

Unique ATV Cave Ride at Mines & Meadows Resort

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“Hey John – would you be interested in riding in an underground mine this spring?”

We get a lot of strange phone calls at the office, but seeing that this one came from a credible source and the calendar didn't read April 1, we were willing to give it the benefit of the doubt.

The call was from Justin Dawes, the ATV communications guru for Kawasaki. It seems he and fellow adventurous motorhead Jon Rall, also of Kawasaki, had a trick up their sleeve.

They had caught the scent of a unique riding destination in west-central Pennsylvania called the Mines & Meadows Resort and thought it would be an excellent destination in which they could feature the capabilities of the company's Brute Force 750 4x4.

Frankly, the 54 miles of above-ground trails are reason enough to visit the Mines & Meadows Resort, as the varied terrain, featuring hillclimbs, rock crawls and mud pits, provides challenges for seasoned riders but other easy trails with gentle, sweeping turns let anybody come and give it a shot.

The underground limestone mine, however, raises this riding destination to the next level. How many places can you go where you get great trails, plus a chance to ride 200 feet underground in complete blackness, and drive through an underground lake?

The answer, as best we can tell, is one – and that one place is Mines & Meadows.

Putting It Together

Upon meeting Bob Svihra, the brainchild and moneymen behind Mines & Meadows, it's sometimes a wonder this guy can make it through tying his shoes in the morning without getting distracted by an idea that's rolling through his head. When he talks, one sentence hardly gets finished before the next comes tumbling out of his mouth, and he seems less likely to stay on the original topic than to bounce to something else he wants to say.

He's not scatterbrained, however. Svihra has been very successful, having started and run businesses involved in disparate fields like medical waste removal, shoulder and knee harness manufacturing, creating a process to remove materials from compact discs and DVDs and as an investor in a variety of things, including the local BeaveRun motorsports complex located a couple miles down the road from Mines & Meadows. So Svihra's definitely a person who has proven he can follow through on a concept, but while he's doing that, a dozen other ideas are also pulsing through his gray matter.

“One business supports the next one that I do, and then that supports the next one that I do ... I'm a good builder but a lousy maintainer – so when I do something like this, I throw it over my shoulder and let somebody else take care of it once it's up and running,” Svihra said with a laugh.

Mines & Meadows is one of his latest start-ups. Some friends took Svihra on an ATV ride through some private property about seven years ago. The trail riding was interesting, but then his friends took him boondocking into an abandoned limestone mine.

“When they took me into the mine, being an entrepreneur, I put two and two together and said, ‘This would be a

great ATV riding place.’ So that’s what I tried doing,” Svihra explained.

Svihra invested \$2 million in the park, initially purchasing more than 400 acres of land around the mine and leasing part of the mine from the Grinnen family, which bought the mine in 2004 and formed the Underland Development Corporation. The riding park has now grown to more than 600 acres above ground, with 54 miles of trails that twist through interesting and varied terrain.

Another 14 acres is found underground in the limestone mine, providing a unique experience for visitors.

Underground:

The Mine

After a brief trail ride through some April showers, our Kawasaki-mounted party made its way to the mouth of the mine. The doorway looked to be about 5 feet wide and 7 feet tall, with wood sign reading “Mine Entrance – Guided Tours Only” hanging above the door. The doorway was lined on the top and sides by wooden beams similar to railroad ties, and from the outside it looked like we were entering a bear’s den.

We watched other machines disappear into the darkness, then took a deep breath and ventured through the narrow gateway. The bright light outside was quickly replaced by darkness – our eyes struggled to adjust to the sudden change in ambient light. Luckily the headlights from the Brute Force illuminated a narrow path in front of us as we plodded forward.

The initial staging room does feature just a tiny bit of light, thanks to whatever brightness sneaks through the doorway, but it’s still dark. The room we entered was about the size of a high school gymnasium, except with a relatively low ceiling.

Once our group was inside and some photos were taken, we followed our leader deeper inside. We could see only as far as our headlights would stretch, and only in the direction of those lights. Want to get a close look at the rocky walls? Better turn your machine in that direction, because that’s the only way you’re going to see them.

The mine itself was created in the 1800s, as mining crews using the relatively crude tools available at the time burrowed through a tall hill to capture the natural strip of limestone found there. For more than 60 years, limestone was pulled from the mine and used in local cement manufacturing until the mine closed in 1958. When digging out the limestone, crews had to leave sections of stone untouched every 35 feet so the ceiling wouldn’t collapse – in essence, leaving irregularly shaped pillars of support.

What’s left is a sort of drive-thru, underground beehive. As we followed our leader deeper into the mine, our main path snaked through the darkness, and on each side of us there would be a “pillar,” then what looked like a secret room or passageway leading farther into the darkness. We weaved our Brute Force 750 back and forth to throw some light into these side areas. Some were shallow, some were deep, and in some cases there would be a room behind the room, again, with pillars separating the spaces every 35 feet.

The ceiling hung about 15 feet from the floor in most places, though occasionally we’d drive through a “keyhole” or other area that wasn’t dug out quite as much, and we’d have to duck our heads as our ATV climbed over rock to make it through to the next room.

The pure darkness is the first thing that grabs your attention – it’s eerie, especially when everybody turns off their headlights and it is absolute darkness. Your eyes try to adjust to the changing light conditions, but in truth they’ll never catch up – without even a sliver of light coming in from anywhere, you are completely blinded. Luckily the

Kawis sprung back to life and we were off again.

Also notable is a musty, cool dampness. The mine stays at 55 degrees year-round, and the humidity hovers at about 80 percent. It made it a perfect place for a mushroom (yes, LEGAL mushrooms!) growing operation that filled this particular mine in the 1970s and '80s. Crews of up to 45 people worked around the clock like moles in this cave, ensuring proper garnish for pizzas, salads and the like.

The grade is mostly flat in the mine – you're actually not going downhill into the earth, instead the earth rises 200 feet in the form of a hill while riders go through.

Eventually, we came to a 3-acre underground "lake." The word lake is in quotes because the water here is merely trapped by a dam on the far end of the mine. Still, it's an interesting sight, and fun to drive through.

The mine was left abandoned beginning in the mid '80s and became a hangout for local explorers and party hounds until the Grinnen family purchased the land.

"We wanted to develop it and possibly get into record storage and storage of vehicles, boats, motorhomes and campers," explained Steve Grinnen. "Also, our main goal right now is a winery. This is the perfect temperature for storing wine, and the humidity can be controlled very easily. There's a lot of square footage in here."

In all, leisurely tours through the mine take about an hour. There's no extra charge for the mine tour – it comes with the price of admission, but the only way in and out is with a guide.

Above Ground:

Trails Everywhere!

The mine is awesome, but we'd be interested in riding at Mines & Meadows even without it.

The facility has more than 50 miles of trails that twist through the wooded and rolling landscape. A color-coded map illustrated the spiderweb of trails, with easy yellow and green trails running around the perimeter and down the center of the trail system, and then a hodge-podge of blue and black trails demarking the greater areas of challenge.

Out on the Brute Force, we found the system to be relatively easy to understand, as trails were marked by number and color, and direction signs pointed the way back to the main staging area.

Best yet, many of the trails are one-way in nature, making it unlikely you'd ever meet somebody in a corner and really easy to find your way back to your tow vehicle, as all trails eventually lead to other trails that will take you back.

Knowing they had some experienced riders with them, our guides took us to the toughest stuff the park could muster. The challenges were fun, but in the end, the rock scramble, powerline hill climb and mudbog were ideal habitat for the Brute Force 750.

The Mines & Meadows Resort near Wampum, Pennsylvania, is open all year, except for two weeks in late November/early December for Pennsylvania's deer hunting season. A day pass is \$25, and that includes a mine tour.

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About the Author:

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