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Exploring Mammoth Cave National Park

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JOHNNY MOLLOY

Exploring Mammoth Cave National Park

Second Edition

JOHNNY MOLLOY

FALCON GUIDES

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*This book is for all the people who have explored the passages of
Mammoth Cave and for all the people who will explore
the unseen passages to come.*

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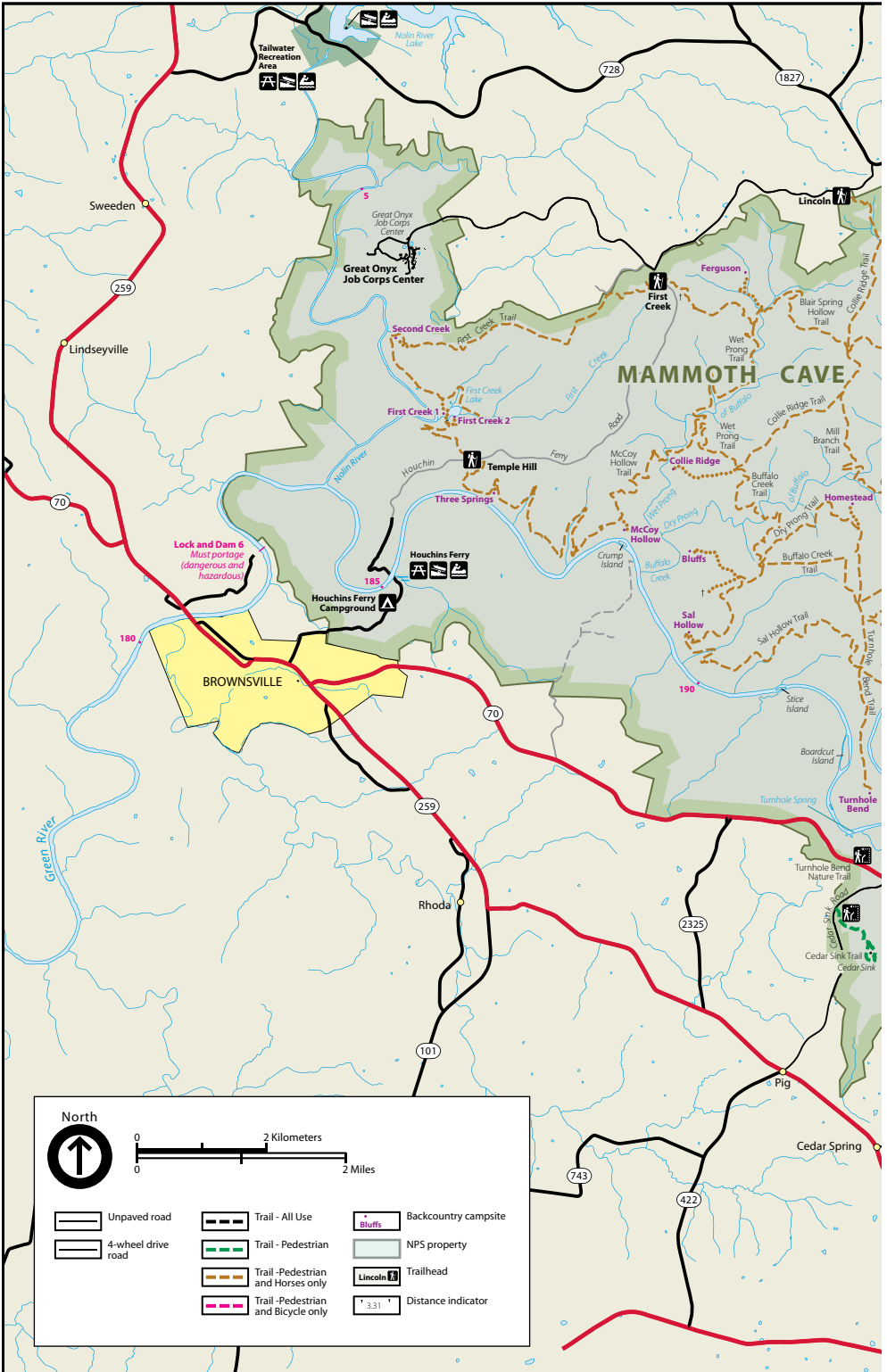
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









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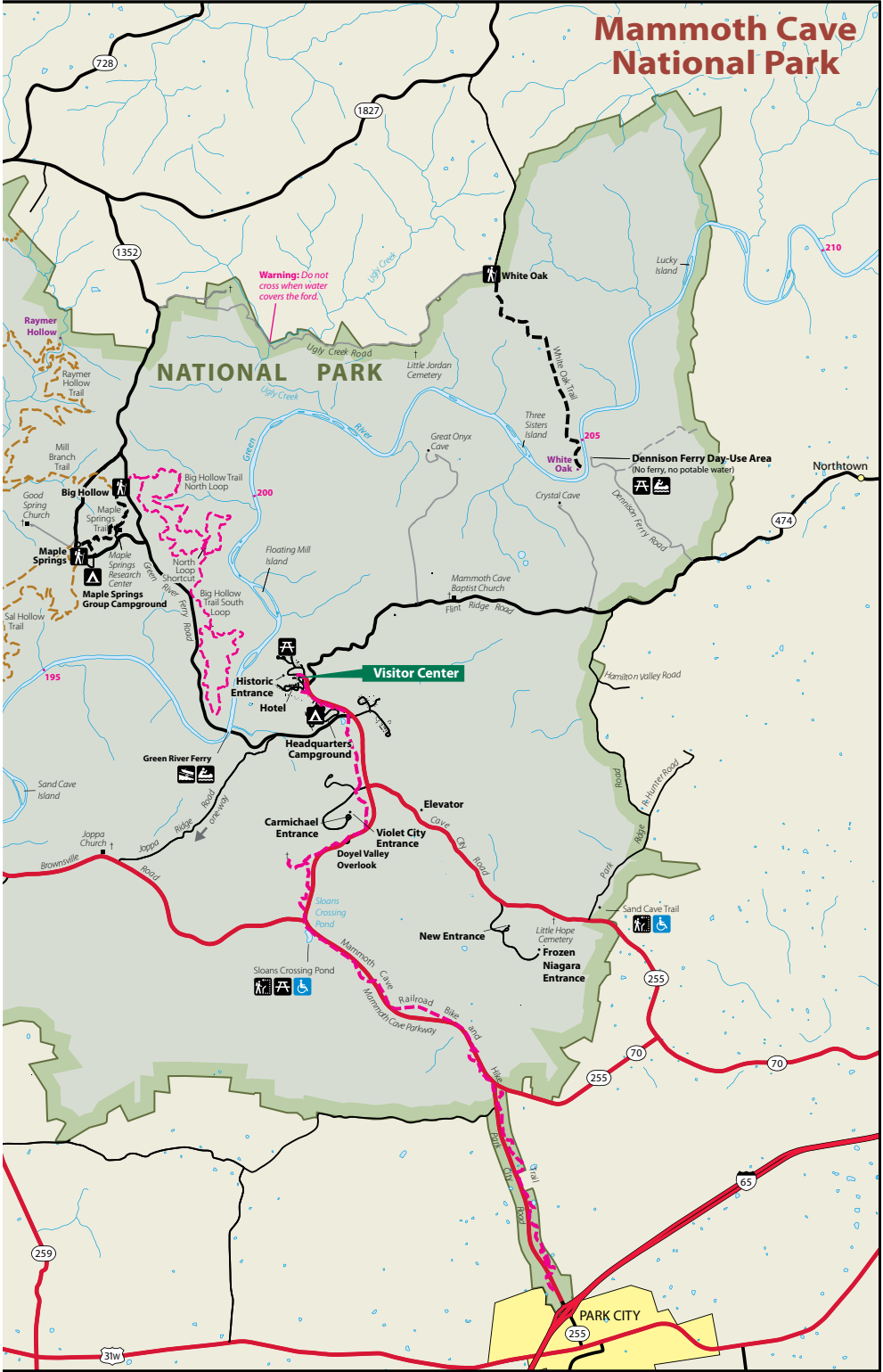
North



0 2 Kilometers
0 2 Miles

 Unpaved road	 Trail - All Use	 Bluffs	Backcountry campsite
 4-wheel drive road	 Trail - Pedestrian	 NPS property	
	 Trail - Pedestrian and Horses only	 Lincoln	Trailhead
	 Trail - Pedestrian and Bicycle only	 331	Distance indicator

Mammoth Cave National Park



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Preface

Welcome to the second edition of *Exploring Mammoth Cave National Park*. Much has happened between the first and second editions of the book. The new Mammoth Cave Visitor Center truly enhances the visitor experience. Cave tours have changed; many trails have been rerouted. Other trails have been built. It is my pleasure to keep you abreast of the park improvements in order for you to maximize your national park experience at Mammoth Cave. The following information includes all the changes over this period.



The new Mammoth Cave Visitor Center enhances the national park experience.

Acknowledgments

The staff at Mammoth Cave National Park was the best ever to work with. These Kentuckians made writing this book easier and more fun than it otherwise would have been. From the people in the visitor center to the behind-the-scenes folk, everyone helped however they could. Specifically I would like to thank Mike Adams for his enthusiasm, and Leslie Lewis and Cindy Logsdon for their wonderful help and friendship. All the guides on the cave tours made learning about Mammoth Cave that much better, especially Colleen Olsen and Ronnie Doyle. Also, thanks to Beverly Scoggins and Kathy Proffitt for helping. Thanks to Linda Guess at the bookstore for her all-around friendliness. Thanks also to Jim Norris, Adam Turner, Brandy Button, and Joyce Hester for their help. Thanks to Larry Johnson for his trail information, Trey Seymour for his map, and Vicki Carson, too.

Thanks to my brothers Mike and Steele for coming up and exploring the park with me; Matt, too, for catching that big bass on the Green River. Thanks to my friends John Cox and Steve “Devo” Grayson for going backpacking with me in the backcountry. Thanks to the women of Bowling Green—Alisa, Ashley, Jayne, Lisa, and Natalie—for their love of Kentucky.

Introducing Mammoth Cave National Park

Mammoth Cave National Park is a world-renowned American treasure. Simply put, this is the largest, longest known cave in the world, with more than twenty-four openings and over 400 miles of mapped passageways, and many more miles yet to be discovered. It is a place where darkness rules and time moves at the pace of the water slowly dissolving its limestone walls, creating more passageways to be discovered by future generations. It is a place of large rooms, high domes, tight passages, long avenues, and strange formations, a place where occasional waterfalls, lakes, and rivers flow beneath a verdant cover of south-central Kentucky woodland.

A Brief History of Mammoth Cave

Today's tour groups and the ranger-guides who lead them are following thousands upon thousands of footfalls that echoed off the walls before them. Mammoth Cave was first discovered by aboriginals more than 4,000 years ago. We know this from carbon-dating the torches they left, burned to hand level and discarded in the cave. These torches were reeds of cane, gathered from the nearby Green River and tied together. It took many such lights to work far back into the cave, where Natives chiseled sparkling gypsum off the cave walls, using it for reasons unknown to us. And for 2,000 years they explored Mammoth Cave, leaving other archaeological evidence of their presence. Then they stopped entering the cave. We don't know why.

For nearly two millennia Mammoth Cave was left to the cave spiders, eyeless fish, and crayfish that live underneath the land, along with sporadic forays by four-legged visitors that could only temporarily take the constant 54°F (12°C) temperature, the silence, and most of all the darkness, a darkness so black it cannot be experienced on the land surface. Then, legend has it, a Kentucky resident named John Houchins was hunting bear in the region, back in the 1790s. He wounded a bear and chased it into what is now known as the Historic Entrance into Mammoth Cave. Houchins promptly forgot all about the bear and went a-cavin', at least according to the legend. Mammoth Cave was found again.

Now we enter the modern era of Mammoth Cave. Interestingly, it was the economic potential of the underworld that initially brought the cave fame. The dirt below was rich in saltpeter, a necessary component in the making of gunpowder. Our young nation was blockaded by England, thus halting imports of saltpeter, and we needed munitions. The War of 1812 was imminent and slaves were put to work in the cave, extracting saltpeter using primitive wood operations: vats and wooden pipes that still exist to this day in the preservative atmosphere of the cave. This national resource became known across America; people began visiting Mammoth Cave, and tour operations were set up, making this parcel of underground Kentucky one of the oldest tourist destinations in American history.

Back then guides led tours using lanterns lit with animal fat and anything else that would burn. Along with markings from the aboriginals, the tops of passageways were blackened by smoke, and visitors were urged to write upon the cave. At this time many cave guides became famous themselves. The most renowned of them all was Stephen Bishop, a slave who made daring explorations of previously unknown passages, in addition to putting on cave tours with flair.

The land above Mammoth Cave became valuable, because those who controlled it enjoyed the fruits from down below. Men sought fortunes from tourism, and maybe saltpeter again. Aboveground, accommodations sprung up to serve tourists in search of food and lodging. The land over the cave changed hands. In addition, railroad service was completed to Mammoth Cave and steamboats plied the Green River, taking tourists from Evansville, Indiana, to visit the cave.

As time passed, tourist dollars became more and more important, ushering in the “Kentucky Cave Wars.” As the known part of Mammoth Cave began to increase in size, and with the discovery of other area caves, local residents and landowners began hawking their caves as the best to visit and as part of Mammoth Cave, sometimes confusing tourists (an easy thing to do, no matter where they visit). Landowners began to realize some cave tours that began on adjacent property led under their property, and sued for profits. New entrances were blasted into the cave, and the courts were clogged with lawsuits.

Then came Floyd Collins, cave explorer extraordinaire. In trying to develop a tourist cave along the route to Mammoth—the cave his family was hawking was off the beaten path—Floyd entered Sand Cave and

became trapped by fallen rock. And there he lay. While those above-ground tried to rescue him, a nation became entranced with his story, bringing such crowds that the National Guard was called out to handle them. Unfortunately, Collins died before he could be rescued, but Mammoth Cave was once again on the national stage.

At the same time, a movement to establish national parks east of the Mississippi River in the grand tradition of Yellowstone in the West began gathering momentum. Some suggested there should be a Mammoth Cave National Park. Problem was, the land above the potential park was privately owned, not already owned by the federal government, as was Yellowstone. The state of Kentucky began raising money to buy the land above and around the Mammoth Cave. The national park model at the time was that of a grandiose wilderness. Some land was acquired around the cave, but the Department of the Interior insisted that the project fit the national park model, which meant that more land had to be pieced together. In the end more than 50,000 acres were set aside. Still, above-ground this land was far from wilderness: It was mostly cleared, tilled by farmers who had been there for generations. Understandably, many of



The Cave City Entrance to Mammoth Cave National Park welcomes visitors and is the backdrop for many photos.

these settlers didn't want to leave, but ultimately they were all forced off their lands. The same thing was going on in the Great Smoky Mountains and Shenandoah, two other eastern destinations that became parks. In came the Civilian Conservation Corps, tearing down houses, planting trees, and developing the park above- and belowground, where they made cave trails, created walkways, and strung lights.

Although completion had to wait for World War II to end, Mammoth Cave National Park was finally dedicated in 1946. And since its inception the park has continued to evolve, modernizing its facilities above- and belowground. Descendants of former area residents now work here. And another generation of park visitors takes their offspring to see the cave, continuing a tradition—and building a foundation of people who see Mammoth Cave as not just a park but an American icon, and a place we can all hold dear.

Dr. Croghan's Grand Experiment

In 1839 one Dr. John Croghan bought a large tract of land that included Mammoth Cave. He then set up a tuberculosis hospital deep in the cave, believing its atmosphere would help patients. As it turned out, however, the chill and the fires that burned around the clock to keep the patients warm may have actually hastened their demise. The ruins of Croghan's experiment can still be seen. The doctor himself lived until 1849, then left a complicated will that wasn't completely settled until his last heir died in 1926.

An Overview of Recreation at the Park

Mammoth Cave National Park offers myriad recreation opportunities above- and belowground. This alone makes the park a rarity. But there's more to this spot's uniqueness. Most other parks preserve superlative terra firma, where the tallest mountains reach for the sky, arches bend over colorful rock, or scenic shorelines curve into the distance. The land above Mammoth Cave, however—while integral to the underworld below—is unusual in its own right. There are, for one thing, no other contiguous protected parcels of middle American upland hardwood forest of this size. In addition, this is “karst country,” a land cut by a complex of fissures, caves, sinks, and bluffs centered by the Green River, which flows through the heart of the park. It creates a rare and interesting location to enjoy the American national park experience.

So what does this mean for the Mammoth Cave visitor? It means a national park ready to be experienced in any number of ways. The cave itself offers a sort of “inside-out” view of the area, while the Green River forms a water trail, a moving venue with a bottom-up view. You can enjoy this in your own kayak, canoe, or johnboat, or use one of the area outfitters. The hiking and equestrian trails of Mammoth Cave, meantime, offer top-down views, such as the one along the Green River Bluffs Trail. Or you can combine park history with pedaling on the Mammoth Cave Railroad Bike and Hike Trail, which traces a portion of the old railroad grade that once led passengers to the park. Maybe road biking along the quiet park roads is your bag, or maybe taking a scenic drive, horseback riding, or fishing on the Green River. Perhaps you want to combine your visit with camping outdoors—or maybe you prefer to enjoy the luxurious accommodations within the park boundaries. All these options, and more, are detailed in this book.

But most park visits begin with Mammoth Cave itself. Varieties of cave tours offer different perspectives on the underworld. You can learn about the past on the Historic Tour, or get a real taste of days gone by on the Violet City Lantern Tour, illuminated only by the primitive lights you'll carry yourself. The Grand Avenue Tour travels 4 miles, making for an underground “hike.” And there is the Wild Cave Tour, where you get down and dirty, crawl through narrow passageways, and remain hunched

over for surprising distances in addition to walking along longer avenues. Cave tours last anywhere from just over an hour on up to 6 hours. Group sizes vary as well, from large-group short-in-length tours, such as the New Entrance Tour, to the small groups taken on the Introduction to Caving Tour. Other tours, such as the Trog Tour, are for kids only. After reading through the tour descriptions in this book, I promise you'll find a tour to suit your desires.

Mammoth Cave National Park comprises an impressive 53,000 acres. It covers much of Mammoth Cave below and is centered on the Green River, which flows east to west through the park. The land south of the Green is more developed, and is the location of the visitor center/hotel/park headquarters complex. This is where cave tours begin, and where facilities lie. Interpretive trails wind throughout the area, allowing you to peer out from a high bluff, or into the Historic Entrance to Mammoth Cave; you can see wildflower-covered spring bottomland, or Mammoth Dome Sink, or the River Styx as it emerges from Mammoth Cave. It is a place to learn about the interrelationships among land, water, and cave. Other interpretive trails are located beyond the visitor center area, such as Cedar Sink, a singularly impressive spot that is one of the most beautiful in the park.

And then there is the north side of the Green River, where a network of more than 80 miles of trails winding among hills and hollows can be enjoyed by hikers, bikers, and equestrians. Here, where nature has reclaimed former farmland, you can glimpse wildflowers growing alongside a crumbled sandstone chimney. Overhanging rocks form rockhouses more commonly seen in eastern Kentucky, springs emerge from underneath hills, water disappears into sinks. Trails travel along waterways, atop ridges, and past pioneer cemeteries. Luckily for backpackers, twelve designated backcountry campsites are situated along these trails, allowing for overnight enjoyment of this area.

The Green River and its major area feeder stream, the Nolin River, allow for watery exploration of the park, primarily by canoe and kayak, but also by small johnboats. Water travelers can see caves, bluffs, springs, and rich woods rife with wildlife. Camping is an option here, too, on gravel bars and islands in the river. Three developed campgrounds complement the backcountry camping opportunities. You can enjoy the convenience of Headquarters Campground, or rough it at Houchins Ferry.