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NATURAL BRIDGE CAVERNS' NEW DISCOVERY CHALLENGE RETRACES DISCOVERERS' PATH

SAN ANTONIO, Texas — Natural Bridge Caverns' new Discovery Challenge allows guests to experience an incredible three-hour tour in which they follow the path the discoverers took in early 1960, including about a half mile through "wild cave" – adventurous passages unchanged since being discovered more than 45 years ago.

The Discovery Challenge, which starts Friday, July 15, covers a total distance of 1.25 miles. It's a spectacular journey that begins under the Natural Bridge and through the Caverns' commercially developed area (concrete trails, handrails and strategically placed lighting) where guests encounter the nationally renowned Sherwood Forest, Castle of the White Giants and other immense chambers. The trail then leads to the physically challenging "wild passage" where guests wear helmets with lights and must crawl, climb and slide over and through various obstacles, many times through thick mud.

Brad Wuest, president of Natural Bridge Caverns, says the Discovery Challenge is both a physically and a mentally challenging adventure, yet allows guests the rare opportunity to walk in the discoverers' footsteps.

"The Discovery Challenge gives all of us a true sense of appreciation for what the original discoverers had to overcome and endure," he said. "Caving is one of the original extreme sports and the Challenge's wild passages are raw and natural. If you're up for the Challenge, we have excellent guides to lead you and give the history as told to us by the discoverers," Mr. Wuest said.

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The discoverers, who were students at St. Mary's University, entered the cavern for the first time on January 3, 1960. There were two more trips on January 10 and February 7 for further exploration, but it was the fourth trip on March 27 when the major sections of the Caverns were first seen by Orion Knox, Al Brandt, Joe Cantu and Preston Knodell. What they discovered turned out to be the largest cavern in Texas.

During the Discovery Challenge, tour guides explain step-by-step the progress discoverers made during each trip, what they encountered and anecdotal tales of triumph and perseverance.

Mr. Knox, who was the first to enter or see many of the Caverns' amazing rooms and formations, is available for scheduled interviews. His notes from the original expeditions describe the discoverers as being "tremendously excited" and that the larger rooms were "beyond our wildest dreams."

Mr. Wuest points out the carbide lights used as headlamps by discoverers were not nearly as strong as the electric lights worn by cave explorers and guests today. In Mr. Knox's notes following the discovery of Sherwood Forest he described the carbide lights giving out "only a small glow in this vast darkness."

There will be two Discovery Challenge tours each day – one in the morning and one in the afternoon – Monday through Friday and reservations (210-651-6101) are recommended, said Caverns officials. The temperature year round in the Caverns is 70 degrees with 99 percent humidity.

Once in the wild cave, if the Discovery Challenge becomes too adventuresome, there are opportunities for guests to turn around and be escorted by a tour guide back through the Caverns.

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The first challenging obstacle is near the front of the wild cave where guests have the opportunity to scale a muddy slope (an incline of between 30 and 40 degrees) about 35 feet to the top. Guests are instructed to climb on all fours and maintain a low center of gravity.

The second major challenge is the “Birth Canal” – a 40-foot crawl through a tunnel ranging in height from 1.5 to three feet with about two to four feet of working space on the side. The floor of the tunnel is muddy and guests must crawl on their stomachs through the passage.

After the Birth Canal, the trail consists of deep sticky mud and guests must duck, crouch walk and – in some areas – crawl through passages. Once the tour has reached its’ furthest point at Belayman’s Bluff, a pit which overlooks the 60-foot drop into the Inferno Room, the guide directs guests back through the passages and obstacles leading to the commercial trail. Belayman’s Bluff also is the point where the discoverers turned back.

“If you consider yourself an adventurous type, the Discovery Challenge is a must,” said Mr. Wuest. “When you’re crawling through these passages, just imagine what it was like for those discoverers who were the very first to leave tracks in the mud and the first to see the pristine beauty of the Caverns.”

Natural Bridge Caverns is the largest cavern in Texas and attracts more than 250,000 visitors a year. It is located 13 miles north of San Antonio on Natural Bridge Caverns Road (FM 3009) eight miles west of IH-35.

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