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How Much of the Cave is Unexplored?

A challenging, but common, question asked by visitors at Carlsbad Caverns National Park. Yet the question comes from an innate desire to understand the unfamiliar and a wish to know more about these vast underground wonders. Exploration in every cave in the park is an ongoing legacy with a deeper history than many may realize. These awe-inspiring caves invite people, past and present, to satisfy their curiosity and discover the unknown.



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Who Discovered the Cavern?

The simple answer is we don't know. We do know that for 10,000 years, American Indian tribes have called the Guadalupe Mountains home, and they knew about the caves. Carlsbad Cavern has pictographs near the entrance, mescal roasting pits, and artifacts found nearby. In addition, burned reed torches, potsherds, and fire pits found in Slaughter Canyon Cave show a long history of human curiosity about these underground worlds. These caves have a special significance to many tribes today because they are seen as sacred.

Humans have been exploring caves for the same reasons for thousands of years. Who was the first person to gaze in wonderment at the marvels in the darkness? We may never know for sure.

A Whale of a Cave

Jim White, who described the cave with the words above, extensively explored this cavern, likely entering for the first time between 1898 and 1901. Some stories claim he entered alone; others say he explored with a young Mexican boy whose name has been lost to history. But because of Jim's promotional efforts, word of the vast underground realm quickly spread.



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Robert Holley, a government official, was sent to explore and map the cavern in 1923. He was so impressed by the magnificence of Carlsbad Cavern that he recommended national monument status in his official report. Six months later, President Calvin Coolidge created Carlsbad Cave National Monument on October 25, 1923.



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Scientific Interest and Curiosity

The desire to extensively map and study the cavern resulted in a six-month expedition funded by National Geographic and led by Willis Lee beginning in 1924. Willis had a team of trailbuilders, a surveyor, a biologist, and his two children, among others. His 21-year old daughter, Elizabeth, initially served as the team's secretary. However, within a few days she became a full-fledged member of the exploration party. She helped with bat research, advised her father on photography composition, and explored extensively. In addition, Elizabeth was likely the first woman to enter Lower Cave.



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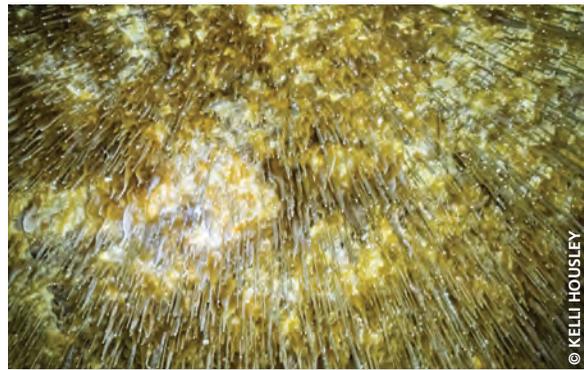
More Cave Chambers

In January of 1930, park superintendent Thomas Boles and others ventured into Left Hand Tunnel, a passageway just beyond the present-day Underground Lunchroom. They continued through the tunnel, finding a huge pool of water in a new room they named Lake of the Clouds. At 1,036 feet (315 m) below the surface, this remains the deepest known area of Carlsbad Cavern.



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Later that year, popular journalist Frank Nicholson increased public interest and excitement for the cavern through fanciful tales of adventure and daring. In fact, on May 14, 1930, Congress voted to change the status of the national monument to Carlsbad Caverns National Park. This change was spurred by an on-going hope for preservation of other caves in the area.



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Off-Duty Discoveries

In 1966, three off-duty park guides began exploring a new passage before finding a tight pinch. Beyond this squeeze, they found the first major cave room discovered in about five years.

On subsequent expeditions, Hall of the White Giant was found—an area that visitors can see on a strenuous, wild caving tour. Teams continued exploring this passage until they stumbled on the Guadalupe Room—the second largest room in the cavern by volume. Collectively known as the Guadalupe Complex, explorations here are still ongoing today.



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Exploration and Imagination

Beginning in the 1970s, cave specialist Ron Kerbo decided to push as many potential unexplored areas as possible. But as the years went on, these virgin passages were harder to find. However, explorers became more creative.



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As Kerbo continued investigating, he recognized an opening in the ceiling of the Big Room. This “high hole” had even been noticed by Willis Lee in 1924. However, accessing it required imagination. One evening in 1985, helium balloons lifted paracord 250 feet (75 m) above the floor of the Big Room. After carefully securing the rope around a stalagmite, the first brave explorer attached his ascenders and climbed up to find a room now called Spirit World. This rope can still be seen in the Big Room today, near the Top of the Cross overlook.



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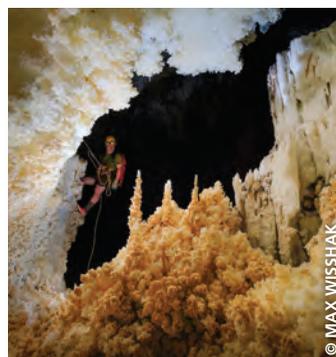


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If It Blows, It Goes

While Carlsbad Cavern had grown into a world-renowned show cave, the attention toward exploration and preservation expanded to other caves within park boundaries as well. After noticing particularly strong air currents near an entrance pit in 1984, cavers asked for permission to dig through the rubble. Two years later, they finally broke through into a walking passage in Lechuguilla Cave.

This cave officially surpassed 150 miles (240 km) in 2019—and thousands of unexplored areas still remain. It is currently the longest and deepest known cave in the park (and one of the top-10 longest caves in the world).



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Due to the technical challenges of access, highly delicate cave features and scientific research possibilities, the decision was made early on to restrict access.

Only scientists with a valid research permit or experienced cavers may enter with permission from the National Park Service.

You'd Fit!

Exploration continues in Carlsbad Cavern as well. An area above the New Mexico Room (the third-largest room in the cavern) was first climbed in 1992, which added two miles (3 km) to the known cave. Then in 2018, a seemingly impossible squeeze in the fourth-largest room (the Mystery Room) called for petite, skinny cavers to explore the lead and a team of women were selected. Collectively named the Twisted Sisters, they entered never-before-seen rooms and added names to the map of Carlsbad Cavern—such as Tomb of the Sky Bears, Ladies' Lament, and Wiggler's Relief. They also found and mapped the second-deepest known part of Carlsbad Cavern, Lake of Muddy Misery, which is only 13 feet (4 m) higher than Lake of the Clouds!

How many miles (or kilometers) still exist that have yet to experience the artificial light of a headlamp? Only future explorers may know the answer.



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And So It Continues

Exploration is still significant today in Carlsbad Cavern, Lechuguilla Cave, and the over-120 known caves within the park. Those who explore aim to expand their knowledge of this magnificent place and seek to protect and respect the delicate environment of each new space and cave.



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Just as tribes today still see Carlsbad Cavern as sacred, hopefully every visitor, explorer, and researcher feels a sense of reverence as they explore their curiosity and increase their understanding of the mysteries of Carlsbad Caverns National Park.



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For More Information



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