

Smithsonian's New Hall of Origins

Natural History Museum Gallery Opens March 17

The distance is just 24 feet, but the journey transports visitors back more than six million years and to the other side of the world — to north-central Africa, home of our early human ancestor *Sahelanthropus tchadensis*. The pulsating time tunnel, with its rear-projections of early human species, serves as a dramatic entrance to the new \$20.7 million Hall of Human Origins at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.



The Smithsonian's Natural History Museum is a popular attraction along the National Mall and is opening a new gallery exploring human origins.

The new permanent exhibition, which opens on March 17, uses technology to illuminate the story of evolution, or as Richard Potts, director of the Human Origins Program, says, it answers the questions "How did we get here, and how are humans similar to, yet distinct from, other living beings?"

The evolution to modern humans was not necessarily a straightforward one. "In fact, as recently as 100,000 years ago, five different early human species were living at the same time, each specialized for dif-

ferent climates," Potts notes. It is his research and vision that formed the foundation of the Smithsonian's Human Origins Initiative, which also includes a website, educational programs, and ongoing research.

"The past 20 years have seen an enormous pace of new fossils and archeological remains, along with genetic finds that have even begun to unravel the genome of the Neanderthal, an early human species," Potts says.

A major focus of the exhibition relates to research pioneered by the Smithsonian that studies how ancient climate change affected human evolution.

What You'll See

Modern, interactive multi-media dioramas place visitors in the role of scientists using clues uncovered in three different bone beds to reconstruct the lives of early humans in Kenya, Iraq, and South Africa.

Two different computer games in the Changing the World Gallery are designed to engage younger audiences. A survival game geared to teens and young adults requires users to make decisions that ultimately affect the species' evolutions and survival. Younger kids can play a game that shows them how human bodies could evolve in the future to adapt to environmental changes.

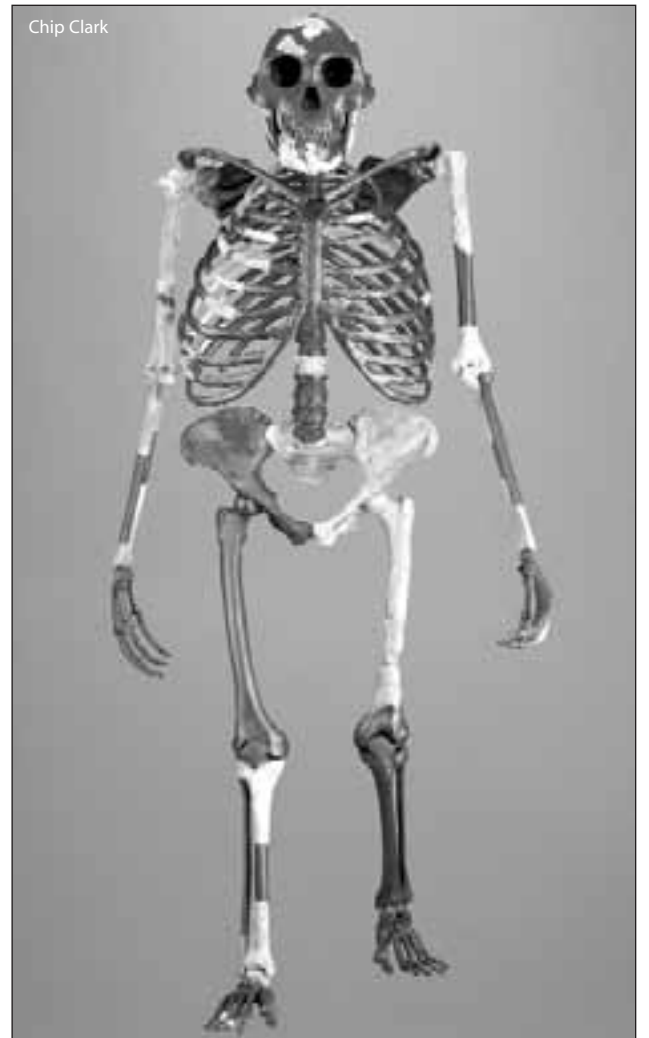
"We are really hoping that visitors will be able to make a strong connection with their early ancestors," says the Smithsonian's Michael Atwood Mason. To that end, one of the exhibit galleries brings visitors face-to-face, literally, with their ancestors — or at least with accurate, life-size reconstructions of the heads of seven early human species. Visitors can then have their photos taken at an adjacent computer station and be morphed into one of four early human species.

A display of 75 skulls (cast reproductions) from all over the world and from dramatically different time periods gives visitors a sense of the evolutionary process that led to modern *Homo sapiens*. The same gallery, Family Tree, details three possible variations on the story of human evolution. "Human evolution is an ongoing science, and we try to reflect that in this exhibition," Mason notes.

Other Species in Our Family Tree

Potts says that visitors might find some of the science presented in the Hall of Origins not only new, but also unexpected. "For instance, it will surprise a lot of people that at least three other species overlapped in time with the known time range of our own species," he says. "The overall consensus is that there were at least a dozen species in the human family tree besides our own, *Homo sapiens*."

Among the exhibition's treasures are many original



This reconstructed "Lucy" skeleton from Ethiopia is featured in the exhibition. The lighter-colored bones were actually excavated and are about 3.2 million years old. The darker bones were created from measurements taken from other fossils from Lucy's species

artifacts and the only original fossil Neanderthal skeleton housed in the United States. Institutions worldwide have supported the Smithsonian in its quest to assemble detailed replicas of an enormous range of fossils and archeological finds from all over the world.

"Our interactive displays will encourage visitors to connect the dry, dusty fossils and stone tools we dig up with the actual places where our ancestors lived," Potts says. "We bring the picture of human origins up to the present — and encourage visitors to imagine the challenges of the future."

By Theresa Gawlas Medoff

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Smithsonian Natural History Museum:
www.mnh.si.edu

Garrett County

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Haley Farm's spa and sauna can help you relax no matter what the activity or season and the spa offers a menu of delightful services. "We offer a getaway weekend that makes you feel at home as soon as you walk through the door," says innkeeper Pete Briggs.

At more than 2,000 feet of elevation, it takes a bit longer for the vines at Deep Creek Cellars to awaken from their winter slumber and the winery, close to the Maryland-Pennsylvania border, doesn't begin its regular Wednesday-Saturday tastings until April 20. However, owner/winemaker Paul Roberts says they are open most March and April Saturdays, weather permitting. Just call ahead to be sure or to make an appointment.

"We started in 1997 and planted fruit trees as well as grapes," Roberts said. "We've expanded our Asian pear plantings as well as blueberries and raspberries, all of which are available seasonally in our tasting room."

Roberts, who began learning his winemaking skills in the Napa Valley, says he makes relatively dry table wines intended to go with food. "Lots of people staying in the area for weekends or vacations buy our wine to have with their meal that night as well as to take home."

Check Out the Area

Deep Creek Lake and Garrett County have long attracted families and couples for winter and summer fun, but a look at www.visitdeecreek.com reveals ten artists and galleries, plus the Spruce Forest Artisan Village and antiquing opportunities ranging from Englander's Antique Mall to the Book Mark'et and Antique Mezzanine. You can absorb history in Oakland and Mountain Lake Park or marvel at nature at Muddy Creek Falls or in thousands of acres of state forests and parks.

Even though winter is waning and summer is still over the horizon, you can still have loads of fun in Garrett County's shoulder seasons!

By Jane and Marvin Bond