

Apostle Islands

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Apostle Islands National Lakeshore
Wisconsin



Sea Caves



The stories of Apostle Islands National Lakeshore reveal themselves along edges where water meets land, field meets forest, and past meets future. Centuries of wave action, freezing, and thawing have sculpted shorelines throughout the Apostles. Some of the Great Lakes' most spectacular scenery occurs where nature has carved delicate arches, vaulted chambers, and hidden passageways into sandstone of the Devils Island Formation. These "sea caves" honeycomb cliffs on Devils Island, Sand Island, and near Mawikwe Bay on the mainland. Visitors are drawn to Apostle Islands National Lakeshore in summer and winter to visit the sea caves and witness Lake Superior's ever-changing handiwork.

Sea Cave Creation

The story of the Devils Island Formation begins over one billion years ago when rivers and streams carried sandy sediments from hills in what is now southern Minnesota to a basin where the Apostle Islands are now found. These rivers, known as braided streams, carried sediment that slowly filled the basin and covered the area with many shallow ponds, some only a few inches deep, connected by shallow channels. Sand deposits in this environment were thinly-bedded, fine-grained, and extensively ripple marked. These deposits became the sandstone known as the Devils Island Formation.

Where wave action erodes and undercuts the base of a cliff, a feature known as a reentrant develops. Sea caves are produced when a number of reentrants join behind the face of a cliff, leaving behind supporting pillars and arches. They develop most easily where the layers comprising a rock formation are very thin. Cliffs carved from exposures of the thinly-bedded Devils Island Formation at Devils Island, Sand Island, and on the mainland feature the national lakeshore's most spectacular array of sea caves.

These easily eroded sandstone cliffs are constantly changing, as shown in the photos below. In early 2008, the pedestal forming the arch (below left) collapsed exposing a fresh rock face (right).



2005



2008

Sea Caves



Devils Island



Sand Island - Swallow Point



Mainland

Getting There

In summer, the sea caves are best seen by boat. The Apostle Islands Cruise Service offers daily trips past the Devils Island sea caves from mid-May through mid-October. Kayak outfitters guide day trips to the mainland sea caves throughout the summer. Kayakers with their own boats wishing to visit the mainland sea caves will find a good launch point at the end of Meyers Road. Meyers Road is located about 18 miles west of Bayfield off Highway 13. There is a daily fee for parking a vehicle at Meyers Road. Boaters wishing to visit the Sand Island caves will find a boat launch (fee) at Little Sand Bay, 13 miles north of Bayfield. The Swallow Point sea caves on the east side of Sand Island are about four miles across the lake from Little Sand Bay. The Devils Island sea caves are 14 water miles from Little Sand Bay or 22 water miles from Bayfield.

Visitors to the park's mainland unit who do not have a boat can view portions of the mainland sea caves from the Lakeshore Trail. The trailhead is adjacent to the parking lot (fee) at the end of Meyers Road. A rugged two mile hike along the trail brings hikers to the top of the cliffs above the sea caves. The trail offers several views of the caves from the cliff tops.

To reach the mainland sea caves in winter, visitors should park in the lot (fee) at the end of Meyers Road. The bay near Meyers Beach is frequently covered with ice for some or all of the period from late January to late-March. If the bay is sufficiently frozen, visitors can walk, snowshoe, or ski northeast across the ice to the cliffs. Snowmobile and ATV use is not permitted within the park boundary near the mainland sea caves. The boundary lies 1/4 mile off the mainland shoreline. The caves begin about one mile from Meyers Beach.

Safety

Visitors to the caves face many potential hazards.

By water:

Kayakers have had fatal accidents at the sea caves. Small open boats, canoes, and open cockpit or sit upon kayaks are NOT recommended.

- Monitor the marine weather forecast.
- Be constantly alert to changing conditions and consider how they might effect your trip.
- Avoid the sea caves when conditions are rough.
- Wear personal flotation devices, wet-suits, and spray skirts.
- Paddlers should not visit the sea caves alone. Stay together with your group.



Wear life jackets, spray skirts, and wet-suits. Go with a group and stay together.

By land:

Hikers (and pets) have fallen from the cliffs.

- Stay on trails and keep back from the edge. Undercut ledges can give way without warning.
- Do not throw objects from the tops of cliffs. This is hazardous for paddlers below.
- Visitors with dogs must keep them on a leash (no more than six feet long) and clean up after them.

Over the ice:

Walking on ice can be extremely dangerous and demands caution. Ice conditions can change rapidly.

- Call the Apostle Islands Ice Line at (715)779-3397 ext. 499 for information about ice conditions at the mainland sea caves. For detailed information and weather conditions call (715)779-3397 ext. 399.
- Wear warm clothing. Sub-zero temperatures and bitter wind-chills are common.
- Watch for new cracks or soft spots in the ice.
- Carry ice picks for self-rescue if you break through the ice.
- The ice can be very rough or slippery. Wear sturdy boots (with ice grip traction cleats).
- Carry a ski pole or walking stick.
- Beware of falling ice near the cliffs.



Wear warm clothing, sturdy boots (with ice cleats), and carry a ski pole.



Stay back from the edge.