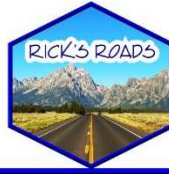




The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America

# RICK'S ROADS

Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What



BLOG POST: 2025.05.14  
Mammoth Cave National Park, Kentucky



The morning after my Stone Mountain visit, the rain found me again. I thought I had given it the slip.

On Saturday, the Florida State Track & Field Championships Class 1A Meet sat through a two-hour weather delay (i.e., lightning in the area). The rain seemed to take a shine to me (ironic choice of words, yes?) and decided it would keep me company.

There were pockets of downpours going almost the same speed as Blue Maxx and I during our nighttime drive up I-95 into Georgia. Even pulling over for a half-hour break did not shake them. I watched, bemused, as the screen of my MyRadar app shifted and twisted its green and yellow shapes to wrap around my little blue dot once again.





Sprinkles and drizzle darkened the green trees and grayed-out the blue skies during my self-guided Mother's Day tour around gray Savannah.

Rain drummed on my roof throughout my Sunday night Boondockers Welcome stay in Juliette (thanks, Milo, for inviting us in for a drink and a couple of hours of warmth and conversation!).

Jupiter reined in his rains (he was the Roman god reigned over rain, get it?) long enough for the Stone Mountain adventure on Monday afternoon, but he turned on the faucet sometime in the wee hours of Tuesday, and barely let up all day.

In my planning, this day lacked any major attractions, so I had diligently sought out lesser-known scenic delights through eastern Tennessee. Lookout Mountain and Rock City Gardens ended up being washouts. I sat in Maxx in the RCG parking lot, sullenly lunching and



hoping for a break. There were blue skies teasing me in the near distance, but the mountain itself seemed to be hemming in the precipitation. Bah.



I had found a road called the Cherohala Skyway – a 63-mile scenic route through the mountains between Robbinsville and Tellico Plains – that looked like it would be worth the 2-hour

detour. But, in the rain, making such a detour just to see wet roads from inside a cloud, alas, made no sense.

Hence, I nixed that highlight too, and it was off to downtown Knoxville, where I spent the night at the Next Level Brewery, one of the rare urban Harvest Hosts. The beer was yum, and the small parking lot was quiet and reasonably level. It was good stay – highlight of the day.



Wednesday dawned gloomy once again, and my drive up to Mammoth Cave National Park, through soothing southern Kentucky rural



landscape, was easy and relaxing. Even better, as I reached the Park, the clouds began to break. Promising!



Park entry was free, which I did not realize, but MCNP made up for it with the cave tour fee. I had reserved a ticket for the Domes & Dripstones Tour, expecting my usual 50% discount via my NPS Lifetime Pass, but, strangely, the Recreation.gov web site offered no such price break. After a couple of attempts, I yielded and paid the full \$32 fee. (Not too happy about it, though.)

But, for the first time since the last time, I was stupid. I'm a smart person, but sometimes smart people do stupid things, and then they seem *extra* stupid. My tour had been chosen because it was one of the last of the day (2:15 PM). The ride to MCNP from Knoxville was more than 200 miles. I'd normally budget 50 MPH for a leisurely four-hour ride, knowing that I could make it in three if necessary.

Needing to check in 45 minutes before my tour, I figured 1:30 was my deadline for arrival. A 3.5-hour drive meant a 10:00 departure from Knoxville.

But, wait! Haha! I congratulated myself on recognizing that I'd be crossing a Time Zone boundary on the way, and so I reset my launch time to 9:00 AM. Clever thinking, Ricko, clever indeed.



**Except**, as you may have discerned, in my passage from Eastern Time into Central Time, I would be *gaining* that hour, not *losing* it. I should've been planning to hit the road at 11:00 EDT to arrive at 1:30 CDT. Even worse, I did not realize this until I was halfway there, when my iPhone clock suddenly clicked from 10:45 to 9:45. One big forehead slap, please.

But, like I said, the sky showed some promising breaks, and when I finally boarded the bus to be brought to the cave entrance, the sun was blazing in a blue sky. And underground I went.



The Domes & Dripstones Tour takes place in caves at the very edge of MCNP, well away from the Visitor Center, at an access point called New Entrance. And there's a story behind that.

Back before the area attained National Park status, the various caves in the area were in competition with one another. Mammoth was the clear leader, and rightfully so, but some nefarious rivals tried to steer visitors away and steal them for their own caves.

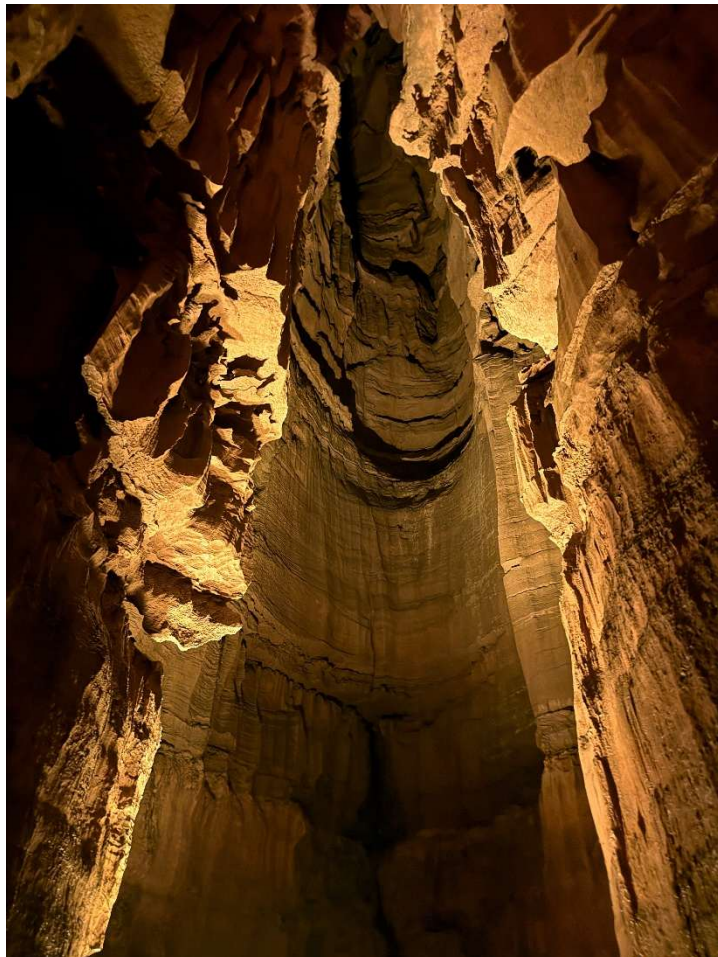
"New Entrance" was one such misleading ploy. "Oh, that way is overcrowded. We have a New Entrance down this way." And other tricks.



The D&D Tour is just  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile long, easily one of the shortest cave tours offered by the park. It is rated Strenuous, though, mostly because of the 736 steps that need to be ascended or descended during the hike.

The start was crazy. We walked to a concrete doorway that looked like it led to some secret military bunker or something. The guide let us in, then locked the door behind us.

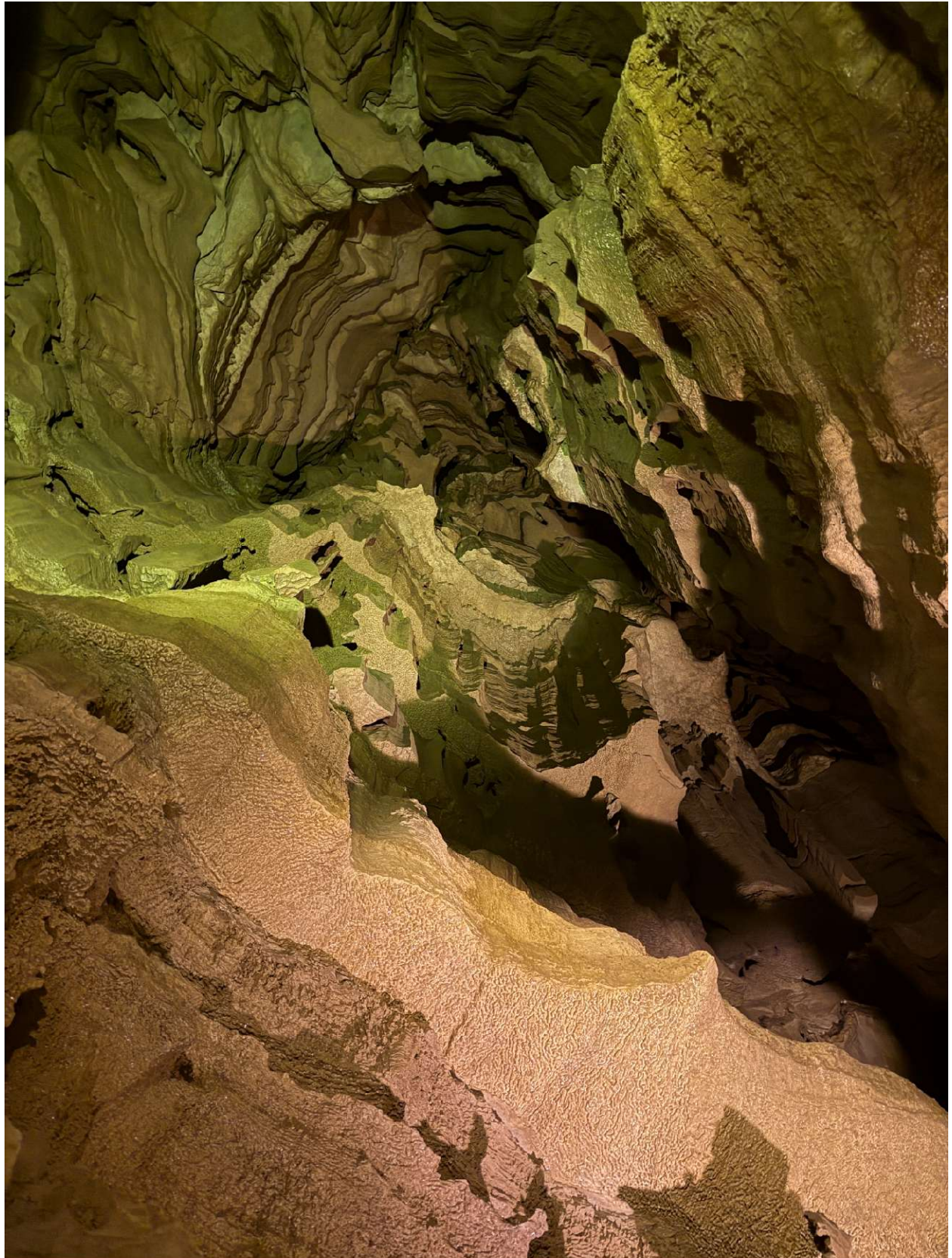
We were immediately faced with a 280-foot descent - almost straight down – through a sinkhole. Fortunately for us, a steel-railed stairway had somehow been constructed through this absurd vertical squiggle. How the hell did anyone ever get these materials in there, let alone manufacture them to the precise fit, maneuver them into place and secure them?? I swear I marveled more at the stairway than I did at anything the cave itself had to offer.



Shortly after that insane descent, our guide gave us a bit of background on it. One guy had come forward claiming to be able to accomplish the feat (with his crew, of course). He had worked on navy vessels, including submarines, so building staircases in cramped places was kind of his specialty. Well, he took four years to complete it, I think (couldn't hear her very well) and when he presented his bill, the park overseers thought that the \$3200 was a wonderful bargain for the 310-step puzzle that he had assembled. Then they read the part they had missed: "per step."

Yup, your math is correct; that is just about a million dollars' worth of staircase. I think it was well worth it, but, well it wasn't *my* money, so it was definitely worth it. =]













Most of the tour was, as promised, domes: large caverns connected by tight passages.

Many of the ceilings appeared to have fallen off in huge slabs, and lay cracked and broken, but still enormous, beside the trail.

Our guide pointed out several spots where an overhead rock looked to be hanging by a thread, but explained, "It has looked like that since the very first people explored this place. Maybe it's been just like that for millennia."

We saw very few of the calcite formations that you'd expect in a cave tour: flow stones, stalagmites, stalactites, and the like. But it was all good. I seemed to remember that there were not a lot of those in

my only other visit to MCNP, back in the early 1990's.

Then, though, our guide informed us that there was an optional area just ahead that detoured off our path. It required a 50-foot staircase down, and a return upward to the same spot, so we did not *have* to do it. But what a dumbass you were if you didn't.

This was the Dripstones part of the tour, nicknamed Frozen Niagara. Millions of years of billions of droplets had





seeped through the limestone ceiling, slithered down the wall until the water had evaporated out, leaving only tiny calcite grains, which then dried and adhered to the existing surface. And the small lump of calcite grew and grew and grew...



If the droplet was heavy enough to reach the bottom tip of the stalactite, it fell, and a pile of tiny deposits slowly accumulated into a stalagmite underneath it. When the two grew long enough, the droplets closed the gap between them, and they became a column.

The Domes & Dripstones Tour truly had saved the best for last. Frozen Niagara was huge!













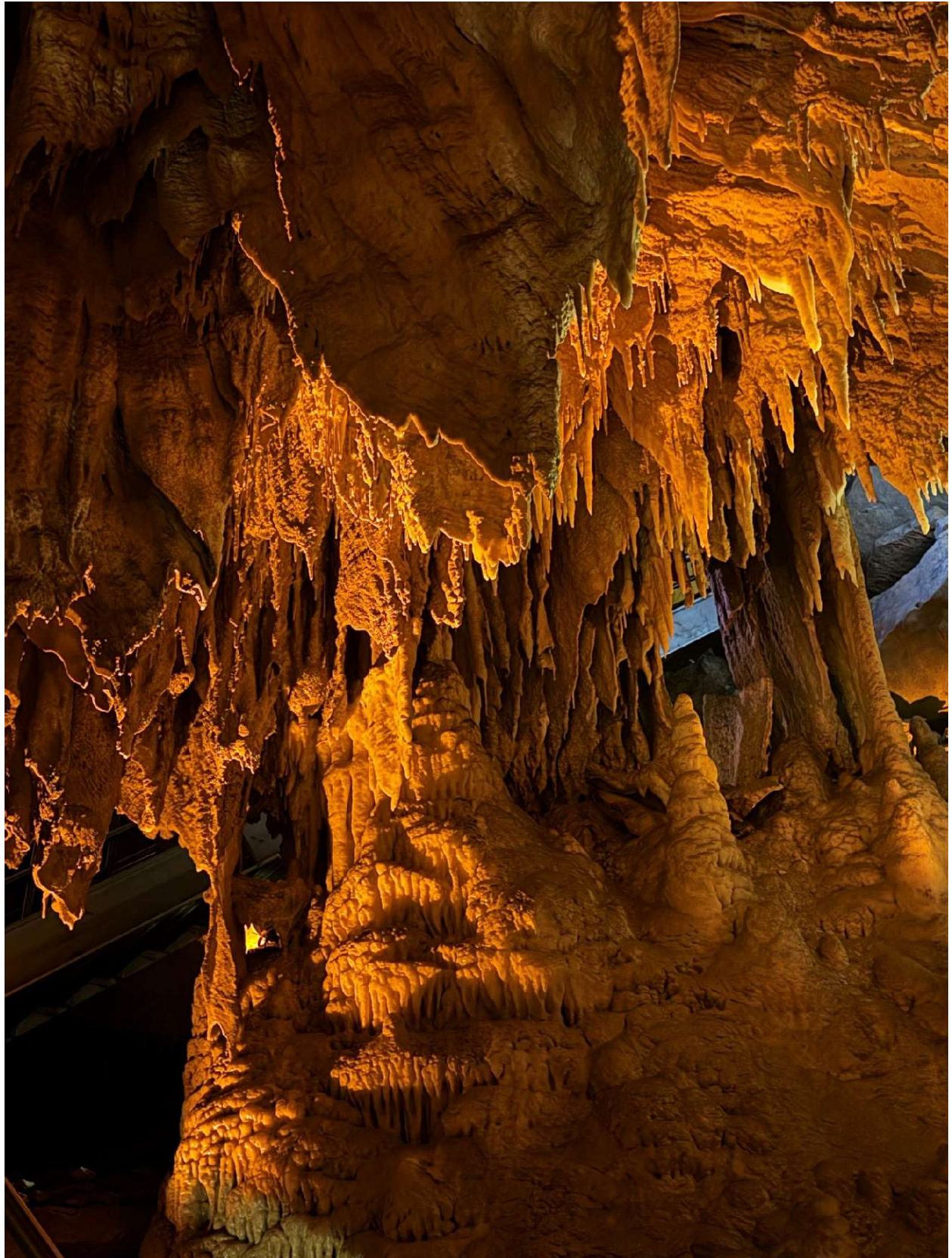




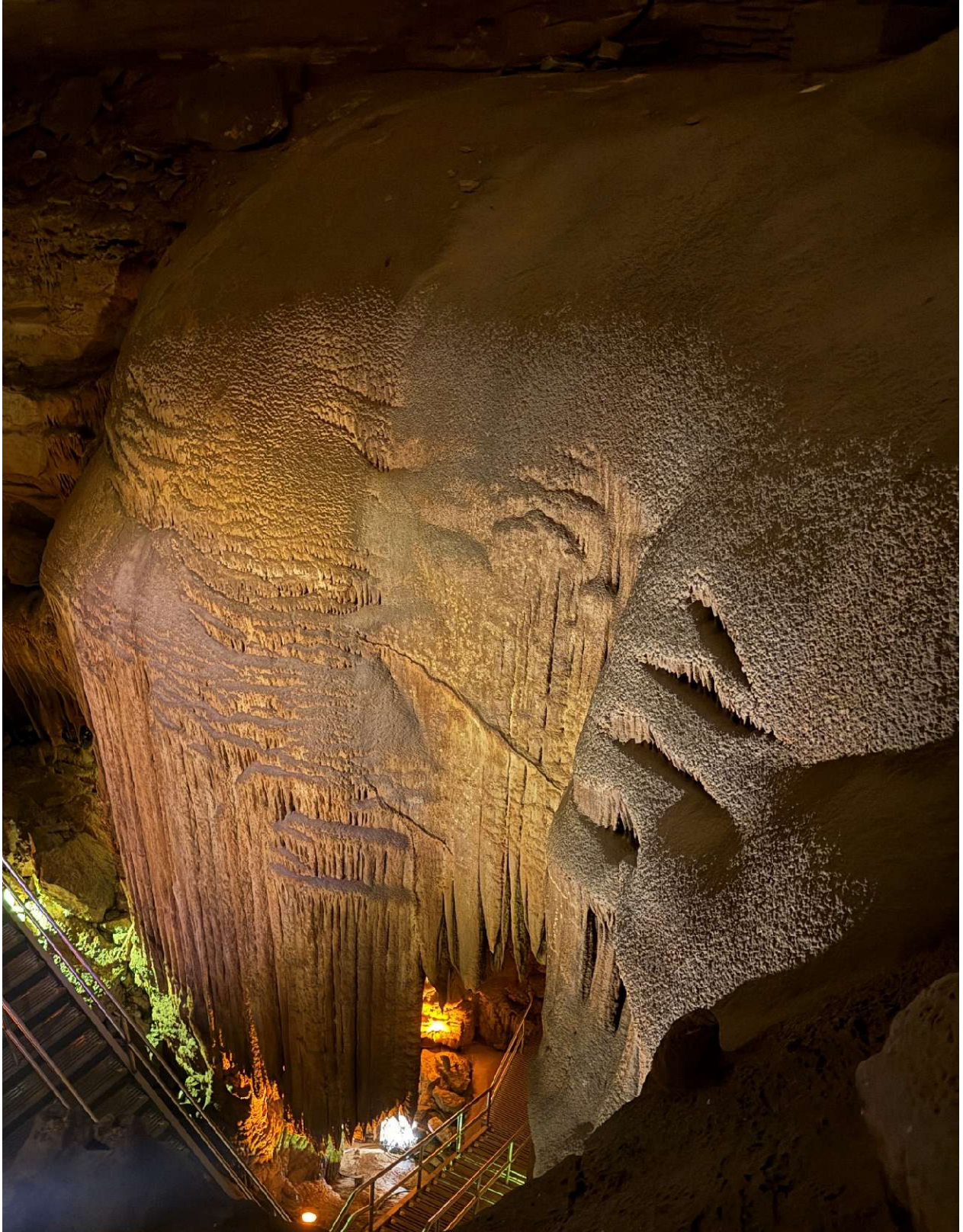






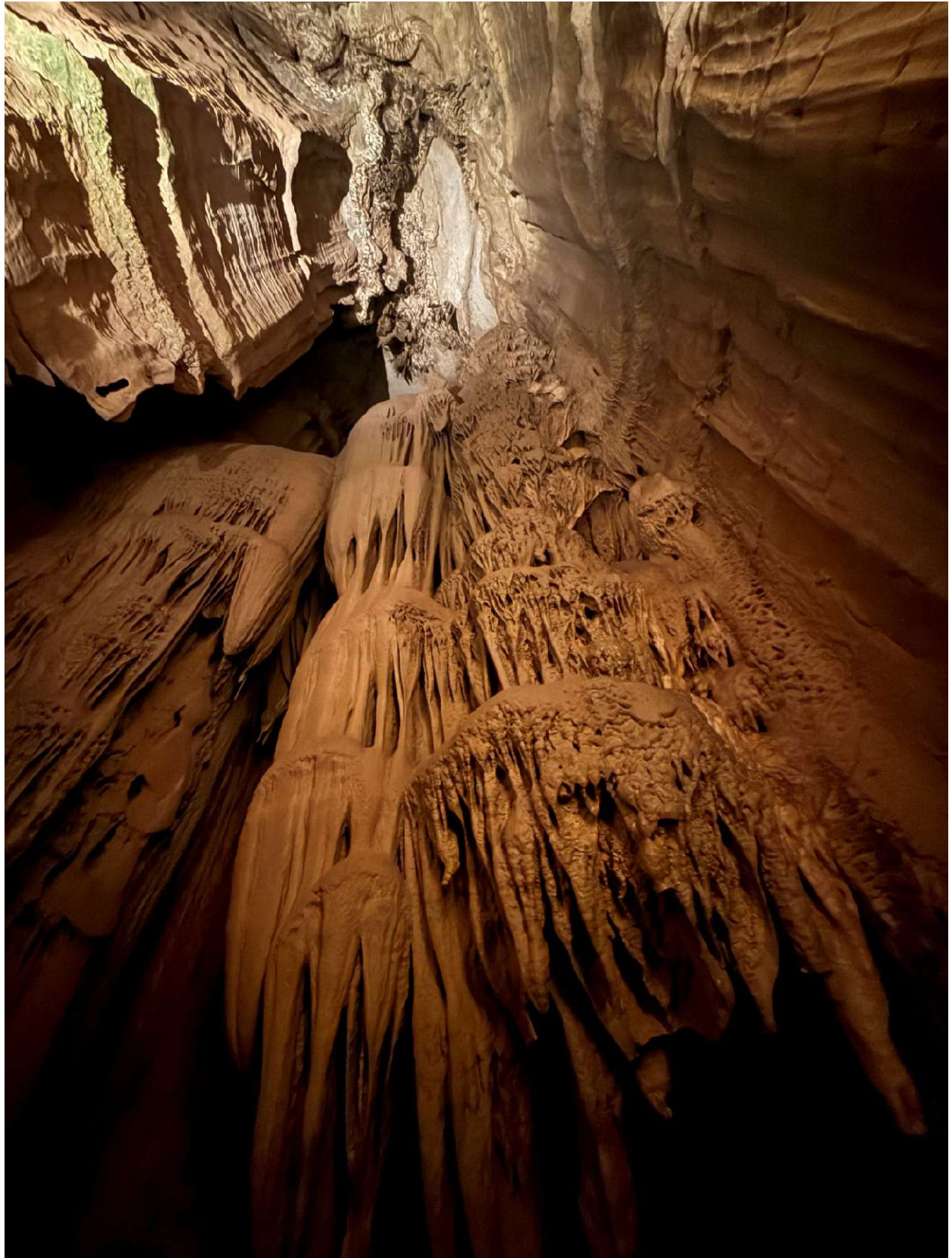






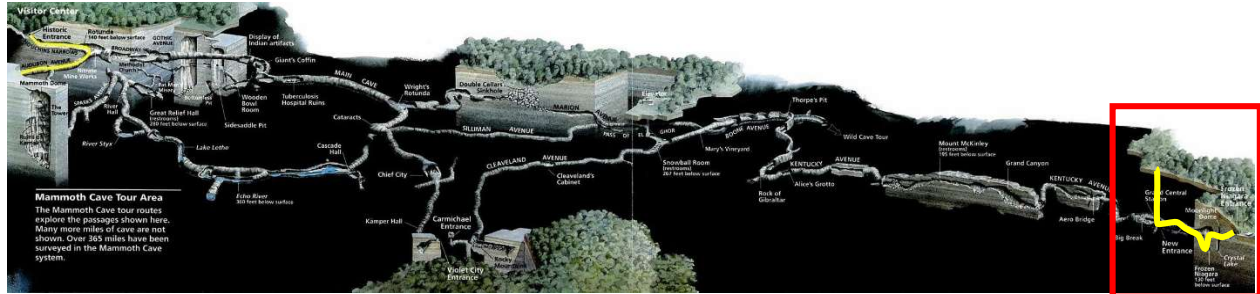
*Frozen Niagara*







Once we climbed back up the stairs, we were led to another door. It opened into a small clearing – looking very much like the New Entrance door, but this was the Frozen Niagara Entrance (though it was an exit for us) – and our bus was waiting a couple hundred feet away.



D&D was a good tour. It's surprising to see how puny it looks on the map of the cave network (above).

The sun was still out when we emerged from underground, but clouds were gathering. A large bank of gray loomed to the southwest, which, to my dismay, was the direction I'd be heading to reach my Site For The Nite.

Boondockers Welcome was providing my accommodations at a place called True North Farms.

It was really close to the park, and I enjoyed a very peaceful night's sleep. Thanks, Ed!

It rained some, of course, I would have been amazed if it didn't. But, ever the optimist, I held out hope that the sun might keep Blue Maxx and me some company as we trekked on east into West Virginia tomorrow.

