

## Carlsbad Caverns: Beauty and Wonder in Depths Below

Hidden treasures lie within the heart of the Guadalupe Mountains in New Mexico, a glorious sight that must be seen to be believed. Carlsbad Caverns is not a mere cave or nice sidetrip to pass by: it is a destination that is sure to bring out the spelunker in each of us and change whatever expectations we previously had about caves. With the third largest cave in North America, Carlsbad is a magical adventure worth seeking.

When you first arrive at the entrance of the cave, you might grow a little skeptical. The city of Carlsbad is literally in the middle of nowhere in a state that is also in the middle of nowhere (sorry New Mexico). Don't let this fool you. As you come around the side of a little mound and head towards the mouth of the cave, that's when you'll see it: a gaping cavern glistening with limestone stalagmites and stalactites. The Natural Entrance Trail is composed of 1-1/4 miles of steep switchbacks that slowly lower you into the mouth of the cave. While there is an elevator that can be taken to the bottom of the cave, the trail is by far the better way to go down so you can enjoy the breathtaking beauty all the way down. As a recent visitor, I couldn't believe that such a place could exist. As you walk down into the depths of the cave, millions of spotlights shine around the room allowing each visitor to easily see each facet and shadow of the formations. Every inch of the cave is sheathed in limestone structures with little pools of water around each corner. If you hold your breath and listen very carefully, you'll hear a faint dripping sound of water from above. The cave is not finished with its formation; it's alive and forever changing.

The cave is composed of more than twenty different rooms, each named to represent the formations found there. Some of the highlights include the Spirit World whose stalagmites appear like angels dancing around the ceiling, the Lake of the Clouds where cloud-like rocks formed when the cave was under water, and the Chocolate High that stands over a mud-filled pit and weaves around a maze of small passages. By far the most impressive room is the Big Room. Aptly named,

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 1:57 PM

Deleted: s

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 1:57 PM

Deleted: 3<sup>rd</sup>

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 1:59 PM

**Comment [1]:** These two sentences don't seem to go together. Maybe just switch the sentences.

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 1:59 PM

Deleted: . A

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:01 PM

**Comment [2]:** This is a beautiful image.

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:01 PM

Deleted: 20

this room is the largest in the cavern and could fit 6.2 football fields in its wide expanse. Within the various rooms stand the cave's more prominent formations which have been named for their memorable shapes, each identified by a plaque: Witch's Finger, Fairyland, Rock of Ages, Temple of the Sun, and Bottomless Pit. The trail through the Big Room is about 1-<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> miles long, although various shortcuts can be taken if time necessitates or if your 2-year-old nephew simply can't make it through the cave without screaming the entire way. It happens.

As I walked through the cave, my jaw sore from gaping open in awe, I tried to imagine how such an extraordinary sight came to exist in a place like Carlsbad, New Mexico. More than 250 million years ago, the entire area was covered by an inland sea complete with horseshoe reefs and sea sponges. The sea eventually evaporated, leaving the reef buried beneath layers upon layers of salt and gypsum rocks. In fact, remnants of the sea and its ancient creatures can still be found in Carlsbad today, fossilized memories of its previous life. Over time, trickling rainwater, when combined with the carbon dioxide, began to eat away at the limestone, creating the magnificent Carlsbad Caverns formations, called speleothems. Stalagmites and stalactites formed, some of them joining together to form majestic columns like the White Giant. Other whimsical structures decorate the walls, like the popcorn formations which blossom as a result of water evaporation and calcium deposits. Most unusual of all are the helictites which seem to defy gravity itself as their twisted shapes start at the ground and continue their contortions as they reach towards the ceiling above.

The caverns weren't explored until 1898 when a New Mexican cowboy Jim White noticed what appeared to be a tornado of some sort coming out of the ground. Upon closer examination, he realized that it wasn't a tornado of any kind; it was a whirlwind of bats spiraling up to the sky. He was mesmerized, later commenting that "any hole in the ground which could house such a gigantic army of bats must be a whale of a big cave." He constructed a wire ladder and with a gas lantern in one hand, he descended into the depths of the cave. He spent hours exploring the caves, feeling as if

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:02 PM

Deleted: 1/4

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:03 PM

Comment [3]: Hahaha. I have nieces this age.  
HOLY COW THE SCREAMING.

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:03 PM

Deleted: first

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:04 PM

Deleted: spiralong

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:04 PM

Deleted: mesmerized

he was entering the very core of the Guadalupe Mountains. As a 16-year-old boy, White hadn't seen much of anything outside of his birthplace in Texas or his family's ranch in Carlsbad: "It was the first cave I was ever in, and the first stalagmites I had ever seen, but instinctively I knew, for some intuitive reason, that there was no other scene in the world which could be justly compared with my surroundings." It took White about a decade to convince the surrounding town that the caverns existed, finally shooting photographs of his discovery that immediately sparked their interest. The first tours were conducted in the early 1920s as White lowered eager tourists into the cave using guano buckets—buckets used to collect bat waste that was sold as fertilizer—in what was sure to be a fragrant experience. President Coolidge named Carlsbad Caverns as an official monument in 1923 and President Carter established it as a National Park in 1978.

Today, over 400,000 visitors explore Carlsbad Caverns each year with a grand total of over 40 million visitors since its opening in 1923. The park is open every day, except for Christmas, from 8:30 AM to 5 PM, but the natural trail closes at 2 PM during the winter and at 3:30 PM during the summer. Temperatures average around 50 degrees [Fahrenheit](#) and a light jacket and a bottle of water is encouraged [for all visitors to bring](#). Both guided tours and audio tours are available upon reservation. The visitor center shows a film that emphasizes the importance of the cave to scientists today, as well as showing magnificent photographs taken by the talented [Ansel Adams](#). If you are able to visit the park from April to May or late October to early November, you'll be lucky enough to see the bat flight that begins around sunrise. As you sit in an [amphitheater](#) listening to a park ranger talk about the Mexican Free-tailed Bats, you will be able to see the same tornado of bats that Jim White first [witnessed](#), as roughly 700,000 bats corkscrew counterclockwise upwards in the sky, leaving their habitat in the caves to feed on insects at night. The entire display can take anywhere from [twenty](#) minutes to [three](#) hours.

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:05 PM

**Deleted:** Fahrenheit

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:05 PM

**Deleted:** to

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:06 PM

**Comment [4]:** I love Ansel Adams!

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:06 PM

**Deleted:** ampitheater

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:07 PM

**Deleted:** witnesseed

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:07 PM

**Deleted:** 20

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:07 PM

**Deleted:** 3

Carlsbad Caverns gives us so much more than a spectacular sight of rock formations; it instills a feeling of wonder that most of lose in our lives. Regardless of other experiences or trips, Carlsbad Cavern uniquely inspires its visitors to rethink the world we live in and what beauties we thought the world contained before. Are you ready for the adventure?

HBLL CIRC 4/2/13 2:08 PM

Deleted: re