



Work in progress Portraying the magic of artist's studio museums

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Going underground

Laura Rutkowski investigates museum tours that reveal strange and often little known subterranean landscapes



People are fascinated by unusual locations, and museums have caught on with a cluster of underground tours.

The London Transport Museum offers Hidden London tours, which run until March and include film screenings and tours held in Clapham South Subterranean Shelter, which was first opened to the public as a bomb shelter in July 1944 during the second world war. Visitors are immersed in the shelter's history as first-hand oral histories, real footage from the war, propaganda films, cartoons and newsreel clips make the space come alive.

Another relic from the second world war is the Churchill War Rooms in London, run by Imperial War Museums (IWM), which gives a glimpse of the political machinations and tactics employed by the wartime prime minister and his cabinet. The subterranean bunker remained secret for years, even after the war ended.

The rooms, now open to the public, are largely viewed from behind glass for conservation purposes, but this does not mean any scrimping on detail.

"In the Cabinet Room, you can get so close to Churchill's chair that you can see the scratch marks he left on its arms during those long and stressful war cabinet meetings," says an IWM spokeswoman.

Unlike the heavily fortified concrete bunker of Churchill's government, the Stockport Air Raid Shelters in the north of England were carved from the natural sandstone cliffs. Opened in 1939, they were the largest air raid shelters made for civilian use in the country and the network of passages became extensive enough to provide refuge for 6,500 people.

Another underground network used during the second world war was Chislehurst Caves in south-east London. Visitors taking a tour here are given handheld lamps that light up the undulating walls of the 2,000 year old labyrinthine passages. First dug out by druids to obtain chalk for lime burning and brickmaking, the 30-metre-deep caves were extended by both the Saxons and Romans. During the second world war they housed a functional underground town.

Above: Big Pit National Coal Museum in Wales takes visitors 90 metres underground

Below: Mail Rail, run by London's Postal Museum, takes visitors through tunnels that used to move post across the city

Then, in the 1960s and 70s, they were used as a popular music recording studio and venue – the caves are still used for television and film shoots.

But some underground tours go much deeper than 30 metres – the Big Pit National Coal Museum in Wales transports visitors 90 metres underground. Tours are led by former miners



with real-life stories to tell. Visitors are required to wear the same equipment as the miners: a helmet, cap lamp, belt, battery and a "self-rescuer", a portable oxygen pack.

The Museum of Lead Mining is in Wanlockhead, which, at 461 metres above sea level, is the highest village in Scotland. Its Lochnell Mine Experience offers visitors the opportunity to be guided around a mine tunnel that was first created in 1710. The tour is one of very few hard-rock mine tours in the UK, where mineral veins were discovered and ore was extracted to be used for lead, zinc and copper production.

"Most of the other mines in the UK are now in a very dangerous state and will never be accessible again," says Jon Evans, a trustee for the Museum of Lead Mining. "This makes our mine a very precious place to preserve our mining heritage, and it is one of the few places left to study in-situ mining."

Work is underway to extend the tour – the only underground tour in Scotland, according to Evans – from 150 metres to 300 metres into the hillside. The new section is set to open next year, and will reveal a huge underground chamber called a stope, where the miners removed the lead ore by using hand drills and gunpowder.

The Museum of Lead Mining is producing a virtual tour for visitors who are unable to go underground, which will allow them to enjoy the experience from within the visitor centre.

In London, Mail Rail offers a 15-minute immersive subterranean tour of the tunnels that were used to move post across the city. This attraction is part of the Postal Museum, which reopened last year following a £26m development. Visitors ride on specially made miniature trains that have been adapted for use on the tour.

With such a huge choice of mines, caves, wartime shelters and other subterranean venues for people to visit, it seems that going underground is no longer just an underground pursuit.

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