

Weekender

By Carrie O'Brien

HIDDEN WONDERS

Explore the Nation's Largest Caverns and Vintage Southern Charm in Luray, Virginia



Dream Lake

Dream Lake. **Giant's Hall.** **Saracen's Tent. Pluto's Ghost.**

Sixteen stories deep within the ground beneath the Shenandoah Valley, milky-colored mineral formations shimmer and ripple as if alive, transforming subterranean halls into an otherworldly paradise known as Luray Caverns.

Anybody who has gone camping knows that luxury and nature don't always go together, but in Luray, travelers don't need to rough it to enjoy a natural wonder. They can put their feet up at the Mimslyn Inn, a classic Georgian Revival hotel that was newly restored in 2008 and is a member of the Historic Hotels of America.

The Mimslyn Inn

"In 1936, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt came to dedicate the Shenandoah National Park," says Jim Simms, general manager of the Mimslyn Inn, "Eleanor Roosevelt opted not to camp out for the night. She stayed here, in the Roosevelt Suite."

needed to fix a length of crown moulding, they would remove the piece and take it to the mill to get it replicated exactly."

The attention to detail is evident. Modern guests can enjoy the same indulgences as Eleanor Roosevelt, plus they can experience modern conveniences like flat screen TVs, jetted bathtubs and wireless Internet access. Guests can even stay in one of the Roosevelt Suites, should they be so inclined to experience the Inn just as Eleanor Roosevelt did more than 75 years ago.

You Could Be Here by Dinner

And what a dinner it is. The Mimslyn Inn has two restaurants: The Speakeasy and Circa '31. For nightly live music and Southern favorites like chicken pot pie and pork barbeque, choose The Speakeasy. It also has a Prohibition-era inspired drinks menu, and it is a local favorite.

For something a bit more refined, choose Circa '31. Located in the main dining room, hung with crystal chandeliers

and lushly decorated with dark woods and crisp linens, Circa '31 serves upscale Southern cuisine designed to pair with Virginia wines.

"The Weekend Wine dinners are so special because we pick a different Virginia winery to feature each month," says Sims.

"We pick a winery and pack a picnic, bring the staff, and we visit the winery to learn about the wines. That way, each member of our wait staff is very knowledgeable about the wines that we feature—and we all love doing the research!"

The Mimslyn also offers a Whiskey Wine Loop Package that starts with a self-guided tour of nearby wineries and the Copper Fox Distillery. Guests can order a lunch to bring with them, travel the Skyline Drive and visit wineries during the day and choose the wine they'd like to drink with dinner that night.

Circa '31 serves breakfast and lunch daily, but dinner only on Friday and Saturday nights.

Foray in Luray

The strange and beautiful underground world of Luray Caverns was formed more than 4 million centuries ago when water filled the limestone chambers and began chemical reactions that produce the striking calcite formations of dripstone, flowstone, cascades and draperies.

"Stalactites hold tight to the ceiling, and stalagmites might one day reach the ceiling," says Luray Caverns tour guide Emily Hilliard. "When a stalactite and a stalagmite meet in the middle, they form a column."



Mimslyn Inn

It's easy to see why the First Lady made her decision.

From its perch on a high knoll overlooking a rolling front lawn and the Allegheny range of the Appalachian Mountains, The Mimslyn Inn is a perfectly restored example of vintage Southern splendor. The main lobby features a winding grand staircase, dramatic double-hung windows, glittering antique chandeliers, and several conversational groupings inviting guests to relax by the fireplace, enjoy a cup of coffee and read the paper, or sip a cocktail before dinner.

"When the Assam family bought the Inn in 2005, they spent three years restoring every detail," Sims says. "If they



At nearly 10-stories high, the column named Pluto's Ghost is one of the most impressive. This formation takes supernatural to another level—it is visible at three different points during the tour, and seems to follow you throughout the caverns like a ghost haunting you.

Other impressive formations include Saracen's Tent and Dream Lake. Saracen's Tent is a drapery formation, a huge rippling curtain of calcite that is so thin in places that it is nearly translucent. Dream Lake is the largest body of water within the caverns, but it is only about 18 inches deep. It is a perfectly calm mirror that reflects the forest of stalactites hanging from the ceiling. The optical illusion of Dream Lake is so complete that it is not discernible as water until your guide tells you.

Upcoming Events

May 11

Luray Festival of Spring

Fine crafts, food, wineries and The Duck Race—a competition of rubber duckies racing through the center of town in Hawksbill Creek. *Downtown Luray*

May 18

An Evening with Robert E. Lee

Actor Tex Wells plays Robert E. Lee and discusses the Battle of Gettysburg. Civil War-era music and historical reenactments will also be featured. *The Luray Valley Museum*

July 4

Fireworks & Fun in Luray

Central Greenway, Downtown Luray

August 10

Discovery Day

See the caverns as the first explorers did! Grand Illumination Tours showcase special candle-lit sections of the caverns. *Luray Caverns*



Saracen's Tent



The Great Stalacpipe Organ

Rock Music and Much More

Above all, the caverns seem to live and breathe—hey, they even sing.

The Great Stalacpipe Organ, located in the Cathedral within the caverns, plays music by tapping stalactites of different sizes to form different notes. It took mathematician and musician Leland Sprinkle more than three years to build the organ, but today visitors can hear this “rock” music on each tour.

Tours leave every 20 minutes, and the temperature inside the caverns is a balmy 54 degrees Fahrenheit year-round, so they're cool in the summer and comparatively warm in the winter. Tours last about an hour, and the walking length is about a mile and a quarter.

Other things you can do in Luray include a Hedge Maze, a high ropes course, the Car and Carriage Caravan Museum (included in your ticket price to the caverns), and the Gem Sluice Mining Station in the Luray Valley Museum.

In Luray, visitors really can have the best of both worlds. After tromping through a natural wonder—the most popular and largest caverns in Eastern America—visitors can put their feet up in a grand Virginia inn overlooking the Allegheny Range of the Appalachian Mountains. 