

### Exploring above and below

*Plunge into the Laflèche Caves, then head aloft for an aerial adventure!*



By Katharine Fletcher

It's November and chilly winds are blowing... So why not head underground with the kids and explore a below-ground world?

Afterwards, why not go to the other extreme? Walk through the treetops at the Laflèche site's aerial park, or ascend a hilly hike so your family can lookout over the Ottawa River!

### **So tell me about these Caves...**

The Laflèche Cavernes are a 30- minute drive north of Ottawa, in Quebec, east of the Gatineau River. Here you'll find a menu of activities: caves to explore, an Adventure Aerial Park, Kids' Park, and hiking trails which morph into cross-country ski trails after snow season commences. Oh, and at Christmas time there's a choir in the cave...

### **Cool. So, what are these Caves?**

The Laflèche caves were formed around 20,000 years ago and were discovered by a hunter. Imagine how surprised he was when, while tracking a black bear, he saw it disappear into the rock. Following it (was he foolish or what?) he discovered a stunning system of linked caverns – more than 143 years ago.

### **Quick facts**

With more than 30,000 visitors a year, this is the most-visited cave in the Canadian Shield. When you explore it, you'll be given a helmet complete with head-lamp for your hour-long, guided spelunking (caving) tour.

Your bilingual guide will explain how the cave was carved by water over thousands of years. And you'll hear about bats' which call the cave home.

### **Yikes... Bats?**

Don't be concerned. In wintertime, tours avoid all the bats favourite hangouts. Yes, these little mammals literally "hang out," by clinging to the ceiling with their feet and hanging upside down! However, because they are incredibly sensitive to temperature changes, winter tours are designed to leave them completely alone.

Even if you do happen to be fortunate enough to see one, bats are nocturnal. All they want to do is sleep (hibernate). They won't fly at you. They won't catch in your hair (and remember, you're wearing a helmet). Instead of being concerned, ask your guide about fascinating bat facts.

### **I'm game... But surely it's cold underground?**

The temperature of the caves is constantly hovering around 4 degrees Celsius. So although you need to dress cozily, you won't need to worry about freezing underground, and don't dress like the Michelin Man as you'll want to be able to walk about easily! Moreover, because it's above freezing, there is unlikely to be any accumulation of ice.

### **There's a Kids' Park, too?**

Both the Adventure Aerial Park and Kids' Park are fun activities – above ground. The former is for kids 14 and more. The latter is a special course carefully designed for younger children who are, at minimum, 122 cm tall (4 feet). The Kids' Park includes 18 suspended bridges and two zip lines in the trees. And yes, you must accompany your children when they play in the Kids' Park.

Because kids will be climbing ladders, navigating tunnels, and clambering on ropes, they must be warmly clothed for November's chill. And remember, they'll be able to grasp ropes better with gloves, not mittens. It's key to ensure clothing is not baggy so it doesn't catch in the harnesses and clasps they'll be wearing. Although it's not summer, so sandals shouldn't be an option now, they must wear closed-in shoes, such as sneakers, too.

### **Are there rules?**

Children of five years of age and more are permitted underground but they must be accompanied by an adult. As well, kids under 14 must be accompanied by an adult when exploring the Adventure Aerial Park.

Reservations are required. To pre-register and find out about costs, times, contact the Laflèche site toll-free at 1 877 457-4033 and browse their website at [www.aventurelafleche.ca](http://www.aventurelafleche.ca) to find a directions and other important details.

### **Did you say there are other lookouts to explore?**

Yes! Drive to Gatineau Park's Luskville Falls, accessed past Gatineau (and old Aylmer) on Route 148 West. You can carefully clamber up the Eardley escarpment on the trail, to find a lookout over the flat Ottawa Valley. You'll see the Ottawa River in the distance and, to the west, glimpse the steeple of Quyon's Catholic church at the river's edge.

Or, in Ottawa, walk around Parliament Hill for a good look upriver. (And check out the Parliamentary pussycats...) To the west, the Ottawa River stretches west and you can see the Chaudiere Falls from here too (and then go and see it via the Eddy Street Bridge!)

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