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EXPLORE 5 NW CAVES

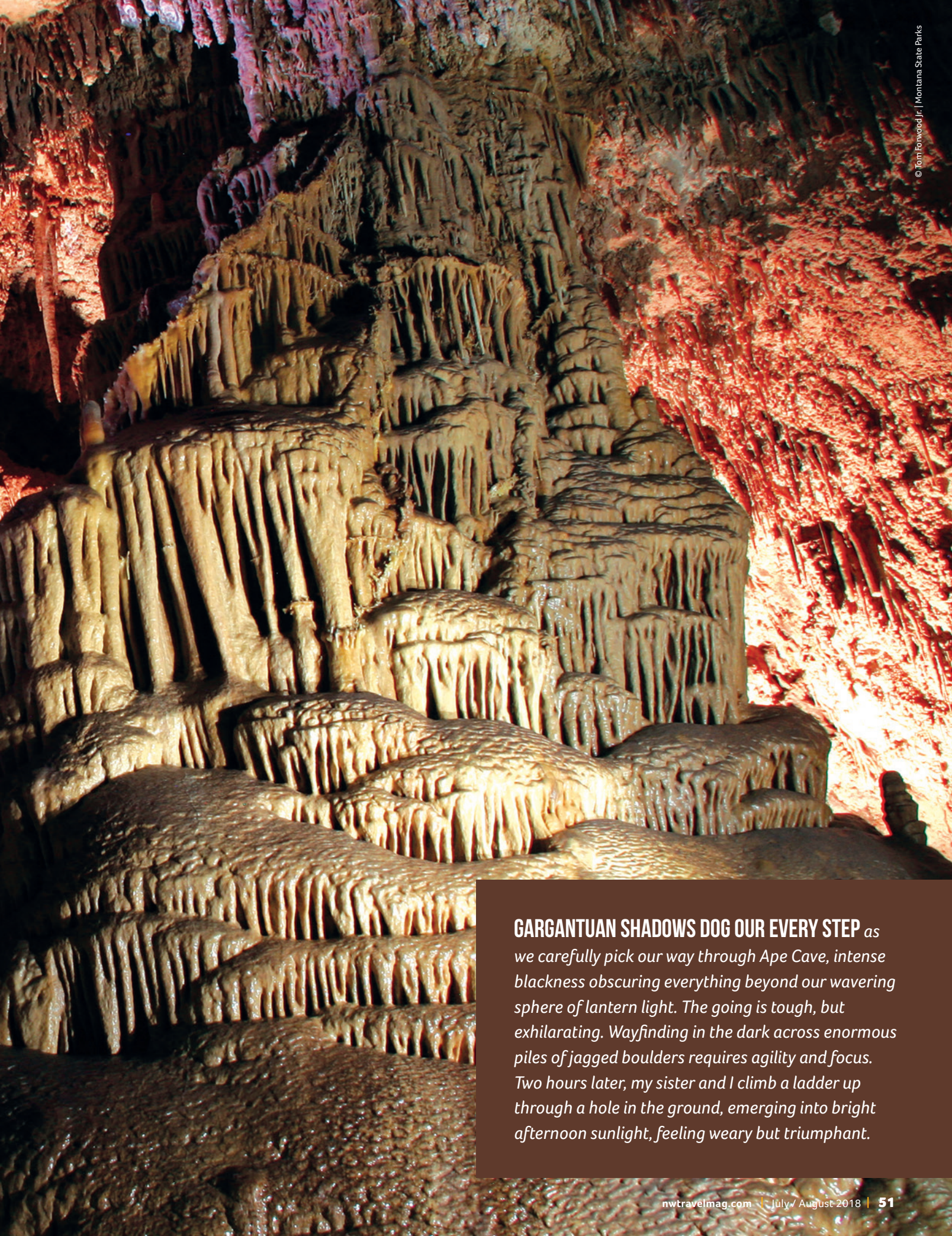
DRIVE THE ALASKA HIGHWAY



DOWN UNDER

ESCAPE THE HEAT WITH
CAVE TOURS

BY TAMARA MULDOON



GARGANTUAN SHADOWS DOG OUR EVERY STEP *as we carefully pick our way through Ape Cave, intense blackness obscuring everything beyond our wavering sphere of lantern light. The going is tough, but exhilarating. Wayfinding in the dark across enormous piles of jagged boulders requires agility and focus. Two hours later, my sister and I climb a ladder up through a hole in the ground, emerging into bright afternoon sunlight, feeling weary but triumphant.*



© Tamara Muldoon

Cave touring feeds your adventurous spirit and provides an escape from the summer heat. Some caves offer family-friendly guided tours along lit passageways. Others require a strenuous scramble, finding your own way by only the light you carry. Some are tube-like caves of volcanic rock, left behind when the core of molten lava poured out. Others are limestone caves formed as acidic ground water seeps through limestone deposits, the dissolved minerals dripping into a cave where it re-solidifies into fantastic shapes.

The following Northwest caves are just waiting for intrepid souls to plumb their depths. Go prepared and take a companion. Dress warmly; cave temperatures hover near 40 degrees. Wear sturdy, closed-toe shoes to protect your feet. Take multiple light sources per person; a headlamp is great because it leaves your hands free. And pack a bottle of water.

LAVA RIVER CAVE

Central Oregon's popular Lava River Cave is one of many geologic attractions within the Newberry National Volcanic Monument. Hiking this mile-long cave takes about 1.5 hours out and back.

Just beyond the check-in station, a steep paved path and stairs descend into the cave. The first section is the hardest,

with many steps and uneven, rocky terrain. Once beyond that, a broad floor of smooth rock and sand makes it easier to walk—but watch out for potholes!

At one point, the nearly 60-foot ceiling dips to about five feet, making you crouch to get through. Stop and examine the walls and ceiling where molten rock flowed and dripped during the cave's formation, creating "lavacicles." Rent one of the high-powered flashlights at the entrance. While my headlamp and flashlight got me through, it was inadequate for a detailed look at the formations.

Open May through September, this attraction gets crowded in summer. Arrive early to get a parking space. An annual Northwest Forest Pass or daily parking pass is required, which you can purchase there. While in the area, explore the entire Newberry National Volcanic Monument. visitcentraloregon.com

OREGON CAVES

You'll find Oregon Caves National Monument high on a forested hillside in southern Oregon's Siskiyou National Forest. Administered by the National Park Service, this is a limestone cave, rare in the Northwest.

The tour transits a half-mile of twisting tunnels, through rooms with amazing formations, and up 500 steps. While it

sounds strenuous, there are pauses while the guide explains points of interest and the cave's history, so the pace is relatively slow.

Like other limestone caves, this one delights with extraordinary marble-like features built up over centuries—stalactites, stalagmites, columns, draperies and flowstone. Before access was controlled, some early visitors inked their names on a smooth rock. Subsequent accretions sealed this graffiti with translucent mineral deposits, forever preserving their vandalism.

Tours are available spring through fall, with summer being the busiest time. I recommend reserving and pre-paying for your tour online. Oregon Caves is 50 miles west of Grants Pass. The entrance road is narrow and winding, so allow plenty of driving time. While you're there, visit Oregon Caves Chateau. Completed in 1934, the six-story lodge hotel is a National Historic Landmark. southernoregon.org

APE CAVE

Located near Mt. St. Helens in southwestern Washington, Ape Cave is America's longest lava tube open to public exploration. I hiked this cave with my sister years ago and remembered it as a great adventure. We recently repeated the experience. It was more difficult than we recalled, but I think we've changed, not the cave.

Rent a lantern at the check-in station. The cave's absolute darkness devours all but the brightest lights, and this is one cave where you need to see where you're going. From the main entry, the downslope portion of the cave is the easiest, about three-quarters of a mile long. A rough floor with ridges of solidified lava makes walking tricky, but most people can navigate it with care.

The 1.5-mile upper section is challenging and should not be attempted by anyone with limited mobility. There are numerous rockpiles, tight squeezes and an eight-foot wall



© Tom Forwood Jr. / Montana State Park



WHITE NOSE SYNDROME

White nose syndrome is a fungal disease that does not affect humans but is lethal to bats. Widespread in the eastern U.S., the disease has now been identified in Western bat populations. To help prevent its spread, avoid wearing clothing, shoes or other items that have been worn in any other cave unless it has been decontaminated. Most cave tour operators now question participants before granting access to ensure this practice is being followed. For more information, visit whitenosesyndrome.org.



© Montana State Parks

to scale. An opening at the end allows hikers to return by an above-ground trail.

There is no entrance fee, but a Northwest Forest Pass is required for parking. While there, visit the adjacent Trail of Two Forests for another intriguing volcanic feature. visitmtsthelens.com

SHOSHONE ICE CAVES

While driving Central Idaho's Sawtooth Scenic Byway north of Shoshone, watch for the large Ice Cave sign, a cluster of red buildings and a giant green dinosaur. Privately-owned Shoshone Ice Cave is a throwback to kitschy mid-century roadside attractions; still, it's worth a stop. Guided tours are offered May through September for a fee. There's a small museum and fun gift shop.

Beneath an expanse of flat volcanic rock hides a 1,700-foot-long tunnel. Air flow through the cave causes ice up to 30 feet

thick to form along its floor. Ice remains even through summer. On this half-hour tour you follow walkways and staircases through the lit tunnel, learning about the cave's history and geology. Bundle up! Temperatures stay near freezing.

Also visit nearby Craters of the Moon National Monument, a mind-boggling landscape of lava flows and cinder cones used for astronaut training in the 1960s. shoshoneicecaves.com

LEWIS & CLARK CAVERNS

Montana's Lewis & Clark Caverns State Park, midway between Butte and Bozeman, features one of the Northwest's most spectacular limestone caves. Guided tours are offered May through September.

The moderately-difficult Standard Cavern Tour takes two hours. There is a one-mile uphill walk to the entrance. Then, the two-mile underground journey includes 600 stairsteps, squeezing through narrow openings, and scooting down the "Beaver Slide" as you descend about 350 vertical feet, emerging lower on the mountain. Marvel at stalactites, stalagmites, columns and gravity-defying helictites. Lit for best display, these fantastic limestone formations resemble a ghoulish skeleton—the bones of the mountain.

The Paradise Tour, designed for the mobility-impaired, includes the largest and most decorated cavern room. Agile adventure-seekers enjoy the Wild Cave Tour which explores realms beyond the standard tour—helmets, kneepads and headlamps are provided.

There is a tour fee and a parking fee for out-of-state vehicles. Although the cave is the main attraction, the 3,000-acre park offers year-round camping, hiking trails, fishing and other recreation. stateparks.mt.gov/lewis-and-clark-caverns. 🗺️



© Shoshone Ice Cave