



NORTHEASTERN MINNESOTA

Going Under

Above-and-below-ground exploration at Minnesota's "next-generation" state park and newest campground

— by Terri Peterson Smith

You've returned to the surface from a tour of the historic Soudan Underground Mine, Minnesota's oldest and deepest iron-ore mine. As you take off your red hard hat, it comes as a bit of a shock when you emerge from the dark world half a mile below ground into the brilliant sunlight that sparkles off the lake. Yet such contrasts abound here at northeastern Minnesota's new Lake Vermilion-Soudan Underground Mine State Park, just south of the Superior National Forest and Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

The Soudan Underground Mine opened in 1882, but the land became a public park after the mine closed in 1962, and folks have toured it ever since. Things began to change in 2010, however, when the state purchased 3,000 acres adjacent to the mine from U.S. Steel and gradually started building



Teeming with walleye, muskellunge, pike and bass, Lake Vermilion stretches nearly 40 miles across Minnesota's Northwoods and laps at the rocky shore of a new state park.

what park officials call a "next-generation park" that combines 19th-century history with 21st-century camping.

For example, the park's recently completed Vermilion Ridge Campground features three group camps and 33 drive-in campsites, all with electric hookups and Wi-Fi. Visitors enjoy solar-heated water in the shower buildings, LED lighting, and electronic check-in and permitting. That's just the beginning, according to the park's assistant manager, Dawn Voges. "Only about a quarter of our master plan is finished, and the next steps include a

campground specially for ATV users."

Still, nature, not technology, provides the park's best experiences. Geologists flock from around the world to study the swirling banded-iron rock formations unique to the area. The widely varied terrain — with lakeshore, bogs and forests — means visitors may spot large animals such as moose, whitetail deer, black bears and "a healthy population of timber wolves," Voges says.

The 3,000-acre park offers hiking and biking, with access to the Mesabi Bike Trail, as well as fishing and boating on Lake Vermilion. Mine tours and camping close down from October to May, but the park stays open for day use with snowshoeing and ice fishing in winter.

➡ The Soudan Mine is open to the public. Tour takers and guides don hard hats and descend $\frac{1}{2}$ mile by cage and two spiral staircases, then $\frac{3}{4}$ mile by rail to the deepest part of Minnesota's first iron-ore mine.



LAKE VERMILION-SOUUDAN UNDERGROUND MINE STATE PARK

Reservations for RV sites at the park's new Vermilion Ridge Campground may be made up to 365 days in advance on the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources website or by phone at 866-857-2757.

www.mndnr.gov/reservations