

Unearthing Underground: Sophomore narrates trip to Glade Cave with the JMU caving club



Photo by Eben Knowlton

Sophomore Breeze reporter Kellan Howell (front) accompanies caving club members junior Shannon Gillian (left) and senior Brian Young on their trip to Glade Cave.

Posted: Thursday, March 3, 2011 12:00 am | Updated: 10:28 am, Thu Mar 3, 2011.

By Kellan Howell | The Breeze

After an eternity of silence, I heard an echo in the darkness, "Lights on!" As my eyes adjusted to the light from my headlamp, illuminating the glimmering stalactites underground, I began to realize why each member of the Madison University Student Grotto risks danger each weekend - the thrill of caving. After a 20-minute ride from Burruss Hall to Augusta County, four members of MUSG (also known as the JMU caving club) and I stood at the entrance to Glade Cave.

"It's pretty much the bowels of the earth," said Alicia Mau, sophomore health sciences major, referring to the areas of the cave where we would trudge through knee-deep mud and water.

When I had peered down into the ominous cave opening, located in the middle of a cow field, I braced myself for what I presumed would be a disgusting and terrifying experience.

Club secretary Chris Booth, a junior media arts and design major, recited the caving club motto, signaling the beginning of our trek into the darkness.

"Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints, kill nothing but time," Booth said as we made our way into the cave.

The club is part of the National Speleological Society and has been around since the early 2000s. I had always expected the inside of a cave to be freezing cold, but was pleasantly surprised to find that the deeper we went into the cave the temperature remained at a comfortable level.

"It's always about 52 degrees inside the cave," said Shannon Gilligan, a junior geographic science major and president of the club. "Caves have their own weather system and the temperature always stays about the same. In the winter it stays warmer and in the summer it's nice and cool."

Caving is sort of like playing a video game, except much more physically challenging. We overcame obstacles like mud holes, "birthing canals" (tight crevices), and even slabs of muddy vertical rock that we ascended using knotted ropes. After completing an obstacle, we were rewarded with an entrance to another huge "room" within the cave, each holding its own visual treasure.

Each caver seemed to favor a particular room. As we entered one room with ceilings high enough to cause neck pain, Mau ran to her favorite hiding place, a tiny hole in the ground that led to a high perch in the cave wall.

After a great deal of coaxing and mental preparation, I climbed up to Mau's perch and took in the magnificent view of the huge rock formations buried in the cave for thousands of years.

Later, I discovered my own favorite room. After climbing over a tight crevice and belly crawling through a muddy tunnel, Brian Young, a senior integrated science and technology major and caving club vice president, directed us into a small open area in the cave. I was surprised to see a light up ahead and Young knew what I was thinking.

"Shimmy up there and look up to your left," he said.

I followed Young's directions and found a small hole that let in sunlight - a welcome sight for lost cavers below.

"When you're moving through a cave it's always a good idea to look back behind you to remember which direction you came from," Mau said. She also explained that if cavers do get lost, they could eventually find their way back to the surface by following paths called elephant tracks.

Booth shared another helpful tip on cave navigation when I pointed out a spray-painted arrow on one of the cave walls.

"It's never really a good idea to follow arrows or signs painted on the walls because some people will paint them going in the wrong direction as a kind of sick joke," he said.

After hours of exploring, we entered the biggest of the rooms and Booth's favorite. Although there wasn't the gift shop or a McDonald's that the club members had promised was at the end of the "yellow brick road," there was plenty of mud to make up for it.

An enormous space with thick mud floors became our playground when someone sparked a random mud fight.

Though we arrived at the end of the cave, we were only halfway done. We left our muddy palace to slowly make our way back through the cave and into the world above.

Finally, all five cavers made it out unscathed, squinting in the sunlight, covered in mud and bewildered by the experience.

"The club is sort of a hidden treasure," Booth said.

Students who are daring enough to get dirtied up and want to explore the underground treasures with the caving club can attend the meetings on Thursday nights in the Airport Lounge on the fourth floor of Warren Hall.

Contact Kellan Howell at howellkc@dukes.jmu.edu.