Certain caves are closed to protect bats. Please check with a ranger for current closures.

● Least Challenging

These caves have relatively high ceilings and smoother floors or trails.

Mushpot Cave (770 ft / 235 m)
Recommended as an introductory cave, interpretive signs explain formations, ecology, and cave climate. The cave is lighted, however, bring extra light and watch your head.

Sentinel Cave (3,280 ft / 1,000 m)
This cave's easy main trail requires no stooping or ducking and has lots of interesting features. This is one of the only developed caves with two entrances.

Valentine Cave (1,635 ft / 498 m)
Named for the day it was discovered in 1933, it has large main passages with smooth floors and walls. It was created by a different lava source than the caves on Cave Loop.

Skull Cave (580 ft / 177 m)
The wide open feel of this cave makes it an excellent choice for those who do not like tight, closed-in spaces. It is a remnant of three very large lava tubes, one on top of the other. This allows cold winter air to be trapped inside and create a year-round ice floor on the lower level, accessible via a smooth trail, down a metal stairway to a platform. It is named for the bones of pronghorn, bighorn sheep, and two human skeletons discovered inside.

Merrill Cave (650 ft / 198 m)
Visitors once ice skated by lantern light on an enormous ice floor at the bottom of this cave. Changing air flow patterns are the suspected cause of melting. Today you may see small ice remnants from a viewing platform at the bottom of a stairway.

Heppe Cave (170 ft / 52 m)
A 0.4 mile walk will take you to this tall twilight-lit cave. In some years you might find a small pool of water; this water can be an important water source for wildlife as there is no surface water in Lava Beds.

Big Painted Cave (266 ft / 81 m) and
Symbol Bridge (148 ft / 45 m)
Irreplaceable historic Native American pictographs adorn the entrance areas of these two short caves. Look closely to find the pictographs as they blend in with the rock. An easy 0.75 mi (1.21 km) hike is required to reach them.

Ovis Cave (216 ft / 66 m) and
Paradise Alleys (1,033 ft / 315 m)
Ovis Cave contained 36 bighorn skulls when it was discovered in the 1890s. In Ovis, ceiling heights exceed 25 ft (7.6 m), and some outside light is visible throughout. Paradise Alleys has smooth floors, and ceiling heights exceeding 7ft (2m) are found throughout this cave.

■ Moderately Challenging

These caves may involve stooping through low sections and/or rough floors. Additional protective gear is recommended for the more difficult spots.

Golden Dome Cave (2,229 ft / 679 m)
Beware of "headache rock" when entering and exiting the cave via the ladder. The downstream portion of this cave (heading north) requires some stooping. The back section where the "Golden Dome" is located is a figure-8; take note of your location so you don't go around in circles. The golden ceiling in this and many other caves here is the result of light reflecting off water droplets that bead up on a coating of hydrophobic bacteria. The bacteria are not harmful to humans but are easily damaged, so please do not touch. The upstream portions of this cave require more stooping and some crawling.

Sunshine Cave (466 ft / 142 m)
Two collapses allow sunlight to enter the cave where abundant vegetation grows. Stooping is required in the main passage, and the back section has floors that are steep, very rough, and sometimes wet. Beautiful hydrophobic bacteria coats the ceiling at the back of this cave, where winter icicles adorn cracks in the ceiling.

Balcony Cave (2,903 ft / 885 m)
and Boulevard Cave (759 ft / 231 m)
These caves have sections of low ceilings and an optional crawl up onto a balcony created by changing lava flow levels. The "boulevard" was named for the smooth floor created by a lava cascade.

Blue Grotto Cave (1,541 ft / 470 m)
This cave is named for the pale blue-gray portions of the ceiling inside the "Blue Grotto". The ceilings are high throughout this cave, but the floors are rough.

Indian Well Cave (300ft / 91 m)
The first half of this cave has a pathway which changes to loose rock. It has a high ceiling and unusual ice formations in winter. Historically, this cave was home to a pool of water, which is how it got the "well" part of its name.

You Can Help Protect Bats!

Learn about white-nose syndrome and get screened before you enter caves.

⊗ Lava Beds provides critical habitat throughout the year for large, stable populations of at least 14 species of bats. During the summer, some caves are closed to protect maternal bat colonies where mothers raise thousands of tiny, vulnerable bat pups on the ceiling. Other caves may contain groups of hibernating bats in winter, which can die if awakened often.

What to Do if You See Bats
Stop talking, shine your light away from the bats, and leave the area as quickly and quietly as possible. Note about how many bats there are and where they are, so you can tell a Ranger. Your information will help us better protect these important, fascinating animals.

♦ Most Challenging

These caves have some portions which require crawling. Helmets, kneepads, and gloves are a must in these areas. They are also more directionally challenging. Purchasing maps is highly recommended!

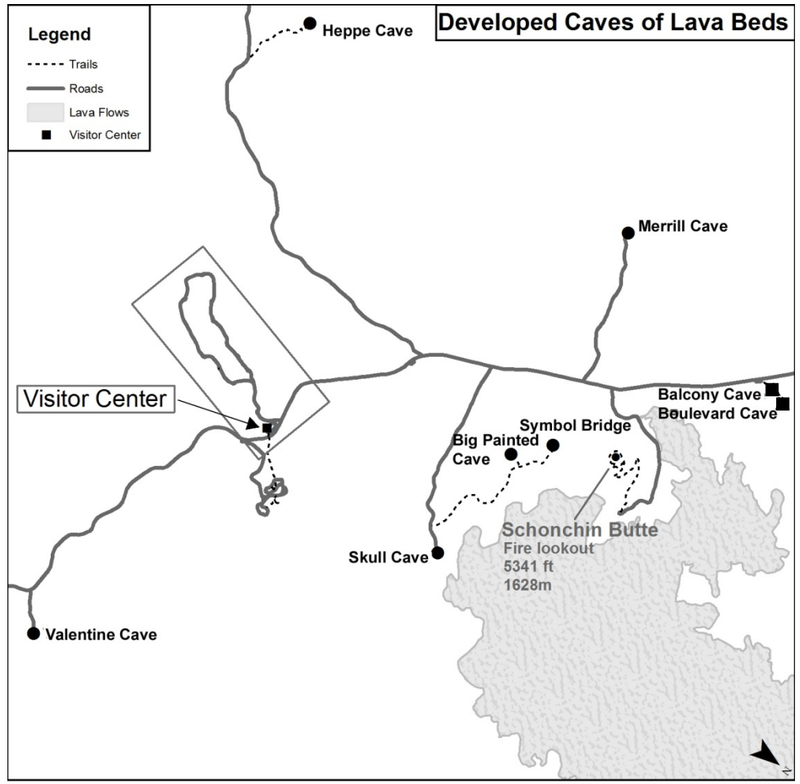
Labyrinth Cave (1,239 ft / 378 m) and
Lava Brook Cave (859 ft / 262 m)
These caves near the Visitor Center are connected by a twisting segment requiring crawling. Ceiling heights tend to be low throughout. As the name Labyrinth suggests, you must pay attention to your route! The "Lava Brook" is an interesting pattern left on the floor of one passage by the last lava flow. As you travel through these caves, be prepared to exit at one of three locations, the Labyrinth, Lava Brook, or Thunderbolt entrances.

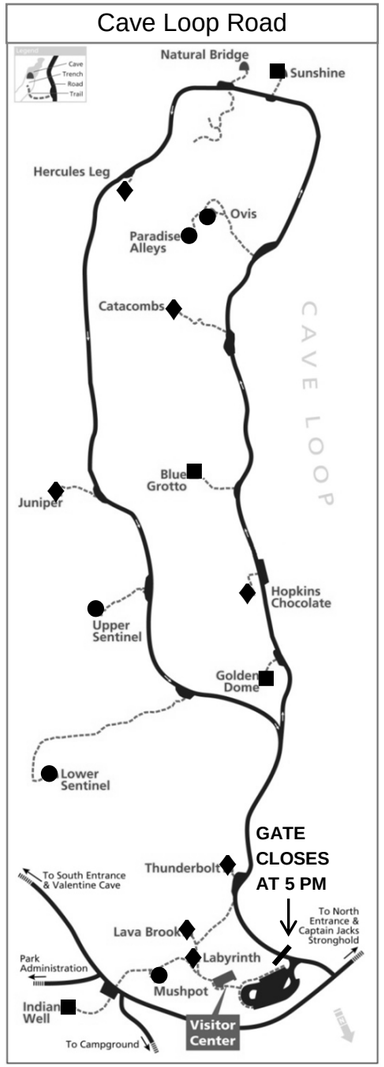
Thunderbolt Cave (2,561 ft / 781 m)
Crawling is required in the downstream portions of this cave where it connects to Labyrinth and Lava Brook Caves. Upstream (right) from the entrance are a few tight areas, one of which is 6 in (15 cm) wide at knee level. There is some stooping before the ceiling height allows walking upright.

Hercules Leg Cave (1,948 ft / 594 m) and
Juniper Cave (2,362 ft / 720 m)
These two caves were connected by the removal of debris in a collapse pit, and together make one long excursion with an entrance and exit. The Hercules Leg portion has generally high ceilings and smooth floors. The connection to Juniper cave involves crossing rocky floors with a passage height of 2.5 ft (0.8 m), and several low sections thereafter.

Hopkins Chocolate Cave (1,405 ft / 428 m)
This cave was named by E.L. Hopkins for the rich brown color of lava coating the ceiling and walls. Stooping is required in some places, and there is one passage with a ceiling height of 3 ft (0.9 m) that requires duck-walking. If you look closely, you can find historic graffitti by J.D. Howard and E.L. Hopkins. Do not touch bacterial mats.

Catacombs Cave (6,903 ft / 2,104 m)
This very long cave is easily entered, but gradually increases in difficulty. It is possible to walk upright for approximately 800 ft (244 m) to the stairway, after which the ceiling rarely exceeds 3 ft (0.9 m). A few places exist where the ceiling height is less then 12 in (30 cm).
A cave map is highly recommended for any group planning to explore the entire cave, as multiple levels and numerous side passages can be confusing. This cave is not recommended for inexperienced cavers.



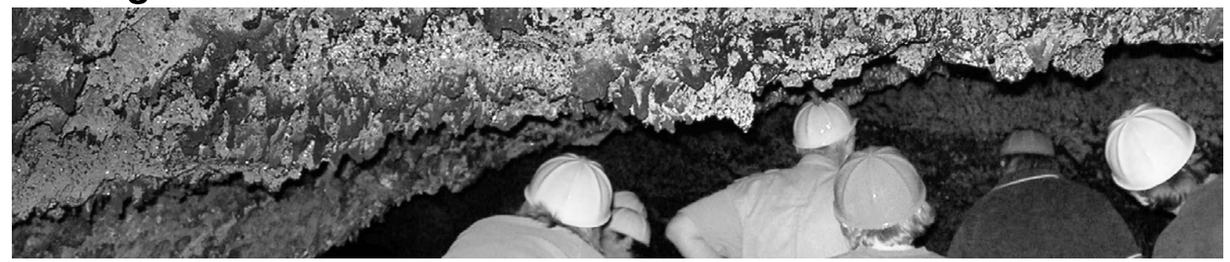


Lava Beds

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Lava Beds National Monument

Caving



The caves found here were created by flows of smooth lava 10,500 to 65,000 years ago. As the lava cooled, caves formed and created homes for unique cave life to thrive. These fantastic underground worlds can be visited on your own or by guided tour in the summer. Please **“take only pictures, leave only footprints”** so others have a chance to discover what you have during your trip.

Cave Softly

Please care for these fragile, amazing environments and cave life by following these rules during your visit:

- Stay on available trails
- Leave no trace of your visit behind—do not eat, drink, smoke, or leave trash
- Do not use caves as bathrooms, use a “wag bag” and pee bottle
- Formations made of lava, calcite, and ice can be permanently damaged—cave slowly and carefully and do not touch
- Do not touch hydrophobic bacterial mats—they are easily damaged and take decades to regrow
- Use electric flashlights, not carbide or gas lamps
- Do not touch paintings or cultural artifacts, as they are easily damaged
- Observe closures to protect bats, and do not disturb any cave life you see
- Pets are not permitted in caves

Cave Safely

Wear Appropriate Safety Gear - Prevent injury by wearing **long sleeves**, **pants** and **closed-toed shoes** or **boots**. **Gloves** and **kneepads** are recommended in difficult caves.

Protect Your Head - Use bicycle, construction, or other types of **helmets**. Bump hats are sold at the Visitor Center.

Bring Enough Light - Each person should carry at least one flashlight with extra batteries (and bulbs if available). **Three flashlights** per person are ideal. Flashlights are loaned free of charge during hours of operation at the Visitor Center.

Wear Warm Clothing - Most caves are about 55 °F (13 °C) year-round. Caves with ice are colder.

Know Yourself and Your Group - Choose caves suitable for everyone in your group. Don’t push beyond anyone’s limits. Children and seniors should be able to walk safely on their own. Caves are not appropriate places for infants.

Explore as a Group - Tell a friend or family member where you are going and when you expect to return. If you must go alone, choose easier caves and carry three flashlights.

Know Your Route - Be observant, and look back at junctions and landmarks to make mental notes. A book of **cave maps** can be purchased in the Visitor Center—learn to read map symbols before you go. Using a **compass** will help you use the maps.

Cave Name	LENGTH (feet)	You can walk completely upright on main path	Cave has stairs /steps	Cave has a *relatively* “smooth” path	Most people must duck in some places	Most people must duck-walk in some places	Most people must crawl in some places if you go through the whole cave	You must hike out to cave	Distance from visitor center
●LEAST CHALLENGING CAVES									
Mushpot	770 ft		Y	Y paved	Y				524 foot walk
Sentinel	3280 ft	Y	Y	Y					Cave Loop
Valentine	1635 ft		Y		Y	Y	Y		1.6 mile drive
Skull	580 ft	Y	Y	Y		Y			2.4 mile drive
Merrill	650 ft		Y	Y	Y				2.8 mile drive
Heppe	170 ft	Y		Y				~0.4 mi.	2.8 mile drive
Big Painted	266 ft	Y	Y	Y				~0.5 mi.	2.3 mile drive
Symbol Bridge	148 ft	Y	Y	Y				~0.7 mi.	2.3 mile drive
⊗Ovis	216 ft	Y	Y	Y					Cave Loop
⊗Paradise Alley	1033 ft		Y	Y					Cave Loop
■MODERATELY CHALLENGING CAVES									
Golden Dome	2229 ft		Y		Y	Y	Y		Cave Loop
Sunhine	466 ft		Y		Y	Y			Cave Loop
Indian Well	300 ft	Y	Y	First 1/2			Y		1064 ft walk
Balcony & Boulevard	2903 ft 759 ft				Y	Y		~0.2 mi.	2.8 mile drive
⊗ Blue Grotto	1541 ft	Y	Y	Y					Cave Loop
◆MOST CHALLENGING CAVES									
Labyrinth & Lava Brook	1239 ft 859 ft		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		250 & 435 foot walk
Hopkins Chocolate	1405 ft		Y		Y	Y	Y		Cave Loop
Hercules Leg & Juniper	1948 ft 2362 ft					Y	Y		Cave Loop
Catacombs	6903 ft		Y		Y	Y	Y		Cave Loop
Thunderbolt (connects to Labyrinth and Lava Brook)	2561 ft		Y	Y	Y	Y			Cave Loop