



MISSOURI'S **TOP-RATED** CAVE EXPERIENCE

# YOUTH CAMPING INFORMATION GUIDE

# Overview

Stark Caverns is proud to present a unique camping and educational experience for youth groups. We offer both in-cave and outside tent camping opportunities, bundled with either a Regular Daily Cave Tour or our famous Black Light Tour. We have over 300 acres of property – great for many youth group activities such as hiking and merit badge activities. Our camping guests have 24x7 access to our clean restrooms at the Visitor’s Center, a great gift shop (open during business hours), gemstone and fossil mining in our custom sluice, geode cracking, an education classroom for rent as needed, two campfire areas and an outside covered pavilion with 3 picnic tables for group activities.

As a real, living and growing ecosystem, Stark Caverns is a treasure that needs to be protected. This Guide is intended to provide you information on what to expect when you visit and also to share our requirements to ensure both your safety and the safety of our cave and extended property. We ask that all youth camping groups fully comply with these requirements.

## **Reservations are Required**

If you would like your youth group to camp at Stark Caverns, you must submit our Youth Camping Request Form (found on the web site, under Camping). You will need to specify group contacts, preferred dates, number of nights desired, type of camping and tour selected, number of participants, and any special needs or interests. We require a *minimum of 10 youth to book a camping experience and at least 2 weeks advance notice*. We recommend you book several months in advance as available camping slots fill up fast. You will be asked to pay a 50% deposit once a date has been confirmed as available by our team. You will receive an electronic invoice detailing all charges. *Your date will not be locked in until the deposit is received*. You will pay the final balance due upon your arrival for your camping experience. If your participation numbers have changed since your deposit was submitted, your balance due will be adjusted appropriately (assuming you still meet the minimum of 10 youth campers).

## **Recommended Packing List**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tarps</li><li>• Chairs</li><li>• Sleeping bags/cots/air mattress</li><li>• Small tents</li><li>• Cooking supplies – camp stove, food and snacks</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Flashlights/lanterns</li><li>• Rain gear</li><li>• Phone chargers</li><li>• Hiking gear</li><li>• Blankets, jackets, coats if cooler weather</li></ul>
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## **Arrival**

We require a pre-arranged arrival time so we can ensure everything is ready for you. When you arrive, enter the Visitor Center front doors (at the top of the steps). Your assigned Stark Caverns staff member will greet you and provide their direct contact information should you need any

special assistance during your stay. Your staff contact will review your booking details and collect final payment for your camping experience.

*Most of our camping groups arrive between 4 and 5 pm.* If you have selected to camp inside the cave, you will not have access to set up your gear inside the cave until after our last Daily Tour has exited the cave (typically at 5 pm). Your cave access time could be earlier or later depending on activities that have been booked that day. If you arrange to arrive earlier in the day, you may choose to hike the grounds, rent the education room, or conduct merit badge activities. You could also feel free to use the primary firepit on the far side of the pond. You have access to a free 10-piece bundle of firewood per firepit used (we have 2 available).



### **Departure**

*We require a pre-arranged departure time as well.* We are open for tours daily at Stark Caverns with the first tour time starting at 10 most of the year, but at 9 during peak season (Memorial Day through Labor Day). *If you have booked an in-cave camping experience, we need your group packed and fully out of the cave no later than 30 minutes before the first scheduled tour (9 or 10*

*a.m. depending on the time of year*) so our staff can prepare the cave for public tours. Please ensure that all of your gear, supplies, and trash are removed from the cave by this time. Feel free to use the picnic areas for final departure packing, group meetings and breakfast. Please also move any vehicles parked near the Visitor Center to the Overflow Parking Lot to allow our daily guests to park close to the Visitor Center.

Please make sure you let us know if you experienced any negative issues during your stay so we can improve our processes and amenities to provide the best possible camping experience for our guests. *You will be receiving a post-camping survey within 2 days of your camping stay* so we can keep track of how we are meeting our customer expectations and continue to improve.

## **Additional Information**

### **Parking**

We have available parking both around the Visitor Center and in the Upper Parking Lot. If you arrive before 5 pm, you should plan to park in the Upper Parking Lot and may choose to move a few vehicles closer to the Visitor Center after 5 pm if that's more convenient for your needs. You may also temporarily move a vehicle close to the cave entrance path for unloading/loading. The Visitor Center parking lot has overnight lighting should you anticipate needing to access a vehicle in the overnight hours. Handicap accessible parking is located near the front of the Visitor Center, adjacent to our Stark Water Tower/slucice. These spaces are tight, so please ensure you don't block the exit/fire lane. The Upper Parking Lot is available across the entrance road with a short walk to the primary firepit/picnic areas & Visitor Center.

### **Cave Entrance Gate**

We have a large, barred entrance at the opening of the cave for security of the cave and protection of wildlife inside. If you are camping inside the cave, *ensure the barred entrance gate remains closed as much as possible* to prevent unwanted animals from entering the cave. Bears have occasionally been spotted on property (although they are typically fearful of humans and stay clear). If using our accessibility ramp, the ramp will have to be moved aside to close the gate completely.

### **Property Entrance Gate & Security**

There is a farm gate at the top of the hill that serves as our entrance gate. We close this gate when our last staff member leaves for the day. Normally we padlock the gate upon our departure, but when we have campers present, we "dummy lock" the gate so it appears to be locked, but actually isn't. This allows access for emergency personnel should they be needed, and the ability for you to depart should an emergency arise. We want to ensure the safety & security of our guests and property at all times. The Visitor Center (Gift Shop and offices) will be locked nightly and our security system engaged. This does not include the restrooms. The restrooms will remain open and unlocked for your use, day or night.

If you have an emergency while one of our team members is still on site, please work with them to resolve the issue. If the emergency is after hours, please contact our Site Manager for that day, listed on a handout you will receive during your check-in process.

## **Restrooms**

Our restrooms are located on the back side of the Visitor Center. They are easily accessible and available 24-hours a day for your use. Our team will ensure they are fully stocked with necessary supplies before our departure for the evening. The restrooms are clean, offer full-service facilities, and are air conditioned and heated too! Please ensure your participants use the facilities respectfully – no graffiti, appropriate disposal of trash, etc.



## **Drinking Water**

We will provide 15 gallons of drinking water in multi-gallon dispensers for your use. The Drinking Water Station will be set up near the cave entrance if you camping inside the cave, or near your camp site if camping elsewhere on the property. Please be sure to provide your own cups, bottles or refillable drink containers. We encourage you to minimize trash by using reusable drinking containers. This purified water should be designated only for drinking and cooking purposes. Our tap water (in the restroom and in spigots enroute to the cave entrance) should be used for handwashing, dish cleaning, other cleaning needs.

## **Firepits & Picnic Areas**

There are several areas with picnic tables – near the primary firepit as well as on the other side of the entrance road. We have a new covered pavilion with 3 picnic tables and a few tables, including kids size, right next to it. We also offer two firepit areas depending on your camping location and group size. Our primary firepit and seating area is located on the far side of the pond, near the entrance road. A second portable smokeless firepit can be located where it is convenient – near the cave entrance on especially cold nights, or near your outside camping area (if you've selected camping outside of the cave). You'll need to let us know when you finalize your reservation how many firepits you will be needing, and if the portable unit is required, where we need to place it.

We provide the first bundle of firewood at no charge for each used firepit. Additional firewood bundles are available for \$10 per 10-piece bundle. You are free to bring your own firewood as well. Please let us know when you arrive if you think you'll be needing additional firewood from us.



### **Trash Receptacles**

There are several trash bins and a dumpster around the property available for your use. One bin will be located near each firepit and there are several others located conveniently around the cave entrance and Visitor Center. Each trash bin located near your assigned areas will have an extra bag inside. If a trash can fills up, please remove the bag, tie it up, throw the full bag into the dumpster in the Upper Parking Lot (to keep animals out of it) and then use the extra bag provided for new trash. We recommend throwing the trash away each night to keep any animals away from your camping site while you sleep.

## **Accessibility Accommodations**

While Stark Caverns is not fully accessible, we are mostly accessible for those with special mobility needs.

- **Wheelchair Ramp at Cave Entrance:** There is a portable wheelchair ramp located just inside the cave entrance gate. There is a slight step down from the cave pathway outside the cave to the boardwalk inside the cave. With the ramp in place and the door open, we can easily accommodate guests in wheelchairs, strollers, or other mobility devices. Our staff will need to place the ramp for you before your guests arrive. Please let us know if your group will need it upon check-in. Since the cave entrance gate cannot be closed with the ramp in place, you will need to move it out of the way of the door swing if you are camping in the cave at night. You can then push it back into place the next morning for everyone to easily exit the cave. Don't forget to open the door before you put the ramp in place.
- **Visitor Center/Restrooms:** Our Visitor Center is wheelchair accessible through the rear entrance of the building. There is a ground level entrance without stairs to access the restroom, patio, and gift shop.
- **Pathway to the Cave:** Our pathway to the cave and areas around the Visitor Center are unpaved, but use relatively smooth gravel. Both the Visitor Center and pathway to the cave have overnight lighting.
- **Inside the Cave:** There are two areas with stairs in the back section of the cave. One area has about 30 steps and the other about 8. There is a waiting bench near the staircase with the 30 steps and a nice flat area for those who are unable to navigate the other 8 steps as well.

## **Access to Electric Outlets**

There are two electric outlet locations on the way to the cave entrance and several inside the cave on the edges of the Ball Room. The outlets on the way to the cave entrance remain live overnight, but the outlets inside the cave do not once the lights are turned off for the night. We recommend your group brings portable rechargeable phone charging devices since there will be limited access to active power sources at night. If you need electric access for medical devices during the night, we can help you run an extension cord from the active power outlets at the cave entrance to the Ball Room where campers will sleep during an in-cave camping experience. Please let our staff know at check-in if you'll be needing an extension cord.

## **Camping Guidelines**

1. **FOOD/DRINK** – While Stark Caverns offers some snack foods and drinks for purchase in the Gift Shop, you will need to bring your own food and drinks to your camp-out. If you have reserved an in-cave camping experience, please be aware that no food or drinks (other than water) are allowed in the cave. This includes snacks, candy and chewing gum. The drinking water station, your coolers, grills and other food storage and preparation items must remain outside the cave. We suggest tarping them over night. As you might imagine, residual food inside the cave attracts undesirable wildlife that wouldn't otherwise spend

time in the cave. The cave has a fragile ecosystem – we don't want to do anything to disturb our cave "locals" – bats, cave salamanders, crayfish and frogs.

2. **CAVE ETIQUETTE** – Please ensure that no participants touch the cave's water, formations or walls. The oils on your skin are actually damaging to the ecosystem and can "kill" living cave formations. Your Tour Guide will provide more information on how the cave was formed and key aspects of our karst ecosystem. Be mindful of cave creatures and do not disturb them. Stay on the designated paths and bridges and remain with your group at all times.
3. **CAVE ACCESS** – In-cave camping is limited to the paved patio in the Grand Ballroom. Access to any other area of the cave is prohibited except when you are on your cave tour with a Stark Caverns Guide. There is a gate near the Grand Ballroom that will be closed to show you where the off-limit areas begin. Please be very careful on the boardwalk area at night as well. Cameras are discretely located throughout the cave to ensure our guests do not stray into prohibited areas.
4. **FIREPIT USE** – The only permitted fires on property are in our designated firepits – never inside the cave or close to any of the buildings. Please ensure to douse all flames and embers before leaving the firepit unattended. Only burn natural firewood, sticks, twigs and leaves. Do not burn trash, plastics or other non-organic material in the firepit. Those items should be placed into the trash.
5. **TRASH** – trash bins are located immediately outside of the cave entrance, by the primary firepit, by the Visitor Center and in the parking lot. If you place any uneaten food in the trash bin, please ensure the lid is on tight and if possible, put the food waste into a zip lock bag before you place it in the trash. You will not want your food garbage to attract bears, coyotes, fox, racoons or bobcats to the site. We recommend you place garbage into the dumpster in the Upper Parking Lot before you all go to sleep for the night.
6. **CAVE LIGHTING** – To restrict the growth of non-native algae, bacteria and fungi, we require in-cave campers to turn off the lights inside the cave at night. Your Stark Camping Host will show you how to do this. They may be turned back on in the event of an emergency. Path lights from the cave entrance to the Visitor Center will remain on for your safety overnight and our Visitor Center and Parking lot around the building are very well lit for your safety and security.

## Guided Cave Tour

You are scheduled to take a guided one-hour cave tour at a designated time. Typically, this is scheduled after you set up your camp site, but that may vary based on our scheduled activities that day. Depending on which tour you've selected, you can expect a fascinating and educational experience for you and your youth group. There may be other non-camping visitors touring the cave that night, but in almost all cases, not with your group. Please ask your group members to use the restroom prior to the tour and then meet your Tour Guide at the designated location 10 minutes prior to the start time of the tour (could be the cave entrance or the Visitor Center).

# Property Map

