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with Kitty Bean Yancey, Laura Bly and Jayne Clark



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## The scariest haunted houses in America

By **Javne Clark**. USA TODAY

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It's high season for the creators of haunted house attractions – and yes, there are people who make a full-time living scaring the @#\$%\* out of their customers.

The 30 members of America Haunts, a group that lays claim to the most hair-raising haunted house attractions in the land, put considerable effort in knowing what creeps you out, as detailed in the phobia blog on the site.

**PHOTO GALLERY:** Get spooked at these haunted houses



► CAPTION By JASON COHN

What scares us? The dark. Getting lost. Getting lost in the dark. Throw in some live rats, the longest snake in captivity and assorted vampires, like they do at The Edge of Hell in Kansas City, Mo., and you've got yourself an adrenaline-charged fright fest.

In operation since 1975, The Edge, as locals call it, was one of nation's first permanent-installation haunted house attractions. (Interestingly, it grew out of a wholesome family-run summer theater troupe that specialized in fairytales. Looking to stretch the season, they turned to terror.)

"We were the inventors of looking at the psychology of fear (in haunted house attractions)," says Amber Arnett-Bequeaith, who runs the business with her uncle. "It's all about fright and flight. There's a reason why we make you get down and crawl."

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"The Beast," a second haunted house operated by the family, features a 10,000-square-foot "werewolf forest" with a live alligator. "When people see that animal, it's instant adrenalin," she says.

At The Scarehouse in Pittsburgh, in operation since 1999, they've conducted their own fright research via exit interviews, online surveys, etc.

A recurring fear factor? Clowns.

"Clowns are always near the top," says Scott Simmons, who runs the place with his wife (whom he met while working in a haunted house), and his dad. "I guess you have one bad birthday experience and it's all over."

Enter Creepo the Clown, one of The Scarehouse's most enduring characters. "He's a guy who's been a clown too long. One too many birthday parties and he just snapped. He's dirty, sweaty and he obviously doesn't like you," Simmons

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says.

"A good haunted house has to scare you," he continues, "but it should make you laugh, too. People see Creepo leaning out of the "Kiss the Clown" booth in the darkness and they hit the floor. And then they laugh."

The best haunted house attractions change motifs for fresh scares. (Planning and construction begin as early as January.) And they don't rely on hackneyed movie images for inspiration, either.

"It's more interesting to create your own characters," Simmons says. "We're influenced by what's out there and what's popular, but you look for something that's going to resonate with *your* audience."

This year, for instance, The Scarehouse features "Pittsburgh Zombies," with the walking dead inhabiting city landmarks.

Since scare season lasts only a little over a month (from late September through October) some of these venues are looking for ways to prolong the experience. The Beast has been the site of corporate team-building events promoted as "Taming the Beast." And the Edge of Hell markets "The Wedding from Hell" package for couples looking for an "offbeat venue," Arnett-Bequeaith says.

"We had an entire zombie wedding," she adds. "The cake was a red-velvet mummy. Life size."

What's your most memorable haunted house experience? And would you consider getting married in one?

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