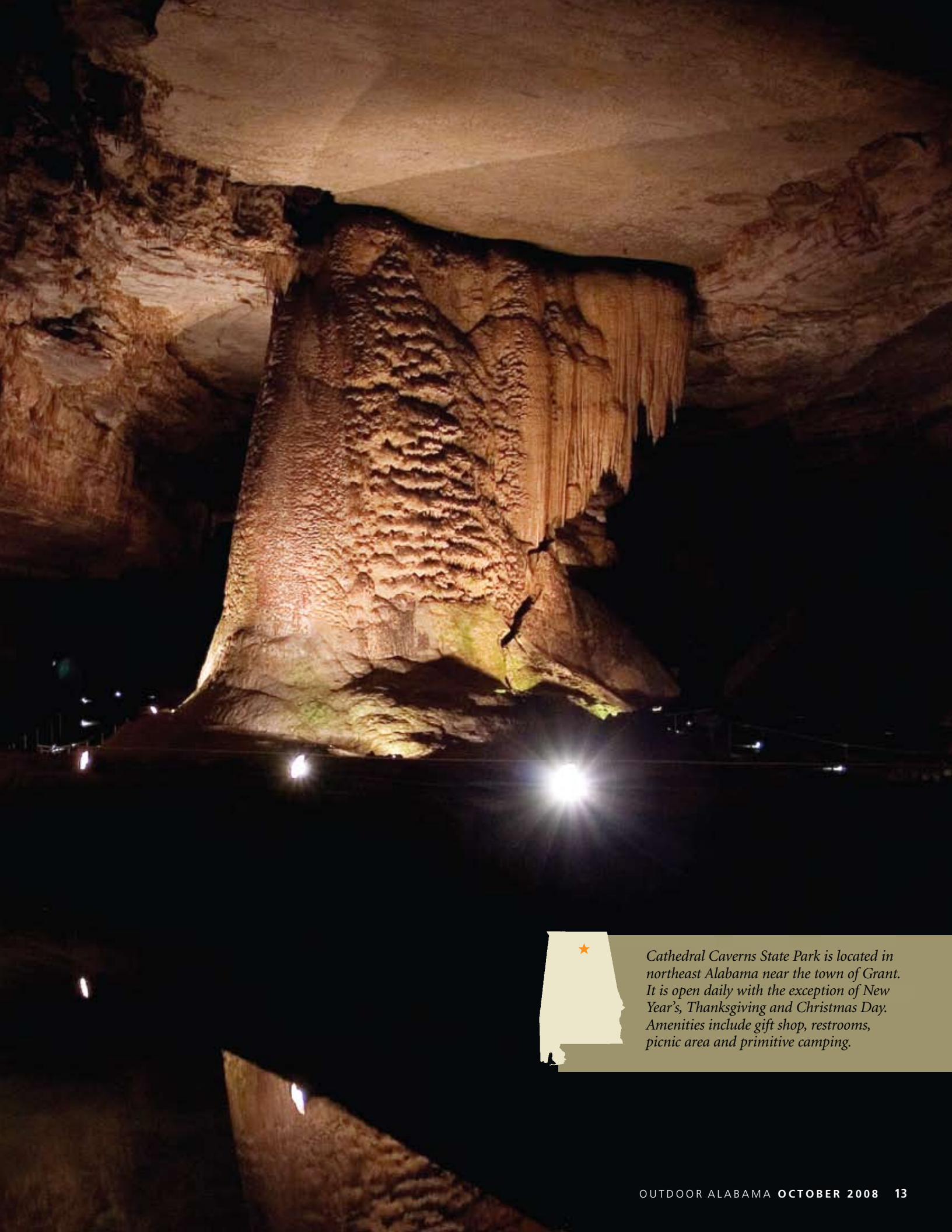


Surprise and awe were probably the two most prominent emotions when I recently entered Cathedral Caverns for the first time.

I had heard complimentary talk about the cave for a long time, but apparently, I wasn't listening.

Listen up. Cathedral Caverns State Park is a natural wonder that should not be missed, especially by folks within driving distance of Woodville, only 35 miles east of Huntsville.

By David Rainer, Staff Writer //
Photography by Billy Pope



Cathedral Caverns State Park is located in northeast Alabama near the town of Grant. It is open daily with the exception of New Year's, Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. Amenities include gift shop, restrooms, picnic area and primitive camping.

Amazing Journey

The enormity of the cave, which was acquired by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources in 1987, is breathtaking.

When Park Superintendent Danny Lewis and I entered the cave, a thin cloud was evident near the entrance. When I asked about the cloud, Lewis said the cave's initial developer, Jay Gurley, told him the cloud meant it was time to break out the rain gear.

"Jay told me not too long after I came here that the cloud we were seeing coming out of the mouth of the cave was a very good weather indicator," Lewis said. "He said every time he had ever seen that cloud, it would rain within 24 to 48 hours. For the 19 years I've been here, Jay has been exactly right. When I see the cloud, I know it's about to rain. It's going to rain. I wouldn't bet the farm on it, but I almost would."

Sure enough, I contacted Alan Clemons, outdoor writer with the *Huntsville Times* who had accompanied us into the cave, and he said it came a flood the next day, well within Gurley's timetable.

Yet, the cloud was just the start of an amazing journey into the depths of Gunter

Mountain, and the second thing you notice is the absence of the sweltering August heat.

"No matter what's happening outside, the temperature inside the cave is 57-60 degrees (Fahrenheit) year-round," Lewis said. "It's always very comfortable in the cave."

As the light fades from the entrance, the extensive artificial lighting reveals a sight possibly unrivaled in the world. Water seeping through the limestone for eons formed stalactites and stalagmites from minute deposits of calcium carbonate with each drip. At Cathedral Caverns there is one spot where the stalactite and stalagmite meet to form a column of epic proportions.

"In my opinion, the most impressive feature of Cathedral Caverns is Goliath," Lewis said. "We believe it is the second world record at Cathedral Caverns. The formation is 45 feet tall, 243 feet in circumference and about 40 feet thick.

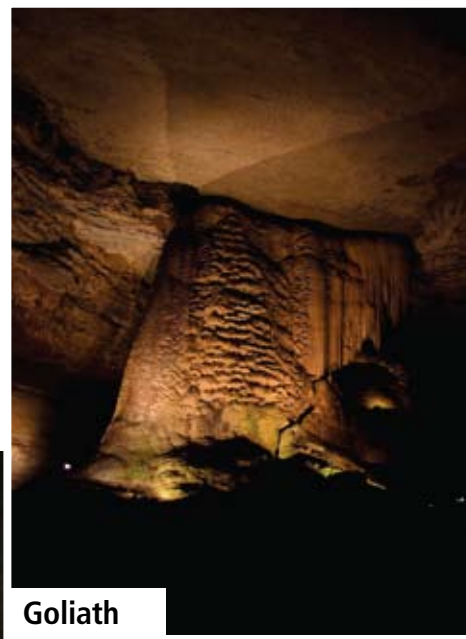
"When people see Goliath, we get a lot of oohs, aahs and 'Man, can you believe this. I've never seen anything like it.'"

Lewis said the first world record Cathedral Caverns claims is the entrance, which is 128 feet wide by about 25 feet tall.

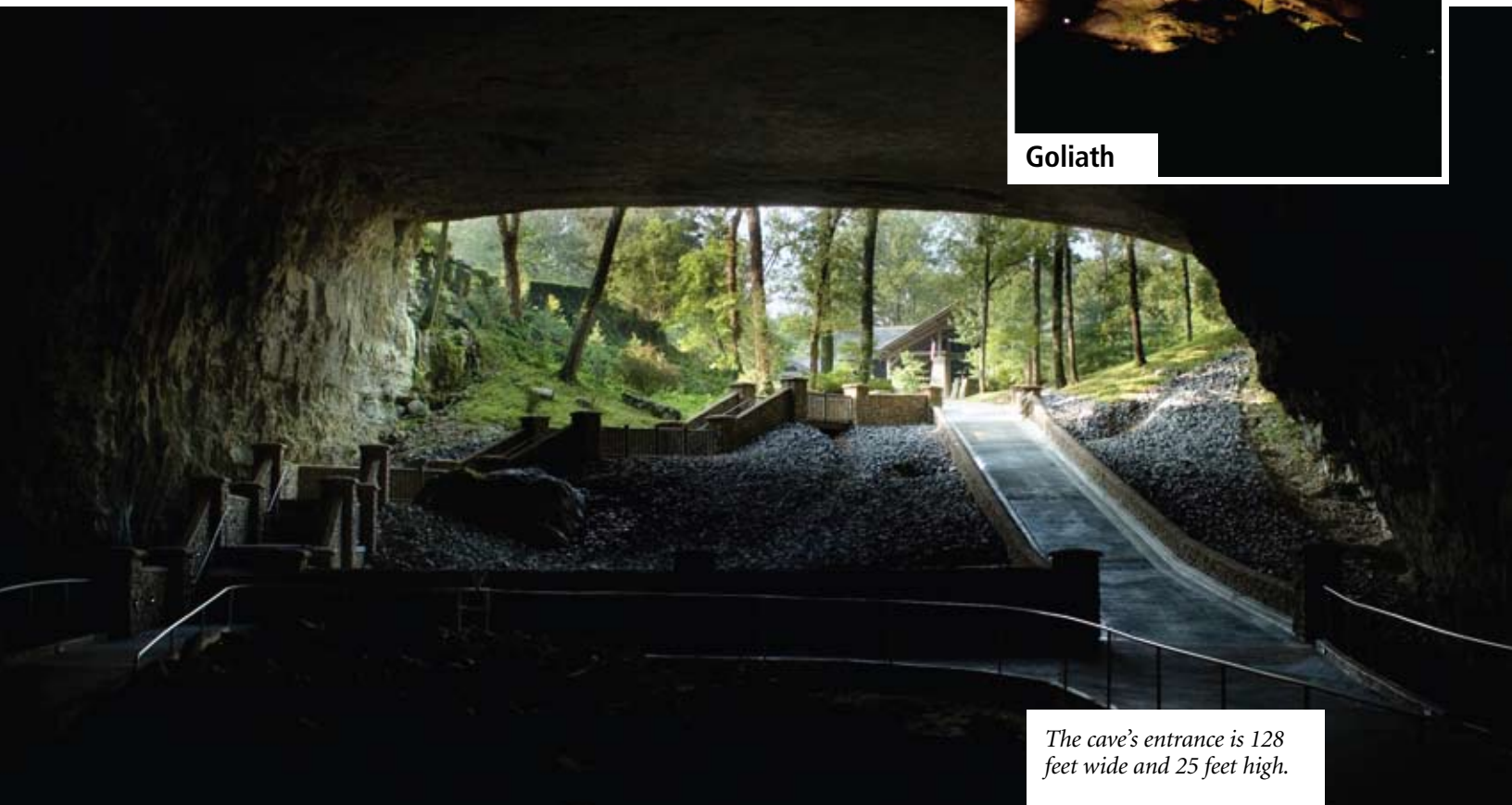
"We also have our frozen waterfall, believed to be one of if not the largest flow-

stone walls in a showcase," he said. "We have the most improbable formation in a free-standing stalagmite that is 25 feet tall, growing on a rock that sits at a 45-degree angle. The base of this formation is approximately three inches in diameter and then is about eight inches in diameter about midway and then goes to a needle top.

"Our stalagmite forest area covers about three acres. It is one of the most beautiful formations I have ever seen. Some reach heights of about 40 feet. We have one room that is 123 feet, floor to ceiling. There is one area in our cave where you can stand and look in two directions over 700 feet."



Goliath



The cave's entrance is 128 feet wide and 25 feet high.



World Class Cave

Lewis said the commercial part of the cave runs just over 3,500 feet with a little more than two miles of paths and passageways, some of which run off to either side of the main system. He said Cathedral rivals Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, Luray Caverns in Virginia and Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico in terms of size, formations and beauty.

“Cathedral Caverns is a very rare cave in terms of size,” Lewis said. “I would even call it world class. Even though there are longer caves or maybe caves with higher rooms, I know of very few that have the volume of Cathedral Caverns, where the cave is long, wide and tall at the same time.”

In 1988 the University of Alabama and Jacksonville State University performed an archeological survey at the cavern’s entrance and uncovered spear points, arrowheads, broken pieces of pottery, a couple of fire pits and a multitude of animal bones, mostly from small animals. The artifacts dated from about 200 years ago to 9,000 years ago. The formations inside the cave are millions of years old.

Despite the cave’s age and inherent darkness, there is no dank, musty smell.

“That’s because Mystery River runs the length of the cave,” Lewis explained. “Although the river is hidden sometimes, it is always there, continually bringing new oxygen in the cave. That oxygen keeps the air refreshed.”

However, because of the restricted outflow, Mystery River tends to flood during a large rain event.

“I have seen it about 40 feet deep,” Lewis said. “Right now it’s about 6 inches deep,

which is a little lower than normal because of our drought situation. Normally, it’s about 18 inches deep.”

Lewis admits that there was nothing romantic about his motivation to gain employment at Cathedral Caverns in 1989.

“My wife and both boys had really bad habits that I had to support for them – all three enjoyed eating and living indoors,” Lewis chuckled as he recalled his start at the park as a caretaker/handyman. “When I started, it was all about eating. But so far, it’s been a wonderful trip and I have so enjoyed it. I read once that if you enjoy what you do, you never work. The people part of my job causes me to not work much. I enjoy people. We get people from all around the world. I did a tour a few years ago that had six countries represented. I know we’ve had people from Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Thailand, Viet Nam, Korea, and Huntsville – all over the world.”

At the end of the commercial trail, Lewis flipped a switch that plunged our party into total darkness. After a few moments, he turned on his flashlight and cupped his hands around the lens to mimic the amount of light Gurley probably had to explore the cave in 1952.

“Can you imagine crawling around on your hands and knees with that just little bit of light?” Clemons asked his kids, Emily Ann and Wesley, who marveled at the cave’s formations.

“I would say that Jay Gurley put in a great amount of blood, sweat and elbow grease into the cave,” Lewis said. “There were times when he did sustain injuries from his work inside the cave. One time he told me he stayed inside the cave so long that he developed pneumonia.”

More than Meets the Eye

Although the cave with the commercial path is impressive enough, Lewis said there is much more to Cathedral Caverns.

“There is another 2,700 feet of cave past the end of the path,” he said. “To me it’s prettier than the one we just walked through. The formations are bigger and compacted into a smaller area. There would have to be money spent, but I believe we would put in a cable ride.”

The current path is about eight feet wide in most places with a round trip of about 1.3 miles. The tour takes roughly one-and-a-half hours, depending on the size of the group, group interaction and the tour guide.

“In my opinion, this is the best kept secret in Alabama,” Lewis said. “We do a great amount of repeat business. Those customers tell someone else about it. I would venture a guess that if we were to advertise more we could double our business. We would have to hire more people, and instead of starting a tour every hour, we’d have to start one about every half-hour. But we could handle it. We could make it happen.”

Lewis understands the natural attraction of something as phenomenal as Cathedral Caverns. “Caves are like puppies – there are no ugly ones,” he said. “All show caves and wild caves are beautiful in their own rights, but to me there’s nothing as massive and nothing as beautiful as Cathedral Caverns.” DA