



## HISTORY UNDERGROUND NORTH FLORIDA

**There's a sense of tranquility** that surrounds when walking down the dewy steps into quiet darkness at the Florida Caverns State Park in Marianna, an hour from both Panama City and Tallahassee. There, within the insulating limestone walls that keep the cavern a balmy 65 degrees year-round, tour guide Billy Bailey locks the door and flicks on the lights, revealing the first surreal sea of milky white, rust-colored and tan formations reminiscent of alligator teeth.

Undoubtedly pretty, but perhaps not impressive until one considers that each inch of stalactite — which hangs like a dripping icicle — and stalagmite — which grows from the ground — is the accumulation of 100 years' worth of rain slowly depositing minerals. Many reach several feet in height, which means they were silently forming before



**The Florida Caverns are the only caves in the state's park service.**



From far left: Horseback riding the park trails extends your visit, a dark narrow passage underground, Grotto restaurant's seafood special.



## The trails take you past sinkholes, rivers and lush ecosystems indigenous to only the northern part of the state.

Tyrannosaurus met extinction. Most of us have only been on this earth in the time that it takes for the tip to form.

Oliver Chalifaux originally found the cavern, located between Interstate 10 and the Alabama border, in 1937, but it was the Civilian Conservation Crew (CCC) that, under orders from Franklin D. Roosevelt, labored for almost five years to make it accessible to the public. For a dollar a day, each member of the Gopher Gang — a unit within the CCC — crawled on his belly through the expanse with an ice pick and shovel until they removed enough sediment to create what 100,000 visitors now see annually.

The 45-minute tour meanders through eight rooms, including the wedding room named for the cake-shaped formation that served as the backdrop for two weddings in 2007.

After you come into the light of day again, venture onto one of the park's many trails that can be hiked, biked and even horsebacked (you

just have to bring your own horse). The trails take you past sinkholes, rivers and lush ecosystems indigenous to only the northern part of the state. Park admission is \$4 per person and an additional \$8 per person for the cave tour. — BROOKE MORTON

### FLORIDA CAVERNS STATE PARK

850.482.9598, floridastateparks.org/floridacavernsorg

### LUNCH SPOT

Should hiking the caverns trigger hunger, chef Rick Amora, owner of the neighboring Grotto restaurant, has the perfect dish: Grotto à la seafood. Although not on the menu, it's by far the most popular dish coming out of his kitchen, and he prepares it almost daily. Filled with shrimp, scallop and crab, grouper is finished with a roasted red pepper sauce. Savor the seafood in a charming rustic dining room, along with a panoramic view of the park's dense forest. 850.526.4600

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