



CAVING



Desert caves largely remain an unknown mystery to most visitors. Except for those caves that have been artificially adapted for public tours, it takes a lot more than a daring sense of adventure to successfully navigate these underground chasms. Caving is a highly technical sport and is not to be undertaken by anyone without the proper skills, training, and support. Most public land managers and park rangers won't even reveal the locations of caves for fear that someone will rashly set upon an exploration that ends in the loss of a life.

While some caves are very small and their exploration involves plenty of crawling, other caves are 1,000 feet long with rooms as big as 80 by 20 feet, and multiple levels. If caving appeals to you, you can join a local grotto (club) and begin the instruction that will ultimately prepare you to explore the more difficult caves. Some of the following caves and underground features in Mojave Desert Preserve and Death Valley National Park can provide a great introduction to caving, as their exploration requires minimal preparation.

Mitchell Caverns are part of a Natural Preserve in the Providence Mountains State Recreation Area. The caverns were originally discovered and developed by a desert resident named Jack Mitchell, and have been equipped with paved

walkways, handrails, and electric lights. Like all caves, they are at a constant and cool temperature. The Caverns are situated at an elevation of 4,300 feet, and provide a stunning view of Wild Horse Mesa and Fenner Valley to the east.

Not far from Mitchell Caverns are two different examples of formations called lava tubes. Near Cima, in the Mojave National Preserve, are lava domes that have open caverns beneath them with access by ladder. BLM lands farther west include the Pisgah Crater-lava tubes. The Arroyo Tapiado Mud Caves are a spectacular geological formation in the Anza Borrego Desert State Park. Navigating through these caves generally requires a greater level of fitness, some specialized equipment, and the knowledge of an experienced guide.

Responsible caving requires the principles of Leave No Trace applied in an even more conscientious manner. It's impossible to enter a cave without leaving some sort of an impact that can never be repaired. A cave is a fragile and sensitive environment that demands an acute awareness of conservation.

Books and Online Resources for Caving can be found at http://www.npca.org/desert_recreation/caving.pdf and on page 46 of this report.



ABOVE

Jaime Lintemoot rappels into a Mojave Desert cave

PHOTO BY ALLEN HAGER

RIGHT

A family approaches the entrance to Mitchell Caverns

PHOTO BY D. A. DEMEO



LEFT

Two cavers explore an underground chamber

PHOTO BY JOHN CHARLES WOODS

BELOW

John Woods crosses a deep crevice in a Mojave Desert cave

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN CHARLES WOODS

[HTTP://WWW.NPCA.ORG / DESERT_RECREATION / CAVING.PDF](http://www.npca.org/desert_recreation/caving.pdf)

PERSONAL PROFILE

John Woods

MEMBER OF NATIONAL SPELEOLOGICAL SOCIETY, SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA GROTTO AND PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHER

John knows caving. As a member of the Southern California Grotto since 1966, his personal advice to new cavers is, “We would rather train you than rescue you.” John points out that the difference between a true caver and the occasional spelunker is training. Even with his expertise, Woods never caves alone. Cavers work together, rely on each other, and take special precautions that inexperienced people might not even consider.

When John was 12 years old, he read a book on caves that mentioned Carlsbad Caverns. Once he convinced his parents to take him, he instantly fell in love with the silence of the cave, its antiquity, and the cathedral-like magnificence of the place. Shortly thereafter he went to Mitchell Caverns, where a California state ranger told him about the Southern California Grotto — he’s been caving ever since. John still visits Carlsbad every year.

Though caving is a physically demanding and rather uncomfortable sport, it’s always exciting. Cavers see themselves as contemporary counterparts to the explorers Lewis and Clark. “We want to see where it goes, and go somewhere no one has been, we want to know why and where. I’ve been to places that no one has ever been before. That’s the big draw for caving.”

Caving is a recreational pursuit that demands a continuous awareness of resource protection. If cavers aren’t careful to respect the conditions in these limited passages, which often contain only a single route, they could cause irreversible damage to the rock resources or flora and fauna. Many caves are closed during certain times of the year due to bat breeding activity. John has helped the NPS by gating off certain areas and restoring caves that have been negatively impacted. Fortunately, his efforts are bringing insects and bats back to those caves.

There is one club motto that sums up the group’s dedication to responsible recreation, “Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints. Kill nothing but time.”



CAVING BOOKS AND ONLINE RESOURCES

SUGGESTED BOOK:

Adventure of Caving, David R. McClurg, National Speleological Society, 1996

WEB SITES:

Southern California Grotto (<http://www.mindspring.com/~bszukalski/socalgrotto/socalgrotto.html>)

National Speleological Society (<http://www.caves.org>)

