

Recreation heads underground in Missouri



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Rather than head outside for a recreational adventure, athletes in Missouri can head underground — to scuba dive, play tennis and, if one man has his way, even try their hand at subterranean ice skating or kayaking.

Missouri is often called the Cave State, with an international reputation for its natural marvels. But it's the state's mining history that has created huge manmade caverns that have been recast as underground recreational areas.

Businessman Tom Kerr has a \$50 million plan to convert an eight million square-foot sand mine into an athletic complex housing extreme, recreational and Olympic-level facilities near Crystal City, Mo.

The concept might sound far-fetched elsewhere, but doesn't seem impossible in these parts. In southwest Missouri people play tennis on courts carved out from limestone caverns.

And Kerr is planning the facility about a half-hour drive from Bonne Terre Mine, a billion-gallon underground scuba diving site located in a former lead mine that a suburban St. Louis couple, Doug and Cathy Goergens, bought in 1979. They converted the now-partially flooded mine into an attraction that National Geographic Adventure magazine placed in the Top 10 of its one hundred best adventures in America earlier this decade, calling it "part Pompeii, part Lara Croft."

Step down a set of stairs at the site and a whole new chilly world, smelling of wet dirt and with the sound of dripping water, opens up. It resembles a "Phantom of the Opera" set — if "Phantom of the Opera" were set in a lead mine.

Huge caverns have been carved out, where lead ore was removed using the room-and-pillar method of mining. They are supported by enormous stone columns that miners left behind. The caverns are now lit with motion-sensitive path lights. The underground waters are surprisingly blue.

Temperatures here remain fairly constant, at 62 degrees for the air and 58 degrees in the water year 'round. "When it's snowing outside, we're scuba diving," Doug Goergens said.

The divers don't see fish — well, there's one, a largemouth bass named "Bonnie Bass of Bonne Terre Mine," who mine manager Donna Jones says often comes when called.

But there are plenty of unusual sights for divers here, Jones explains as she steers a pontoon boat through the waters in the underground caverns. "For them, it's going back in history. They see ore carts, drills left in the wall, timekeeper shacks, where the guys would clock in," she said.

She said divers encounter optical illusions, like an area that resembles an upside down waterfall, another known as the "Redwood Forest," for the way it looks when light hits submerged stone pillars.

The Bonne Terre Mine with 24 dive trails draws 15,000 divers annually and another 30,000 tourists who tour and learn the mine's history, said Doug Goergens.

Kerr's recreation complex called Crystal City Underground is being planned to draw thousands of visitors, at a minimum. Though it would seem to be more challenging to create a recreation complex underground, Kerr sees it

differently. "You could never do it above ground. You could never build all the buildings to do it," he said.

Kerr, who owns St. Louis-based Fiesta Corp., is proposing a host of underground recreation from rock climbing to skating to swimming, with individual operators renting out venues in the complex, with an attached convention center. Above ground, he envisions softball fields, football fields, an equestrian center and more. Food and shopping will be part of the mix, he said.

He said work is under way to bring utilities to the caverns. He said most people haven't gotten caught up in the fact the facilities will largely be underground, he said.

"The immensity of it is appealing to athletes. Athletes like to cross train. Athletes like to play," he said.

These manmade caverns serve different recreational purposes than their natural counterparts.

Cave enthusiasts usually take precautions to protect the life and natural formations they encounter in caves, but caving organizations didn't see a problem with efforts to transform manmade caverns into recreational facilities.

"We try to teach people conservation. Don't hurt the cave and don't hurt yourself," said Bill Torode, librarian for the National Speleological Society based in Huntsville, Ala.

But, "We're more concerned about natural caves. The manmade things, like mines, are different from caves," he said.

Even so, the caverns provide a unique environment for a workout.

In southwest Missouri, tennis players hold matches underground, on two illuminated courts in an underground cavern. The property is owned by AmeriCold Logistics, Inc., an Atlanta-based food distribution services company that didn't return phone calls seeking comment.

But Nancy Sanders has played tennis there since 1977 at Underground Racquets Ltd., where it naturally stays about 68 degrees, and conditions are always right for playing.

"There's no wind; there's no sun; there's no heat," she said, though she thought of one drawback to her underground tennis matches.

"I guess the first few times I played, the echo bothered me," she said. "There is an echo."

If You Go...

BONNE TERRE MINE: 39 N. Allen St., Bonne Terre, Mo.; <http://www.2dive.com/> or 314-209-7200. Diving in a billion-gallon underground cavern; also offers dive lessons, dive packages, boating and walking tours.

UNDERGROUND RACQUETS: 1331 Cuvuk War Rd., Carthage, Mo., 417-358-2732. Tennis court in underground limestone quarry. Members only.

CRYSTAL CITY UNDERGROUND: <http://www.crystalcityunderground.com/>. Underground athletic complex under development near Crystal City, Mo., a half-hour from St. Louis.

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