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Haunted houses rival horror flicks

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John Seewer

The Associated Press

TOLEDO, Ohio - The towering stone walls of the Gothic prison are scary enough in the daytime.



If You Go ...

Tickets: Some haunted houses have a limited number of tickets, so it pays to check in advance. Weekend nights, especially those close to Halloween, can get crowded. Waits can be as long as two hours at the most popular haunts.

what to wear: Comfortable shoes, heels don't work while running from ghosts. Make sure cell phones and glasses are secure too.

Tips: The people behind the masks say that the more you scream, the more they come after you. And wearing glowing necklaces might make you feel safer, but it just makes a better target for the monsters.

Haunted Houses:

Ohio State Reformatory: Mansfield, Ohio, www.mrps.org

The Haunted Mortuary: New Orleans, www.themortuary.net

Old Tucson Studios: Tucson, Ariz., www.oldtucson.com

The Edge Of Hell: Kansas City, Mo., www.edgeofhell.com

Eastern State Penitentiary: Philadelphia, www.easternstate.org

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Waverly Hills Sanatorium: Louisville, Ky., www.therealwaverlyhills.com

USS Nightmare: Cincinnati, www.ussnightmare.com

The Nightmare Factory At Oregon School For The Deaf: Salem, Ore.,
www.nightmarefactorysalem.com

Winchester Mystery House: San Jose, Calif., www.winchestermysteryhouse.com

Netherworld: Norcross, Ga., www.fearworld.com

Some say it looks like Dracula's castle.

Now add a crisp, moonlit evening, and mix in 50 demons and devils breaking out of rusted cells, and it becomes the perfect setting for a haunted house.

"You can't get any more creepy than this," said Myron St. John, who's in charge of terrorizing the former Ohio State Reformatory in Mansfield. "It's like doing a haunted house on a \$20 million movie set."

Not even Hollywood can match the haunted houses.

Big-budget special effects, elaborate sets and exotic locations are turning what once were neighborhood haunts into weekend destinations for those who love to scream.

In New Orleans, there's an old mortuary surrounded by cemeteries and the city's iconic above-ground tombs.

Old Tucson Studios in Arizona transforms from a movie set for Westerns to the spooky town of Nightfall where a haunted mine and heckling gargoyles are certain to startle and delight in the desert.

And there's a pair of haunted houses in Kansas City, Mo., that end with terrifying slides, one dropping visitors five floors down into the devil's arms.

"For us, it's a true theatrical production, but the applause comes in the form of screams," said

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Amber Arnett-Bequeaith, whose family operates four haunted houses within a few blocks on the edge of downtown Kansas City.

Antique tractors take customers on hay rides to the different attractions where 150 actors roam about.

Animals play a role too - there are pythons and an anaconda at The Edge of Hell, and a live alligator inside the Beast. Watch out for the headless horsemen galloping on the streets outside.

Just within the last five years, haunted houses have become much more elaborate with innovations in technology, said Billy Messina, co-owner of Netherworld in Norcross, Ga., near Atlanta.

It's not unusual to find people working on the attractions who have worked in movies with special effects and costumes.

"We have giant animatronic monsters that are 20 feet tall," he said. "People are used to seeing this at the movies. They want to see it here."

Some of the most popular haunted houses partner with hotels to offer packages that include tickets. Others offer the chance to bypass the lines, which can grow to two hours on busy weekend night in October

"Haunted house fans are like roller coaster fans: They will travel" said Sean Kelley, program director of the haunted house at Eastern State Penitentiary in downtown Philadelphia.

More than 100,000 people visit the shuttered prison each fall. "When you walk into the old cell blocks, you really feel it," Kelley said. "You see furniture tipped over on side, the graffiti. You really get the sense that the people just left."

Near the end, those brave enough to enter are given flashlights and they must find their way out - with a few surprises along the way.

Money raised from the haunted house helps pay for preservation of the prison, which was closed to nonpaying visitors in 1971.

Those too scared to visit in the dark during Halloween can still take tours of prison year round.

The old Ohio State Reformatory - midway between Columbus and Cleveland - has tours during the spring and summer. It's where "The Shawshank Redemption" and several other movies have been filmed.

But it really comes alive during Halloween.

The haunted house takes guests through the six-story cell block and the basement morgue.

Waverly Hills Sanatorium in Louisville, Ky., is another place that relies on its past to frighten anyone who enters. Perched atop a hill, it operated as a tuberculosis hospital until 1961.

"People say why don't you have a year-round haunted house," said owner Tina Mattingly. "I say 'I do. We just don't have actors in there year round.'"

The haunted house tour in the fall includes a trip through the "body chute," an underground tunnel used to transport bodies out of the building.

"You could put nothing in there or fill it up props, people will get scared," said Mattingly, who lives on the site with her husband while they restore the property.

Other haunted houses with a unique story include:

The USS Nightmare, in Newport, Ky., is a dilapidated 1934 steamboat that sits on the Ohio River across from downtown Cincinnati.

"Disney with all their artists couldn't have made a boat look more spooky than this," said Allen Rizzo, a licensed riverboat captain who runs the attraction.

The steam engines and generators are part of the show. A floating barge next to the boat has laser tag and games for those who don't want to go onboard.

Students at the Oregon School for the Deaf in Salem are involved in every aspect of the school's annual haunted house, from designing the sets to scaring the guests.

"They all like to gather and tell stories about who they scared that night," said Ed Roberts, a dorm counselor who started the school fundraiser in 1987.

It brought in \$70,000 last year even though its open just six days.

The Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, Calif., isn't technically a haunted house, at least not the kind with actors in costumes.

It's worth mentioning for its quirkiness alone.

Built by the Winchester rifle heiress, the quirky mansion has stairs that lead into a ceiling and doors that lead nowhere. It's also said to be haunted.

Look for the stairs with 13 steps, the room with 13 windows and a chandelier with 13 gaslights.

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