

Natural Bridge: A wonder of the world just a short drive away

A trip to Natural Bridge is a winning combination — it's a gorgeous nature walk, a study of the science of land formation, and a unique lesson in American history.

Even better, it is an easy day trip from Richmond, only two hours and 15 minutes away. Located in the southern Shenandoah Valley, it is 10 miles south of Lexington on I-81, close to the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Bridges can't get any more natural than Natural Bridge, and its amazing setting is stunning all year long. In fact, Mother Nature herself carved this gravity-defying archway. Nothing short of miraculous, it is 40 feet thick, spans 90 feet, and is higher than Niagara Falls. The Monacan Indians once worshipped it as a sacred site, the "Bridge of the Gods."

Scientists now believe the bridge was once the roof of a cave whose walls broke off over time. Amazingly enough, this solid limestone bridge is still fully functional today. Travelers cross it as part of Route 11 in Rockbridge County, but the view from the overlook is blocked.

Although locals simply call it "Natty B," Natural Bridge is legendary as one of the Seven Wonders of the Modern World, a National Historic Landmark, and a Virginia Historic Landmark. George Washington once surveyed it as a young man, leaving the legacy of his initials "GW" carved into the wall 23 feet up. Thomas Jefferson actually owned the bridge at one point, buying it from King George III for 20 shillings, and using it as his personal retreat.

From the gift shop, take the 137 steps down to Cedar Creek to see the bridge. Better yet, take the handy shuttle bus in either direction. Stroll past the bridge to the living-history settlement depicting life in a Monacan Indian Village 300 years ago. Enter a wigwam, talk with interpreters in period clothing, and experience seasonal activities. If you continue on the trail for a mile, you'll run into the 50-foot waterfall at Lace Falls.

In addition to the bridge itself,



Natural Bridge is 40 feet thick, spans 90 feet, and is higher than Niagara Falls. At right, Foamhenge, a full-sized replica of Stonehenge made out of Styrofoam. Photos by Loretta Sherwood.

there is a caboodle of other kid-friendly activities in Natural Bridge. Included with Natural Bridge admission, the Wax Museum is filled with 165 life-sized replicas of American Revolution heroes, U.S. presidents, and a theatrical presentation of the Last Supper. Don't miss the adjacent self-guided factory tour for a behind-the-scenes look at how the wax figures are made.

The Natural Bridge Caverns are 34 stories down, the deepest on the East Coast. It is well worth a visit to see the stalagmites and stalactites, as well as the teeny-tiny bats hanging from the ceiling. Entertaining guides

conduct kid-friendly tours lasting 45 minutes throughout the day. The temperature is a constant 54 degrees, so it is a bit chilly regardless of the weather above ground. Note: the caverns are closed for the winter, reopening in March. Also, the terrain has some long passageways between "rooms" making it potentially a bit claustrophobic.

Playing nightly since its inauguration by President Calvin Coolidge in 1927, "The Drama of Creation" is a unique sound and light show lasting 45-minutes. Located beneath Natural Bridge at dark, it depicts the Book of Genesis' seven days of creation.

The atmosphere is magical with music playing and lasers illuminating the bridge and surrounding glen.

Since admission tickets are valid for two consecutive days, the Natural Bridge Hotel is the perfect option for an overnight stay. Reasonably priced and just across the street, this elegant hotel has done its best to recover from a massive fire in 1962. Recent renovations include new beds and bedding throughout the hotel. And don't miss the roaring fireplace in the lobby.

Even if you can't stay overnight, check out the tunnel that connects the hotel to the museums across the street. It's got a cool echo. Be sure to check online for any special admission offers and/or packages combining tickets with a hotel stay and a hearty breakfast in the Colonial Dining Room.



On your way back to I-81, have a lively meal at the Pink Cadillac Diner filled with '50s memorabilia and Elvis tributes. With a King Kong gorilla out front, it is definitely casual and kid-friendly. And if you are up for some historical humor, take a pit stop at Foamhenge, a full-sized replica of Stonehenge made completely out of Styrofoam. Now that's one to check off the Bucket List!

Stay tuned for an upcoming story on another great reason to head to Natural Bridge — the Virginia Safari Park. **RPM**

Libby Carty McNamee, a local freelance writer and mother, encourages you to throw a stone up to the bridge as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson once did. For more information on the bridge, hotel, and caverns, visit www.natural-bridgeva.com.