

Pit, radon health mine top spot for nerds



AUGUST 04, 2013 10:49 PM • BY RENATA BIRKENBUEL OF THE MONTANA STANDARD

Two area mines are living the high-profile life these days.

Butte's Berkeley Pit and the Free Enterprise Radon Health Mine in Boulder have received national recognition by Popular Science

magazine.

They are among the Top 25 Nerdiest Road Trips chosen by magazine writers Geoff Manaugh and Nicola Twilley in the current issue.

The Free Enterprise finished No. 14, followed by the Berkeley at No. 15 in the list highlighting the nerdiest offbeat destinations.

"Manaugh and Twilley have selected the top 25 most curious, mysterious, or otherwise beguiling destinations to satisfy your inner science nerd," said publicist Dana Bruneau via email.

A few of the other intriguing nerdy but science-centric sites include the Soudan Mine State Park in Soudan, Minn. (No. 1); the National Radio Quiet Zone (No. 3) in West Virginia; and the Very Large Array (No. 4), a 20-mile collection of 27 radio telescopes in Socorro, N.M.

Here's what the authors write about each Montana destination:

-- Free Enterprise Radon Health Mine — Visitors to this former uranium mine pay to sit in lounge chairs 85 feet belowground and breathe the radon gas seeping from the tunnel's rock walls.

The facility, founded in 1952, is one of four radon-therapy sites in the U.S., all in Montana. Radon gas —emitted by radium, a radioactive byproduct of uranium — causes lung cancer in high doses. Here, exposed to more moderate levels, radon bathers seek relief from arthritic,

respiratory, and other chronic illnesses.

-- The Berkeley Pit — The Berkeley Pit may be a highly contaminated and deeply flooded open-pit copper mine, but it's also a story of hope.

In the early 1990s, chemists Donald and Andrea Stierle discovered that extremophiles — microorganisms evolved to endure seemingly impossible conditions — were slowly decontaminating the site's 40 billion gallons of acid-mine waste. They're now isolating those microorganisms for possible use in pharmaceuticals. A small viewing platform lets visitors look out over the dark waters, which are still so acidic they pose a lethal threat to geese unlucky enough to land there.

The authors toured 150 landscapes throughout the United States as part of a year-long project called Venue at www.v-e-n-u-e.com.

To access the magazine article, see www.popsoci.com

Renata Birkenbuel can be reached at renata.birkenbuel@lee.net and 496-5512.