

Natural Tunnel State Park

Tunnel Talk



Self-Guided Tour to the Natural Tunnel



#7 Mined at One Time

Once you cross the railroad tracks, on the left you will see holes visible in the rock just above the water of Stock Creek. At one time, these were mined for saltpeter – a key ingredient for gun powder.

#8 Look up

While the Tunnel is a sight to see, so are the amphitheater walls that surround it. From top to the creekbed, the sheer limestone walls are roughly 300 feet tall.



#9 At last, the Natural Tunnel

From the South Portal (current location) to the North Portal, the tunnel is 850 feet long and the highest point within the tunnel is 300 feet beyond the entrance and is a dome shape.

How did it form?

The rock that makes up Natural Tunnel is limestone and dolostone, or dolomite. Both are influenced by water, so over time they can dissolve due to the acidity in the water via chemical erosion.

When rock is put under serious pressure, like an earthquake for example, it will bend and break creating a fracture in the rock or a fault. The Glenita Fault was formed and runs the entire length of the tunnel and beyond. This fault was key in the formation of the tunnel.

Stock Creek began to seep through the fault, which at the time was not very big. Over time, the acidity of the water dissolved the rock and formed the tunnel we see today. The chemical erosion also caused two sinkholes to form at each portal of the tunnel and eventually cave in, due to lack of support from rock below. When these sinkholes caved in, it revealed the steep amphitheater walls.

The formation of the tunnel did not happen overnight, in fact it took a great deal of time (millions of years). So what happens when you combine the right type of rock, a fault line, a creek, chemical erosion and time? You get a natural tunnel. This is a great example of what happens when pieces of the puzzle come together at the right time, therefore making this geologic feature truly one-of-a-kind.

Continue Your Adventure:

View the North Portal of the tunnel by hiking the Stock Creek Trail

Want an opportunity to go inside the Natural Tunnel?

You have two options:

1. Stock Creek Passage

A guided program where park staff lead you into the tunnel via Stock Creek

2. Railroad Day

The only day of the year where you will have the opportunity to walk through the tunnel on the railroad tracks.

The third Saturday in July.



Virginia Department of Conservation & Recreation

Natural Tunnel State Park
1420 Natural Tunnel Parkway
Duffield, Va, 24244
Phone 276-940-2674

Tour to the Tunnel

As you enjoy your visit here at Natural Tunnel State Park, whether it is just for the day or maybe a bit longer, we hope you discover the fascinating stories that make Natural Tunnel so unique. From the geologic phenomenon, the tunnel itself, and the railroad to the construction of the chairlift and everything in between – the stories of this region are still evident to this day.

The area where Natural Tunnel lies was once owned by four individuals, then passed on to new owners, advertised as a tourist attraction by several companies, and there was even an attempt to sell the Tunnel to Natural Bridge and Williamsburg all before becoming a state park in Virginia. On your journey down to view the Natural Tunnel, relish in Natural Tunnel's past as you are part of its present story and it's with great hope that you'll share your stories and experiences from your visit with future generations to come.

Choose your adventure:

1. Hike down via the Tunnel Trail
2. Enjoy a ride down on the chairlift (when available).

Recommendation from a Ranger: Do both. Hike down and ride back up on the chairlift.

Tour begins at the Visitor Center

#1 More than a Day Visit

As you look around it may be hard to imagine that over fifty years ago the view looked drastically different. Imagine a view without the Visitor Center or chairlift. Prior to 1939, before Natural Tunnel even became a park, a visit here would simply be for the day. The owners at the current time decided to construct the "Natural Tunnel Lodge" which included a restaurant, gift shop and about eight guest rooms. When Natural Tunnel opened as a state park in 1971, the lodge was converted to the visitor center but was later torn down to construct the current Visitor Center in 1987. The only remnants of the Natural Tunnel Lodge is the brick wall to the left of the Visitor Center in the parking area.



#2 Give a Friend a Lift

In 1989, the way park visitors viewed the Natural Tunnel forever changed. With the chairlift constructed and installed, not only did it create a fun and unique experience, but ensured that all visitors could have an opportunity to see the tunnel. Natural Tunnel State Park can proudly say they are the only state park in Virginia that has a chairlift.

#3 Take a Look Around

As you enjoy the hike down the trail, take in what surrounds you. Natural Tunnel is home to an abundance of plant species, and you may even spot some wildlife along the way too. Due to the ever-changing terrain and limestone bluffs near the tunnel, unique habitats are formed which gives way to diverse flora and fauna.



#4 This Way or That Way?

For this tour, we will continue left once we reach the chairlift at the bottom. By taking a right, the trail would lead to the Carter Cabin – one of Scott County's oldest buildings.

#5 Path of Least Resistance

As you continue down the boardwalk, you'll hear the sound of running water – depending on the time of year it may be gushing or simply a quiet trickle. Below is Stock Creek, which played a vital role in the formation of the tunnel. The creek will flow into the Clinch River, which is one of the most biodiverse rivers in North America.

#6 The Tracks that Changed History

Up until 1890, a visit to the Tunnel was by foot, horseback or by wagon. The South Atlantic & Ohio Railroad took on the task of designing the tracks that would eventually go through the tunnel. When designing a path further in Southwest Virginia, going through the tunnel was the most direct and practical route at the time. However, constructing the path was also a challenge given the terrain that encompasses the tunnel. At the railroad crossing, the tunnel to your left was created through the steep rock wall to allow trains to enter the tunnel on a straight and even path rather than a sharp curve. The tracks that were laid also altered the flow of Stock Creek. At the North Portal (other entrance to the tunnel), the creek originally curved left and then right, but now flows on only one side of the tracks completely.

After the tracks were laid, both the first passenger train and coal train travelled through the tunnel in 1890. For the next 50 years, hundreds of trains passed through as a gateway to the Appalachian area for both transportation and to collect the rich minerals and resources. In 1939, the passenger service ended. This track is still an active railroad which leads to the most common question asked at the park, "When does the train come through?" Unfortunately, the park does not know the train schedule, but if you happen to be down at the tunnel when it does come through, enjoy because it is a spectacular sight to see.