

# Deep-Earth Exploring

Beneath the surface of Missouri's Bonne Terre Mine ■ BY TRAVIS MARSHALL

The lure of Bonne Terre Mine is what the dive shop's crew has dubbed "deep-earth diving," a seemingly endless underground world, frozen in time. This was once one of the world's largest lead mines, but in the early '60s when the miners retreated and the pumps were turned off, it became a top dive site in the town of Bonne Terre, Missouri, just about an hour's drive south of St. Louis.

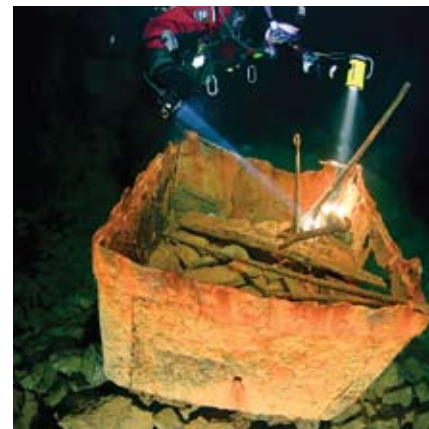
In 1983, Jacques-Yves Cousteau's film team came to document the dramatic underwater scenery; in April 2000, *National Geographic Adventure* named the diving at Bonne Terre Mine one of the top 10 adventures in America.

**Drive & Dive** Through the years, a handful of documentaries have been filmed here and shown on the Discovery and History channels. The mine attracts about 15,000 divers per year from all over North America, and once you arrive, it's easy to see why.

Bonne Terre's dive deck hovers on the water's surface, a full 150 feet into the earth, and though it's a short walk down from the small shed that covers the mine's only opening, the environmental change is complete. From the searing Missouri summer heat, it's like entering the world's largest walk-in refrigerator, where the air stays a constant 62°F and the water a brisk 58°F, year-round.

Pillars, shafts, sheer walls and ceilings — hewn entirely by human hands — stretch for miles in all directions, leaving a sprawling, five-level catacomb beneath the town. At every underwater turn, all manner of artifacts — shovels, rock drills, ore carts and blasting caps — lay strewn across the landscape. It's as if the workers who left these items simply went home at the blow of the foreman's whistle.

A big part of what makes that experience possible is light. The electric blue of the water is a product of the 500,000 watts of high-powered stadium lighting



Clockwise from top left: the dive platform in Bonne Terre; an abandoned ore cart; the locomotive on Trail 5; ladders on an advanced trail to the Clinton Shaft area.

## Itinerary

**Day 1** Friday afternoon, drive from St. Louis to the town of Bonne Terre, about an hour south. Check in at the company store for accommodations at the on-site Diver's Lodge and Bunk House, or the 1909 Depot, an historic train station one block away. Then join an afternoon walking/boat tour of the mine.

**Day 2** Meet at the dive shop at 7:30 Saturday morning for an orientation dive briefing before following the guide past

an abandoned rock drill and the timekeeper's shack on the first trail. » Gear up for a tour of the second trail with submerged rock features and a huge staircase into the mine. » Make your third dive at Chapel Room, the 1905 Canyon and a signature area of the mine called "the Structure," with a huge elevator. » On Saturday evening, have dinner and drinks at the Crossroads Restaurant and Lounge, a local favorite.

**Day 3** Start out with a dive through the "Keyhole," under the Lunch Room Arch and through the Dog Leg Tunnel. » Squeeze through the curved opening of "Fat Man's Misery" ore dump; check out the locomotive

and swim under the "Stairway to Heaven" on Trail 5. » Take a detour to the Missouri Mines State Historic Site (mostateparks.com) where you can learn about the town's mining history in the museum, or go hiking in nearby St. Joe State Park.



ANDY MORRISON (4)

that mine owners Doug and Catherine Goergens and their team have strung from pillar to pillar. The lighting extends through hundreds of feet of subterranean airspace, so dive lights aren't necessary (or allowed) for this adventure. The crystal-clear, rock-filtered water is clean enough to drink, and the long, blue waves of light that penetrate to the darkest depths of the motionless, billion-gallon lake render an almost Caribbean illusion.

The Bonne Terre Mine experience is very accessible. Every group of divers is assigned a guide and a safety diver, and visitors dive the more than 50 trails in a

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preset sequence. The dives become more advanced with additional swim-throughs and archways to navigate as the numbers get larger, so if you make it through Trail Six your first weekend, you'll start at Trail Seven on your next visit. Once you've completed the first 24-dive sequence, you can embark on exploratory dives that delve into the unlit and underexplored sections of Bonne Terre such as "the City," where you can still see the business center of the mine complete with office buildings and movie theaters. Another favorite? The Redwood Forest, where pillar after pillar stretches out into the soft light as far as the eye can see.

## Need to Know

**Getting There** From St. Louis, take I-55 South, and take exit 174B. Then go 23 miles south on Highway 67 to the Bonne Terre exit, and go right. **Weather** Winter is the high season, but conditions inside the mine stay constant year-round, with an air temperature of 62°F. **Dive Conditions** Water temperature stays 58°F year-round; 7 mm wetsuits are the most common, but drysuits might be appreciated. **Visibility** Consistently 100 feet-plus. **Price Tag** Weekend dive/accommodation packages range from \$210 to \$430 for two and three nights. **Local Operator** Bonne Terre Mine is privately owned by West End Diving (2dive.com) and is open only on the weekends.

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