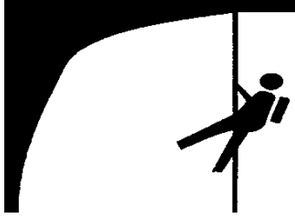
Carlsbad Caverns

National Park
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Backcountry Caves

Caving Opportunities

You may be able to enter one of several wild caves in Carlsbad Caverns National Park by obtaining a special permit from the Cave Resource Office. This brochure provides information to help you decide which cave to visit based upon your caving experience, interests, and abilities. Some caves are difficult to locate and enter, requiring technical caving skills, experience in reading topographic maps, extended hiking in very rough and potentially hazardous terrain, and adjusting to the extremes of a desert climate. Therefore, we suggest you acquire this type of experience before you visit the caves in this area.

Most caves are between one and four miles from the nearest road. Be sure to carry plenty of water, particularly in the summer when daily requirements may exceed a gallon a day per person.

Overnight camping is permitted only in the backcountry, and requires a separate non-fee camping permit which can be obtained at the visitor center.

Any entry into a wild cave may result in irreparable damage to the cave. All park caves are carefully monitored for impacts. Caves impacted by careless users will be closed. Please support the wild caving program by caving in a safe manner, taking care to preserve cave features.

Entry into any wild cave on the park requires a permit. Entry into any cave other than that specified on the permit is illegal.

Cave Permits

To schedule a trip, contact the park, preferably at least one month in advance. Permits are issued on a first-come, first-served basis. The park may deny a permit to any group that does not have proper equipment or experience. Once approved, the permit will be sent to you or arrangements will be made for you to pick it up in person.

Write to: Cave Resource Office
Carlsbad Caverns National Park
3225 National Parks Highway
Carlsbad, NM 88220

Or call: (575) 785-3105
Or e-mail:
rod_horrocks@nps.gov

Response from the park may be slow at times. Please be patient and plan ahead.

Fees

Cave permits do not require a fee, with the exception of Ogle Cave. Entry to Ogle Cave requires a fee and a ranger escort. (Ogle Cave trips are currently unavailable).

Reservations for ranger-led trips to Ogle Cave must be re-confirmed three days before the scheduled date, otherwise the trip may be cancelled.

Ogle Cave Fees:

Age 18-62	$15.00
Golden Age Passport	$ 7.50
Golden Access Passport	$ 7.50

These trips are classified as special use, therefore, the Golden Eagle Passport does not apply.

Age Limits

Trip leaders must be at least 18 years of age. Visitors to vertical caves must be at least 16 years of age for most caves, and at least 18 years of age for Ogle or Deep Cave. Visitors to horizontal caves must be at least 12 years of age and if under 16 must have a legal parent or guardian with them. Visitors to permit caves less than 18 years of age must have special permission in writing, signed by their parent or guardian, before entering any permit cave. This written permission must be received by the Cave Resource Office before the trip may take place.

Safety Requirements

These caves are preserved in their natural state; therefore, potential hazards exist that require certain safety precautions:

- Wear a UIAA approved helmet.
- Each person must have 3 independent sources of light (no carbide lamps).
- At least one of your lights must be helmet mounted.
- Wear sturdy shoes that protect the ankle and have non-marking soles.
- Wear gloves and kneepads.
- Three people is the minimum group size for all permit caves.
- Use a surface watch so someone will make sure you exit safely and will call for help if you don't.
- **For vertical caves, each person must have their own vertical caving equipment and be experienced in its use.**

Natural History

Rocks of the Guadalupe Mountains were deposited about 250 million years ago when this area was adjacent to the deep Delaware Basin, a large inland arm of the Permian Ocean. On the shelf surrounding this basin, limestone formed from the accumulation of vast numbers of the calcite skeletons of various marine organisms and by direct precipitation from sea water. Eventually, water circulation in the basin was restricted, the water became very salty from evaporation, the reef organisms died, and the basin was filled with sediment.

About 15 to 25 million years ago the Guadalupe Mountains began to uplift. Caves developed deep in the ground as fresh waters beneath the mountains mixed with briny basin water and formed sulfuric acid that dissolved the limestone.

Continued uplift of the Guadalupe Mountains elevated some caves above the level of the ground water, causing them to drain and dry. Erosion by water removed the deposits above the limestone and cut deep rugged canyons into the rock and opened entrances to some caves. Water seeping through the rock into caves precipitated the dissolved minerals to create the fantastic array of beautiful cave formations that make the caves of the Guadalupe Mountains world famous.

Conservation

Your actions while caving will be one of the greatest determining factors in the condition of cave resources and enjoyment of the caves by future generations.

Every entry into a cave, by any person, creates disturbance. The cumulative impact of even slight changes and disturbances, even innocent ones, can lead to dramatic alterations of the cave environment, or to people's enjoyment.

It is everybody's responsibility to respect the cave environment. Make sure that all clothing, gear and boots are completely clean before entering any cave.

People can impact caves far faster than nature can repair them, or create new ones—please cave softly.

Cave Trails

Some routes are marked with flagging tape to reduce impact on delicate formations or floors. Please stay on these routes; do not disturb or step outside the tape.

Boot scuff marks on rocks are an unsightly sign of human usage; therefore, the use of non-marking boots is required.

Wildlife

It is illegal to disturb or kill any wildlife within a National Park.

There are over 130 species of insects and other invertebrates found in the caves within the park. Many of these species are true troglobites, meaning the cave is their home and they never leave. Since these animals are small, be extra careful where you step to avoid harming these sensitive creatures.

Most of the caves have been used, at one time or another, by bats. Several bat species are extremely sensitive to the mere presence of humans. To reduce stress and impacts to bats, refrain from disturbing them by quickly exiting areas where bats are present. Be quiet around bats, and do not take photos or shine lights on bats.

White-nose syndrome (WNS) is a disease that has killed millions of hibernating bats in North America since 2006. WNS continues to spread westward across the U.S. and Canada. To protect bats, only clean gear (caving gear, clothing, footwear) that has never been used in a WNS-affected region is allowed in caves of Carlsbad Caverns National Park. Furthermore, gear should be decontaminated prior to cave entry following the latest WNS decon protocols available from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. For current protocols and more information on WNS, please visit **www.whitenosesyndrome.org**

Vertical Caves

These caves require the use of vertical caving techniques, which is potentially hazardous. Each person must provide their own vertical caving equipment and be experienced in its use. Groups may be required to demonstrate their vertical caving knowledge and/or show their vertical equipment and rope(s) to a park ranger before being issued a permit.

CHRISTMAS TREE CAVE

Elevation: 4,892 feet
Distance from trailhead: 1.25 miles
Approximate hiking time: 1.25 hours
Group size: minimum 3, maximum 6
Visitation limit: 2 trips per week
Equipment: 50' rope, vertical gear for each person.

The entrance of Christmas Tree Cave consists of a 15' vertical drop around a rock partition. The entrance chamber is covered with breakdown and gradually slopes to the first level of the cave. Here one finds numerous delicate formations. At the rear of this chamber is a large pile of breakdown blocks, beyond which a lower chamber is reached. The floor of this room is silt covered and care must be taken not to track silt through the cave. This cave is well decorated and fragile. Cave swallows nest in the entrance. Please do not disturb them.

CHIMNEY CAVE

Elevation: 4,328 feet
Distance from trailhead: 0.5 mile
Approximate hiking time: 30 minutes
Group size: minimum 3, maximum 6
Visitation limit: 2 trips per week
Equipment: 120' rope, 15' handline, vertical gear for each person.

The entrance to this cave is through a tight, squeeze through opening, followed by an awkward 10' free climb (use handline). The main chamber is reached by a 45' drop which is located well into the dark zone of the cave. This chamber is approximately 100' in diameter and contains large formations and a bell canopy.

DEEP CAVE

Elevation: 5,946 feet
Distance from trailhead: 1.5 miles
Approximate hiking time: 45 minutes
Group size: minimum 3, maximum 6
Visitation limit: 2 trips per week
Equipment: 350' rope, 150' handline to reach rig point; vertical gear for each person.

This cave must be reached by traveling very rough and rocky roads through the Lincoln National Forest; a high-clearance four wheel drive vehicle is needed. Access to the cave may be closed during periods of high fire danger. The entrance passage slopes down from the 50' diameter entrance at a 45 degree angle, coming to a ledge containing a large boulder and a small stalagmite. The vertical drop requiring the use of the 350' rope is rigged from this ledge. This drop brings you to the top of a breakdown hill in a large, dome-shaped room. The passage then runs back another 500'. Except for one pool, the cave is dry, and is well decorated with totems (tall, narrow stalagmites), shields, dog-tooth spar, bell canopies, and helictites.

HELENS CAVE

Elevation: 4,580 feet
Distance from trailhead: 1 mile
Approximate hiking time: 1 hour
Group size: minimum 3, maximum 6
Visitation limit: 2 trips per week
Equipment: 100' rope, rope pads, vertical gear for each person.

Though the entrance drop is only 30', a 100' rope is needed due to the scarcity of anchor points. Below the entrance drop, the cave heads off in two directions. The right-hand passage ends in a crawl after 50'. The main portion of the cave lies beyond a three foot high constriction on the left-hand side. The main chamber is decorated with a variety of delicate speleothems. Additional passages can be found up a 15' climb (no rope needed) on the left-hand side of the room. This passage is heavily decorated and requires extreme care not to damage the many fragile formations hanging from the ceiling.

OGLE CAVE

Elevation: 4,854 feet
Distance from trailhead: 1.25 miles
Approximate hiking time: 1 hour
Group size: minimum 2, maximum 6 (plus park guide)
Visitation limit: 2 trips per month
Equipment: 250' rope, vertical gear for each person.

Ogle Cave is very delicate and still contains historic guano mining equipment. For these reasons, a ranger escort is required for all trips to this cave, and a fee is required. Trips are also limited to a total of two per month, so advance planning is recommended.

Currently Unavailable

The rappel on the lower west side of the pit drops into the main walking passage. Several rope pads are needed for this rappel. The main chamber extends to the south for approximately 1,450'. The Boulder Room leads off from the main chamber roughly 600' form the entrance. Ogle Cave, one of the largest in the park, contains shields, breccia, helictites, and massive stalagmites. This cave also contains a 106' tall column, the Bicentennial, which is the tallest in the park and one of the tallest in the world. Guided tours vary in length and are confined to a flagged trail.

WEN CAVE

Elevation: 4,747 feet
Distance from trailhead: 0.5 miles
Approximate hiking time: 0.5 hour
Group size: minimum 3, maximum 6
Visitation limit: 2 trips per week
Equipment: 100' rope, vertical gear for each person.

Wen Cave is a small, pretty cave decorated with very fragile formations. The entrance is roughly 7' by 5' and is somewhat hidden by vegetation. The entrance passage extends for about 20', at which point it opens up into a 55' vertical drop. The lower chamber runs in two directions from the base of the drop. The southern passage continues for 100' and terminates in a room 30' in diameter with a 40' ceiling. To the north, the passage continues for about 175' and terminates in a flowstone block. Much of this area is decorated with flowstone, columns, shields, and pool features.

Horizontal Caves

CORKSCREW CAVE

Elevation: 4,803 feet
Distance from trailhead: 0.5 mile
Approximate hiking time: 1 hour
Group size: minimum 3, maximum 4
Visitation limit: 2 trips per week

People planning on entering this small cave should be experienced cavers. The entrance passage must be chimneyed. People with minimal climbing experience should be belayed. Portions of the cave are very delicate. A very large shield is present in the first chamber below the entrance passage.

LAKE CAVE

Closed from April 1 to October 31 each year to protect a sensitive maternity bat colony.

Elevation: 5,340 feet
Distance from trailhead: 2.5 miles
Approximate hiking time: 2.5 hours
Group size: minimum 3, maximum 6
Visitation limit: 2 trips per week
Equipment: 50' handline recommended

Groups should be experienced hikers in good condition. The hike to the cave gains 1,133' in elevation and is thus very long and steep. The cave runs NE for about 600',with the first 350' at approximately the same level as the entrance. Two hundred feet from the entrance, the cave opens up into a 100' by 200' chamber, at the end of which is the Lake Room. The slope leading down to the Lake Room is 35', guano-covered, and slick; a handline is recommended. The lake itself is 135' long, 20' to 30' wide, and up to 10' deep. Even though this cave has been extensively vandalized, it is still a very scenic cave. It contains many unusual speleothems which have been partly corroded by atmospheric condensates into strange, freeform shapes.

GOAT CAVE

Closed from April 1 to October 31 each year to protect a sensitive maternity bat colony.

Elevation: 4,614 feet
Distance from trailhead: 2.25 miles
Approximate hiking time: 1.5 hours
Group size: minimum 3, maximum 10
Visitation limit: 3 trips per week

This is a good cave for beginning cavers. Cave swallows are sometimes found in the impressively large entrance to this cave. The cave consists mostly of one main corridor 1,130' long and from 40' to 200' wide, with a ceiling height of up to 100'. The first part of the cave has a dry, dusty floor. This can be easily kicked up and interfere with breathing. In the last 30 to 40 feet, the floor is covered with bat guano.