

Hannibal, Missouri

There's no town in America that embodies the essence of dreamy, carefree, adventure-filled childhood quite like Hannibal, Missouri...

Take your kids to Hannibal, Missouri, and they can do just what Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn did: whitewash a fence, jump aboard a raft, creep deep inside a pitch-black cave, and smoke a corn cob pipe.

OK, you might want to have them skip the corn cob pipe.

But a trip to the sleepy little town that inspired Mark Twain's stories lets kids actually experience some of the things that made a Hannibal child's life such an adventure more than 150 years ago. And it's just a six-hour drive southwest from Milwaukee.

Visiting Hannibal is more than seeing the house Sam Clemens – later known as Twain – grew up in. While old buildings have been preserved and innumerable museum exhibits inform visitors, local Hannibal promoters have gone to great lengths to recreate parts of Twain's immortal tales for young and old to enjoy.

Of course, there are the real places Twain wrote about at length – the cave and Cardiff Hill, for example. You can also see miniature dioramas depicting infamous scenes from Twain's books, or watch the books come to life at a two-hour riverfront pageant featuring excerpts from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*.

But kids can also put themselves in Tom's shoes – or lack thereof – and clamber aboard a makeshift raft, try their hand at a half-painted fence, shiver in a spooky graveyard, and lay their eyes on life-sized re-creations of diabolical evil doers – all in the interactive displays at the Mark Twain Museum.

Like the eternally flowing Mississippi and the nostalgic childhood tales of Tom and the gang, Twain's Hannibal seems forever suspended in time. It's like there's magic in those Mississippi waters, and everyone who's ever read Twain's lore has been sprinkled with it.

Even worldly middle schoolers think Hannibal is cool, says teacher Bernadette Tille of nearby St. Louis, who's been taking classes there for 12 springs.

"Our students read *Tom Sawyer* in 7th grade, and going to Hannibal makes everything come alive," Tille says. "They say it's the best field trip ever – and that's a direct quote."

"Every year, I see that little kid in our 13- and 14-year olds. The fun Tom and Huck had is still fun today."

If it's been years since you read Twain, get your hands on a copy and start reading with your family. Then book passage to Hannibal – meaning rev up the minivan – and relive the carefree 1830s of Twain's boyhood.

Meet Mark Twain

Get your bearings in Hannibal aboard the **Twainland Express** or the **Hannibal Trolley**. Each offers a several-mile-long narrative trip of the town along the Mississippi, up to Riverview Park with a 300-foot-above-the-river view, and through the historic homes area. The cost for either is about \$25 for a family of four. A shorter, 20-minute tour of the **Mark Twain Clopper**, a narrated horse-drawn carriage tour, costs about \$10 for the whole clan.

Next, spend a couple of hours and about \$20 at the **Mark Twain Museum**, which actually encompasses four buildings and three museums. Start at the **Museum Annex** where you'll see a 10-minute introductory video and exhibits.

The **Mark Twain Boyhood Home** is where Clemens lived with his family from 1844 to 1853. The **Mark Twain Museum** has more displays – and good-quality souvenirs, too.

Becky Thatcher's character was based on Laura Hawkins, whose family lived across the street from the Clemens family. Two upstairs rooms are furnished and on display at the **Becky Thatcher House**, and the first floor is a book and gift shop.

You can almost see town ne'er-do-well Muff Potter standing trial when you walk into the **John M. Clemens Justice of the Peace Office**, which provided the model for the courtroom scene in

Tom Sawyer. **Grant's Drug Store**, aka the Pilaster House, was also home to the Clemens family for a short time.

Do what Tom did

At the **New Mark Twain Museum**, kids can get on Tom and Huck's raft while a continuous film creates the illusion that they're floating past the banks of the Mississippi. Other interactive exhibits let them imagine they're painting the fence with Tom's gang, visiting the scary graveyard with Tom and Huck, meeting Injun Joe with the treasure, and getting lost in the cave.

On the museum's mezzanine level, overlooking the Mississippi River, kids can grab hold of a life-size pilot's wheel and pull a riverboat whistle. The Mississippi River is just one block from Hannibal's historic district where you can get on board of **Mississippi River cruise** for a one- or two-hour excursion. (Reservations are needed for two-hour dinner cruises.) A family of four can take a non-dinner cruise for about \$35.

How dark is pitch black? Your kids might want to grab the nearest stalactite because when the lights are doused in the **Mark Twain Cave**, they'll find out. The one-hour tour lets you see the actual chambers Mark Twain was recalling when he wrote about Tom and Becky's spine-tingling adventure during the school picnic.

If your child likes the way those hairs on the back of his neck stand up in the cave, take him to the **Haunted House on Hill Street Wax Museum**. Faye Bleigh of the Hannibal Convention and Visitors Bureau swears on Aunt Polly's good book that this is a "don't-miss" for kids. In gutsy Tom and Huck fashion, take the eerie winding path and see the Skull Room, Corpse Room, and the Spooky Graveyard. Admission for a family of four is under \$20.

Also worthy of a visit is the **Tom Sawyer Dioramas Museum**, which contains 16 hand-carved miniature scenes depicting adventuring on Jackson's Island and other settings. But to feel like you're seeing the real characters, plan to enjoy the **Mark Twain Outdoor Theatre**, a two-hour pageant of episodes from Twain's books, where a family of four can sit and be entertained for under \$50.

A trip to Hannibal is a trip back in time to the childhood Mark Twain made famous, one that will live on forever in the American imagination.

As one Twain scholar put it, "Through Mark Twain, we see Hannibal as an Eden, an eternal summer place of woods and hills and that great flowing river and boys and straw hats, fishing, and forming friendships."

This spring or summer, let your family form a friendship with Hannibal.

(Sidebar)

National Tom Sawyer Days

Hannibal entertains a half million visitors each year, but the town really hops during National Tom Sawyer Days (July 2-5 this year), when about 100,000 visitors will join in the Hannibal hijinks.

Watch or join the National Fence Painting Championship, frog jumping contest, and "Tomboy Sawyer" competition for girls. A Tom and Becky Contest is also held, in which a local boy and girl are chosen to serve for a year as Hannibal ambassadors.

Tourism officials suggest you book lodging for Tom Sawyer Days no later than May.

More information:

Hannibal Convention and Visitors Bureau – Call toll-free 1-TOMANDHUCK or visit hannibal.com. Additional information can be found on the Mark Twain Museum's website at marktwainmuseum.org.