

## Traveling with Tots

By LIBBY CARTY MCNAMEE

# Discover a world down under at Luray Caverns

Can you imagine the reaction of the local men who discovered the incredible Luray Caverns back in 1878? Our visit was just as amazing, wondering if we'd fallen down Alice's rabbit-hole into Wonderland or stumbled upon the Munsters' underground mausoleum. With Halloween on the horizon, these limestone caverns can be downright eerie with no need for decorations.

More than 400 million years in the making, this eerie subterranean wonder is world-famous and recognized as a National Natural Landmark. These massive connected caves are the largest in the East and are still growing, accumulating one cubic inch every 120 years.

Each mammoth chamber is filled with towering stone columns as well as shimmering stalactite and stalagmite formations in a range of colors, sizes, and forms. There are also a number of crystal-clear pools with breathtaking reflections. The caverns are 10-stories high, so there's no claustrophobic feeling. Just wait until you see the bizarre figures called the "fried eggs" - it's easy to feel like you're on another planet.

Where else can you hear rocks sing or an organ play by itself? In the cavern known as the "Cathedral Room," you will find the world's largest musical instrument, the Great Stalacpipe Organ. It's actually a lithophone that creates symphony-quality tones from the surrounding stalactite formations. These uniquely beautiful and haunting sounds are similar to those of xylophones, tuning forks, and bells.

The caverns are open daily with guides conducting hour-long tours every 20 minutes. Strollers are quite handy because the cavern floor is paved, and the tour is more than a mile long. (The caverns themselves cover more than three acres.) Note there are no ramps, so you'll have to carry the stroller up and down 70 stairs. Also, there are no restrooms down below, so make a potty run before descending. The temperature is quite comfortable at a constant 54 degrees. Oh, and no touching anything down there other than the railings.



Luray Caverns is full of kid-friendly adventures. Photo by Loretta Sherwood.

Located next to the caverns, the Garden Maze is highly recommended. Within this one-acre garden, kids follow clues and discover fountains, a lookout tower, and hidden tunnels. The misting sprays from the eight-foot hedges keep you cool (and on your toes) as you scout the half-mile of manicured pathways, finding the four goals that reveal the maze's theme. It only takes about 30 minutes or so, and kids revel in the adventure while burning off some energy after touring the caverns.

The entrance fee for the caverns is a bit steep (\$23 for adults; \$11 for children ages 6-12) but well worth it.

Admission includes access to two adjoining museums, the Luray Valley Museum as well as the Car and Carriage Caravan Museum that displays 140 means of transportation dating from 1725. Check for discounts such as AAA membership, a Martin's card, or purchasing maze and cavern tickets at the same time.

Located near Skyline Drive and Shenandoah National Park, Luray is a quaint town with a stunning setting in the Shenandoah Valley. The ride from Richmond is a relaxing one, winding through Virginia's rural wine country north of Charlottesville and then rising up into the

Blue Ridge Mountains. It would be a wonderful fall drive with foliage highlighting the natural beauty of the area.

The Visitors Center is located downtown alongside a park and a stone block once used to auction slaves. There are other Civil War-era landmarks in the area, including the New Market Battlefield and its Hall of Valor Museum.

For equestrian types, Jordan Hollow Stables is a neat horse farm with trail rides as well as 20-minute pony rides. By the time you leave, you'll feel like part of the gang and know the horses' life stories. Luray also has lots of phenomenal hiking nearby, as well as canoeing, kayaking, and fishing in the Shenandoah River and on Lake Arrowhead.

If you are interested in staying overnight, the Mimslyn Inn stands out as a cherished local jewel. Perched on a rolling hill just a stroll from downtown, it is celebrating its 80th year along with Shenandoah National Park's 75th anniversary. The rocking chairs on the front porch offer a wonderful vantage point of the grounds below, recalling bygone Southern days before air conditioning. The inn is listed among the Historic Hotels of America.

The Mimslyn Inn also offers an element of Halloween spookiness. Local legend says it is haunted with a ghost wandering the third floor at night. We didn't have any supernatural encounters while we were there, but we sure had fun being on the lookout!

The Inn has an outdoor pool, workout room, as well as two restaurants, the formal Circa '31 and the Speakeasy with a casual evening menu. Uncle Buck's on Main Street is a local dining favorite with good home-cooked meals morning, noon, and night, also available for take-out. There are also a couple of casual eateries next to the caverns. **RPM**

*Libby Carty McNamee, a local freelance writer and mother, can now check off her bucket list that she has seen the world's largest musical instrument. For more information and coloring pages, check out [www.luraycaverns.com](http://www.luraycaverns.com).*