

Focus

Section Two

Spelunking

(it's not a dirty word)

Members of caving club explore natural grottos

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cave TERMS

Spelunking - American name for a caver.

Cave - A natural cavity in rock large enough for a human to enter.

Caver - A person who goes caving.

Grotto - A small to moderate-size cave chamber.

Leader - The person directing activities of a caving party and held responsible for the group's safety.

Bouldering - Rock climbing at low heights with no rope.

Caving - The physical act of entering and exploring a cave.

Head Lamp - A secondary light source attached to a caver's helmet.

Wet Cave - A cave containing a lake or active stream with deep pools, which require wading or swimming to progress through the cave.

Several shadowy figures stand in the inky mouth of a cave in the middle of the night, squinting at a pool of icy, chest-high water that's only lit by the glow of headlamps. The spelunkers, or cavers, are submerged in the water wearing nothing but underwear, holding trash bags containing dry clothes above the water and swimming 20 frigid feet to a subterranean beach on the other side.

Though it is not exactly a typical Thursday night for most JMU students, this trip to Highland County's Aqua Cave topped the list of memorable caving experiences had by juniors John Gualdoni and Jon Matthews. They are members of the Madison University Student Grotto, or the JMU Caving Club for the uninitiated.

"Caving is a fun way to get people to do things that they wouldn't normally be able to do," Gualdoni said. "It's great that JMU has a club that allows people to get involved with something that's different and fun."

The MUSG was founded in 1979 by several members of the university's Outing Club who wanted to concentrate on caving, according to the MUSG Web site www.math.jmu.edu/~MUSG/index.html. The club has grown to currently include 70 members, and now offers students the chance to participate in other outdoor activities such as camping, hiking and an annual rafting trip to West Virginia's Upper Gauley River, according to sophomore Steve Cummings, MUSG president-elect.

Members use topographical maps and other literature about caves to find the destinations for their caving outings, according to Cummings. They always go with someone who is experienced with that cave and who is deemed "the leader," he said.

The club's faculty adviser, math professor Carl Droms, said, "The interesting thing is to see how different groups of people will interact on a trip. We've been lucky over the years in that we have always had very good people [participate], and very good group dynamics."

It is very important that people not go explore caves by themselves, Droms said. One always should go with someone who is an experienced caver, or get involved with a club like JMU's caving club.

Matthews said, "The entrances are often inconspicuous. To someone unfamiliar with the cave, they could just look like a mound of rocks, so it is very important to go with someone that has been to that site before."

Cummings said, "Our meetings are very informal, and we welcome new members at any time. We're a pretty laid-back club in general."

He added, "It's only \$10 a year in dues, making it one of the cheapest clubs to get involved with." The dues cover batteries and the upkeep of all equipment, which members can borrow for excursions and include helmets and headlamps.

Inside, the caves are damp and a consistent 55 degrees, Matthew said. For gear, cavers need shoes and clothes that he or she doesn't mind getting muddy and wet, according to Matthews. "A lot of us wear painters' coveralls that cover our entire body, a helmet and headlamp. It's important to have a backup

source of light so you need extra batteries."

MUSG is one of JMU's most accessible clubs, according to Cummings. To get involved, one should attend a group meeting Thursday nights at 6:15 p.m. in Keezell Hall room 105.

"Hardly any of our members have any prior caving experience before joining the club," junior Chris Stadmeier said. One should not be deterred because of lack of experience, he added.

Droms echoed these sentiments. "I never did any caving at all before coming to JMU and joining the Caving Club. I started going to meetings in the fall of 1983, which was my first semester here at JMU. It was a nice, friendly bunch of people. In fact, some of my closest friends are people I met at that time [also were Caving Club members]," Droms said.

Both Cummings and Stadmeier likened MUSG's weekly meetings to a discussion forum, during which senior members and elected officers facilitate dialogue among the members about planning upcoming trips and other activities. As faculty adviser, Droms said he attends the meetings, but doesn't traditionally lead the group. "In a lot of ways, I'm just another member of the club — basically all decisions are made by consensus," Droms said.

Besides the annual rafting trip, the Caving Club also organizes several other events each year. "We have two big camping trips, Fall Ball and Spring Fling, where we camp, cave, hike and party," Cummings said.

Stadmeier added, "Spring Fling is sort of a mixer between caving clubs ... mostly [between] us and [Virginia] Tech."

In addition to its big events, MUSG also attempts a weekly outing to one of its area's caves. "Our area of Virginia and West Virginia is one of the best caving areas in the country," Stadmeier said.

Cummings said, "Our area, called the Eastern Region [which includes Virginia and West Virginia, as well as Kentucky and North Carolina], has one-third of all the known caves in the United States," Cummings added. With all of these options, it's hard for the members to pick favorites, but Cummings and Stadmeier each have a preferred cave.

"I enjoy Marshall's Cave, near Highland County, because it's a fairly technical cave with lots of climbing, tight crawls, large rooms and cool formations," Cummings said.

Stadmeier said, "My favorite is Trout Cave in West Virginia because of the big rooms with fun bouldering and the occasional tight crawl."

In addition to Aqua Cave, his favorite cave, Matthews also has a special caving memory. "Making mud people inside a cave was really fun," Matthews said.

Droms said he is unable to pick a favorite cave or outing. "I've been on so many trips with the club. I can't say I have a favorite cave — each group is different and each cave is unique."

For JMU students looking to try something new and different, Caving Club members said the club was a great choice. MUSG will provide the gear and a great time. As a testament to that, Gualdoni said, "Caving is kind of like the cool McDonald's [Playplace] things we used to play in as kids, except it's made of rock and has a ton of mud."

