

Underground days out in Derbyshire and the Peak District

PUBLISHED: 08:58 12 February 2019

Peter Naldrett



Stalactites and relics from the past hidden beneath Matlock

There's more to Derbyshire than meets the eye, as Peter Naldrett discovered on a series of underground adventures to find out what lies beneath the surface of our county.





▫ *A young explorer keen to know more about the county's history*

As one of the most scenic counties in England, there's never a shortage of people wanting to travel to Derbyshire and enjoy the picture-postcard scenes it has to offer.

Whether it's the stepping stones at Dovedale, the gritty peat landscapes around Kinder or the charm of serene villages like Tideswell and Monyash, Derbyshire has so much to offer for people wanting to take in the views and snap a few images along the way.

But next time you're enjoying a wander over the hills of the Peak District, spare a thought for what is found beneath your feet. Because Derbyshire is blessed with bewildering beauty below the ground as well as above it.

Spending time underground might not be at the top of the list for folk spending their holidays, but magical landforms can be spotted deep beneath the Earth that you'll never come across on the surface, not to mention being an ideal place to shelter from the inevitable wet weather that hits the school holidays!

▫ *Panning for tin can be an exciting addition to the underground tour*

When it comes to incredible subterranean experiences, Castleton has more than its fair share of Premier League attractions.

Perhaps the most unusual is Speedwell Cavern – there are few places on Earth where you can descend dozens of steps and take a boat trip to an enormous cavern. However impressive the experience is, the origins of this former mine lay in a failed 18th century financial venture to discover lead in this part of the Peak.

The excavations at Speedwell lost money for investors, but today tourists can reap the benefits by going on the magical journey once part of the commute for local miners along a specially built channel.

Lead mining was, of course, a key part of the Derbyshire economy into the 20th century and other underground operations were far more successful. At the Peak District Lead Mining Museum, you can learn all about the extent of the county's mining, see the tools used and discover what the material was used for.

▫ *Lots of attractions are found below ground in the area around Mam Tor and Castleton*

As well as touring around the impressive museum in Matlock Bath's Grand Pavilion, intrepid explorers get a hands-on experience when they cross the road, climb the hill and enter Temple Mine.

Through the old doors lies a forgotten world, practically untouched since miners toiled here and littered with artefacts from decades gone by. Exploring it is like touring through the set of an Indiana Jones movie, with the perfect orb nests of cave spiders adding to the atmosphere.

Travel over the hills to Buxton and you'll find another example of humans shaping the world beneath our feet, but this time they had no idea they were doing so.

The long history of quarrying limestone and processing it to create farming products created plenty of waste material – and a great deal of it was dumped on top of a hill on the outskirts of the town.

▫ *The precious stone called Blue John has been a key feature in the regions country homes*
Rain water passed through the masses of lime, picking up the calcite needed to form stalagmites and stalactites and filtering through the ground towards Poole's Cavern deep in the hillside.

Areas with limestone beneath the surface are often great places to explore caverns carved by running water and see stalagmite formations, the slowly growing columns that take thousands of years to edge towards the roof.

A visit to Poole's Cavern is special because it is home to extreme stalagmites – some of the fastest forming in the world because of the amount of calcite dumped by industry in the past. Their growth rate in the Buxton cavern is many times faster than other places around the world, ensuring it has celebrity status among scientists and geologists interested in the field.

Stalagmites in Poole's Cavern appear to form everywhere; you'll see them on the handrail and you'll even spot them developing on the concrete path built to take visitors into the glittering, crystalline depths of this glorious underground world.

Back in Castleton, more subterranean treats are awaiting those emerging into daylight from their trip to Speedwell Cavern.

A short walk from the centre of the village alongside a small stream brings you to the largest cave entrance in the country, a magnificent way to begin a journey into Peak Cavern.

The long and winding path deep into this limestone cave network reveals many secrets, not least the reason why Peak Cavern is also known as The Devil's Arse and why a visit from Queen Victoria led to a timely name change.

Even before you delve into the hidden parts of Peak Cavern there's a whole new world to try and understand in the cave's enormous entrance.

A rope-making demonstration lifts the lid on an industry that once thrived in these parts, making ladders for lead miners to descend below the Earth's surface. In the 18th century, families actually lived inside the cave and emerged from tiny homes to spend the day twisting and strengthening lengths of rope.

Nearby, the exploration of caverns led to a discovery of a precious stone that changed the fortunes of Castleton.

When Blue John started to be mined from the hill overlooking the village, close to the peak of Mam Tor, its unique make-up made it a desirable household accessory for those who could afford it.

Decorations such as lamps and vases that featured Blue John were made for country homes across the region, including Chatsworth House.

Some mining of Blue John still takes place below the slopes of the White Peak and jewellery is available for day-trippers in several village shops.

There's nothing quite like seeing the precious stone in situ, though, and it can be spotted among spectacular cave features and 350-million-year-old fossils at both Treak Cliff Cavern and Blue John Cavern.

As you explore the beautiful features in this underground worlds, walkers will be heading on their familiar routes way above your head, enjoying stunning Derbyshire landscapes.

But anybody who has descended into the depths of the county knows that the picture-perfect scenic beauty on the surface is just the tip of the iceberg.

Peter Naldrett is the author of **Days Out Underground**, published by Bloomsbury.