



Backcountry Caves

Caving Opportunities

Carlsbad Caverns National Park offers permits to a variety of backcountry caves for members of the public. These caves are difficult to locate and enter, requiring technical caving skills, experience in reading topographic maps, and extended hiking in rough and potentially hazardous terrain. Please make sure you have this type of knowledge before visiting caves in the park’s backcountry.

Any entry into a wild cave may result in irreparable damage to it. All park caves are monitored for impacts. Support our wild caving program by caving in a safe manner and following the guidelines in the permit.

Caving softly allows for the park’s beautiful backcountry caves to be enjoyed by visitors from around the world for generations of cavers to come.

Cave Permits

A permit is *required* to enter any backcountry cave. To schedule a trip, contact the park at least one month in advance. Permits are issued on a first-come, first-serve 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. Cave permits do not require a fee.

Trip leaders must be at least 18 years or age. Visitors to vertical caves must be at least 16 years of age. Visitors to horizontal caves must

be at least 12 years of age. Visitors under the age of 18 must have special written permission signed from their guardian before entering any permitted cave. This must be received by the Cave Resources Office in advance.

Cave Resources Office
Carlsbad Caverns National Park
3225 National Parks Highway
Carlsbad, NM 88220
575-236-1441
cave_bc_permits@nps.gov

Safety and Conservation

- A UIAA approved helmet is required to be worn at all times inside the cave.
- Each person must have three independent sources of light. At least one light must be helmet mounted. Carbide lamps are prohibited inside the caves.
- All trip members must wear sturdy shoes with ankle support and non-marking soles.
- Trip members must provide and wear their own gloves and kneepads. Elbows pads are optional for use.
- Three people is the minimum group size for all permit caves.
- Leave an itinerary with someone at the surface and provide an exit time. The surface watch is responsible for initiating help if your group is not out on time.
- For vertical caves, each person must have their own vertical caving equipment and be experienced in its use.
- Most caves are between one and four miles from the nearest road. Make sure to carry plenty of water.
- Overnight camping is permitted only in the backcountry and requires a separate free permit. This can be obtained at the visitor center information desk.
- Stay on routes marked with flagging tape to reduce human impact.
- Keep an eye out for insects and invertebrates that live in caves. Leave them be and avoid shining lights at them.
- If you encounter bats, do not photograph or shine lights on them. Leave the area to minimize human disturbance.
- To protect bats, all clothing, footwear, and equipment must be clean and not previously used underground in an area affected with White-Nose Syndrome. Decontaminate all gear between cave trips. Visit whitenosesyndrome.org for more information.

Vertical Caves



Christmas Tree Cave

Entrance Elevation: 4,892 feet (1,491 m)
Distance from Trailhead: 2 miles (3.2 km)
Hiking Time: 1.5 hours
Group Size: 3-6
Rope Required: 50 foot (15 m) rope

The entrance of Christmas Tree Cave consists of a 15 foot (4.6 m) vertical drop. The entrance chamber is covered with breakdown and gradually slopes to the first level of the cave. The rooms are silt covered and well decorated.

Helen’s Cave

Entrance Elevation: 4,580 feet (1,396 m)
Distance from Trailhead: 1 mile (1.6 km)
Hiking Time: 1 hour
Group Size: 3-6
Rope Required: 100 feet (30 m) rope, rope pads

The entrance drop is 30 feet (9 m), the long rope is needed due to scarcity of anchor points. The main chamber lies beyond a three foot (0.9 m) tight constriction. The right hand portion ends in a crawl. Many fragile formations hang from the ceiling.

Deep Cave

Access road closed during high fire season

Entrance Elevation: 5,946 feet (1,812 m)
Distance from Trailhead: 1.5 miles (2.41 km)
Hiking Time: 45 minutes
Group Size: 3-6
Rope Required: 350 foot (107 m) rope
150 foot (46 m) handline

This cave requires a high clearance 4WD vehicle to reach the trailhead. Access to road is through the Lincoln National Forest. The entrance passage slopes at a 45° angle. The vertical free hang is 80 feet (24 m). Except for one pool, the cave is dry and decorated with shields, dog-tooth spar, and helictites.

Chimney Cave

Entrance Elevation: 4,328 feet (1,319 m)
Distance from Trailhead: 0.5 miles (0.8 km)
Hiking Time: 30 minutes
Group Size: 3-6
Rope Required: 120 foot (37 m) rope
15 foot (5 m) handline

The entrance to this cave is through a tight squeeze, followed by an awkward handline. The main chamber is located after a 45 foot (14 m) vertical drop. This chamber contains large formations including a beautiful bell canopy.

Wen Cave

Entrance Elevation: 4,747 feet (1,449 m)
Distance from Trailhead: 0.5 miles (0.8 km)
Hiking Time: 30 minutes
Group Size: 3-6
Rope Required: 120 foot (37 m) rope

Wen Cave’s entrance drop is 55 feet (17 m) with an optional rebelay. It is recommended for experienced vertical cavers. The cave’s main chamber is decorated with very fragile formations.

Horizontal Caves



Corkscrew Cave

Entrance Elevation: 4,803 (1,464 m)
Distance from Trailhead: 0.5 miles (0.8 km)
Hiking Time: 1 hour
Group Size: 3-4
Rope Required: 100 foot handline

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

Lake Cave

Closed April 1–October 31

Entrance Elevation: 5,340 feet (1,628 m)
Distance from Trailhead: 3.5 miles (5.6 km)
Hiking Time: 3 hours
Group Size: 3-6
Rope Required: 50 foot (15 m) handline

Groups should be hikers in good condition. The hike to the cave gains 1,133 feet (345 m) in elevation. After a small entrance, the cave opens up into a large chamber, ending in the Lake Room. A handline leads down the slick guano covered slope towards the lake.

Goat Cave

Closed April 1–October 31

Entrance Elevation: 4,614 feet (1,406 m)
Distance from Trailhead: 2.25 miles (3.6 km)
Hiking Time: 1.5 hours
Group Size: 3-10
Gear Required: Dust mask

This is a good cave for beginning cavers. Cave swallows nest at the entrance, a dust mask protects from histoplasmosis. The cave consists mostly of one long corridor 1,130 feet (344 m) long. This cave contains historic signatures from the early 1900’s. Please do not add to them.