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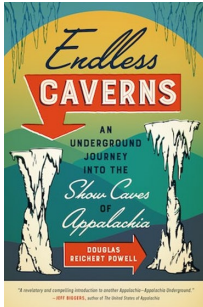
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Endless Caverns: An Underground Journey into the Show Caves of Appalachia



Douglas Reichert Powell
Chapel Hill: University of
North Carolina Press, 2022
ISBN: 9781469669434
232 p. \$29.00 (Pbk)

A network of caves and caverns spans the southern Appalachian region. Throughout history, these caves and caverns have been used by enterprising people for legal and illegal purposes – from storing confederate goods to hiding escaping enslaved people to making and distributing moonshine. These hidden warrens were also a lure to adventuring cavers who could only rest once they explored the next gallery and found all the underground spectacles. It is little wonder that resourceful people could take these natural wonders and turn them into attractions that would draw people from all over the world.

In *Endless Caverns: An Underground Journey into the Show Caves of Appalachia*, Douglas Reichert Powell recounts his many adventures exploring current and former show caves throughout the Appalachian region. Powell's book is part travelogue, part sociological treatise, and part case study on the impact of history tourism. Powell spent years researching this book, traveling along the Appalachian Mountains from Alabama to Maryland, searching out show caves, and collecting the stories of how they came to be and, in some cases, why they ceased to be.

Endless Caverns opens with Powell recalling a visit to Bedquilt Cave in Kentucky. The story of the Bedquilt Cave trip is not merely a story of a commercial cave visit but rather the tale of a spelunking adventure that Powell used to explain why he chose to write about caves as tourist attractions and how the history of those caves aid in the understanding of Appalachian culture. The author continues to explain that there is a particular pattern to a show cave visit, such as the introduction, features of the cave, a descent into darkness, and a visit to the gift shop, to name a few, and the chapters of the book are arranged to reflect that pattern.

Each chapter describes the history of one or more show caves and includes Powell's often

funny observations and experiences while visiting the fissures. In chapter three, Powell covers one reason many visit caves: the natural formation that looks like fixtures from life above ground. Some of these natural formations look like Niagara Falls, the Capitol dome, or even bacon. The tour guides are sure to point out what the natural formations resemble so the tourist can marvel at the wonder. In some cases, the developers of these attractions will mix in exhibits that bring some of the history of the cave to life. Forbidden Caverns in Pigeon Forge, TN, is a prime example of a show cave that mixes nature with history. Their natural formations have names such as "Ice Cream Parlor," Grotto of the Dead," and the "Fried Egg," and along with these, there can be exhibits that include a model of a moonshine still.

At some point during his travels from cave to cave and interview to interview, it was suggested to Powell that he attend the National Cave Association (NCA) conference. After working and contacting his network, Powell was finally able to secure an invitation to the NCA conference. Expecting a trade show the author instead discovered that the NCA's commitment to maintaining the health and integrity of the caves in their care.

Along with the discussions of the general tradecraft of running a tourist cave, Powell also covers topics such as the impact of strip mining, over-development, and gentrification on Southern Appalachian culture and how these attractions might be used to frame the conversation around these topics. Powell touches on the White Noise Syndrome, a deadly fungus that affects many of the bat populations that make their homes in some of the caverns.

Powell's book is a readable mixture of content covering history, ecology, natural conservation, and sociology. Written in a conversational manner that draws the reader in and then surprises them when they discover they have learned something intriguing. Anyone interested in Appalachian cultural history, history tourism, social history, or caves and attractions, in general, will find *Endless Caverns* an engaging read. This book is recommended for academic and public libraries and is a crucial addition to any collection that caters to Appalachian studies.

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