FYI Travel: A unique museum experience, 650 feet down

by Tom_Roebuck

A journey into the subterranean world of a working salt mine is possible in just a few places on Earth, and the only mine in the Western Hemisphere that allows visitors is in Hutchinson, Kan., at the Underground Salt Museum. A 70-second, noisy, dark elevator ride takes visitors 650 feet below the ground to the museum, which opened in May. Visitors go underground wearing a hard hat and a small, light rescue breather in case of a fire, but since salt isn't flammable, a salt mine is much safer than a coal mine.

SAFE UNDERGROUND - Worn by George Clooney in 'Batman Returns,' the original costume is featured in the Underground Vaults and Storage Gallery. This gallery was replicated to mirror the Underground Vaults and Storage Co., a secure storage facility located in the mine. UVS stores items and documents for hundreds of businesses across the world, including many from the major Hollywood movie studios. CNS photo courtesy of Kansas Underground Salt Museum. HANDS ON - At the Kansas Underground Salt Museum, visitors examine the varying layers of salt strata, noting the water trapped inside the formation. The museum is 650 feet below the Earthâ€™s surface and features exhibits highlighting the mining process, geology, mine transportation and the Underground Vaults and Storage business. CNS Photo courtesy of Kansas Underground Salt Mine. All aspects of the mining process are on display, both modern and historical, in a three-part gallery. In the undercut and drill area, the mine is set up for the first phase of a blast. An undercutter is used to cut a slot at the base of the rock, making it possible for the salt to drop. The next pillar is the mining area, where miners-for-a-day can see how the room being mined is wired with explosives. The third phase is the load area, where a Joy loader that was used from the 1940s until 1983 is on display. The huge loader was brought down the mine shaft in pieces and welded together underground. Many large pieces of mining equipment are eventually abandoned underground after an area has been mined.

The Hutchinson salt mine is also home to Underground Vaults and Storage, a secure facility housing corporate and medical records, film reels from Hollywood and other valuables. While the 26-acre, secure storage area is off-limits to the public, a replica in the museum depicts the look and setup of a film vault and rotates displays from movie studios, including costumes from "Batman and Robin," "Giant" and "The Matrix."

FYI: Hutchinson is about 50 miles northwest of Wichita. The Underground Salt Museum is open Tuesday through Saturday 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Sunday 1 to 6 p.m., closed on Mondays. The last tour begins at 4 p.m. Admission is $13.50, children 4-12 $8.50. Reservations are recommended, call 866-755-3450. Web site www.undergroundmuseum.org.

WARM WINTER FUN

Half Moon resort in Montego Bay, Jamaica, will launch its "Winter Escape" package, designed for large families, on Jan. 5. Groups of eight to 14 people staying a minimum of five nights in villa accommodations will receive credits of $1,000 for a five-bedroom villa and $1,400 for a seven-bedroom villa. The package includes daily breakfast and round-trip airport transfers. Guests have a choice of water, waterfront or garden views.

An exciting choice for exploring Jamaica by boat is the Chukka ocean safari, designed specially for two by Chukka Adventures. Guests are escorted to their own private beach, where a Chukka guide will give partners an orientation and test their skills before they take to the open sea. Couples will head up the picturesque coastline of Jamaica's garden parish St. Ann to a private sanctuary, home to the indigenous snow-white egret. Chukka guides provide a history of Jamaica and its landmark sites during the tour. A visit to a select private spot offers great snorkeling before the return journey to the beach for relaxation and a tropical drink.

FYI: For more information on Half Moon's Winter Escape package, visit www.halfmoon.com or call 866-648-6951. Rates for the Chukka ocean safari are $65 per person. Tour lasts three hours. Visit www.chukkacaribbean.com/MontegoBay/oceansafari.php , or call 877-424-8552.

ADVENTURE IN AFRICA

Experience a South African tour and safari adventure available at an unprecedented price from African Safari Specialists Premier Tours. Choose between two packages - both include airfare and an exhilarating safari through majestic Kruger National Park game reserve and feature local wine tasting and tours of the scenic Cape Town region with additional inclusions.

Package one: Highlights of South Africa includes 10 days from $2,995 per person. Four nights will be spent in Cape Town, with a full-day Cape Peninsula tour, a full-day wine lands tour, three nights at a private safari

lodge in Kruger National Park, open-vehicle game drives, breakfast daily, three lunches and three dinners, and airport transfers.

Package Two: Overland Explorer includes 22 days from $2,995 per person and requires some flexibility and an adventurous spirit, as some nights will be spent in log cabins (sleeping bag required). All transportation is included, as are most meals. Open-vehicle game drives will take visitors through reserves and national parks, as well as the Drakensberg Mountains and the Kingdom of Swaziland. Included are a visit to a wine farm and tasting, a Karoo Desert farm stay, an otter trail walk, Knysna boat trip and a Table Mountain hike.

FYI: Airfare from JFK or Dulles and intra-Africa flights are included. Valid for travel Jan. 7-March 31. Single-traveler supplement is available. For more information, visit www.premiertours.com or call 800-545-1910.

Â© Copley News Service

FYI Travel: A unique museum experience, 650 feet down by Tom_Roebuck