

Going Deep

By Pamela Gerhardt
Special to The Washington Post
Sunday, July 5, 1998; Page E01

Two hours or so into my Lower Cave tour at Carlsbad Caverns, the tour guide paused in the dark 840 feet beneath the border of Texas and New Mexico and beamed her headlamp on an artifact she wanted us to see.

I had read about this in a brochure. I leaned toward the light, squinted once, then opened my eyes wide. There, in the colorless earth, I saw it: a crumpled pack of Chesterfield cigarettes.

"It dates to the 1940s," Viv said importantly.

In the world of cave tours, guides do not have much to show to the layperson, precisely because there is not much to see. The guides rattle off formations: Cave Pearls. Stalagmites (with a "g," for ground). Stalactites (with a "c," for ceiling). Draperies. Columns. Flowstone. Soda Straw.

You find yourself saying, "Oh," and nodding your head. After a while, it all starts to look the same: muddy, gray. Earlier that morning, I had toured a more popular part of the cavern called, appropriately, Big Room. As its name implies, the room is a 14-acre chamber, 750 feet underground, 90 feet above Lower Cave. There, the formations had looked as inviting as cotton candy: clusters of spirals glistening under artificial pink and blue lights. Small signs gave the areas names that further cater to our imaginations: Chinese Theater, Fairy Land, Top of the Cross. At one point I stood above a black hole. The sign next to it said "Lower Cave," and I knew I wanted to go down there, at least briefly, in search of some kind of authentic experience. I already understood what tricks colored lights could perform; what would I find when left with only myself?

As it turns out, what is most remarkable about descending 1 1/2 times the length of the Washington Monument on ropes and ladders into the earth is the nothingness, at least initially, that you find there. No bats. No bugs. No algae. No paramecium. No bacteria. Nothing. Life needs light.

If you think about this too long while you are below, your heart will thump a little too fast.

Perhaps there is nowhere in this world--or universe--so devoid of so much.

Off-trail tours at Carlsbad Caverns require reservations, gloves, batteries and a hard hat with a light on it (you can buy the batteries and gloves on the way in Whites City or Carlsbad or El Paso; the park provides the hat). We landed in the El Paso

airport in the morning, rented a car, drove 166 miles to Carlsbad, made a reservation for the Lower Cave, then toured the Big Room while we waited.

In cave parlance there is something called the "Twilight Zone," which occurs when the last rays of natural light form an aura around you like a final hug before you make the descent into darkness. Carlsbad, I am told, provides some of the best Twilight Zone ever. To see it, when you first arrive you must walk into the cave through the natural cave entrance rather than take the elevators down. The narrow switchback trail descends 750 feet in one mile, and visitors walking down single file seem to fade like spirits in an opium-induced William Blake painting.

More than 500,000 bats sleep near the cave entrance waiting for dusk, when they fly out to catch insects. In the 1930s, 8 million bats lived there, and the caverns were discovered by people who mined guano--200,000 tons a day--and sold it as fertilizer to California fruit farmers.

Although the Natural Cave Entrance Trail is paved, you find yourself forgetting about the surface world as you breathe in the sweetness of the bats and process the way sound, for example, bends differently in a cave until you suddenly come to the end, Big Room, where you find exit signs and neon lights and hot dogs and Carlsbad mugs and Dr Pepper. The off-trail tours require that you meet back up at the top. You can take the elevator.

Carlsbad offers several off-trail tours. I chose the moderate-level one that did not require a lot of crawling in small spaces. I thought the dark itself would be enough.

We gathered at the elevators, two high-school girls, myself, my husband and three men traveling alone. I expected jovial laughter, nervous jokes, some sense of camaraderie. Instead we dutifully popped the batteries into the helmets and stared at our boots. Our tour guides, Viv and Danny, bickered quietly about some information concerning another park. Viv was a retired schoolteacher with a smart haircut and obvious seniority over Danny, a young man with a soft Mexican accent.

To get into Lower Cave, we took the elevator back down to Big Room, then shimmied down a slick surface backward, holding a rope fist over fist. Next, we squeezed backward through tight spaces called keyholes. Lying on my stomach, I wriggled the top half of my body in one "room" while I felt blindly with my feet in another until they landed on the firm iron of a permanent ladder rung. I found it was easier, somehow, to close my eyes, to stop straining to see and rely simply on my sense of touch and distance.

Things seemed tighter than I had expected, and my heart surprised me by pounding in my chest until we squeezed through one more keyhole and came into the open cave, at least 60 feet high in most places.

An odd intimacy develops among strangers in the dark. I could not always see the other people but I could smell them. The guy directly in front of me might have been camping in nearby Guadalupe National Park; he smelled of burning wood and underarm sweat. For three hours, I stared at the back of his head as we walked in single file, the bulbs of our helmets casting thin beams of gray light.

Nobody talked much, as if the sound of human voices that far under would jar something loose. In cave etiquette, you are allowed to take photos, but you must first yell, "Flash!" to warn the others of the literally blinding light. The high-school girls bravely broke up the silence at frequent intervals, pausing under archways, near pockets of cave pearls, smiling confidently for their friends back home.

Time is hard to tell down there. We walked, and Viv and Danny paused at points of interest: rope and wood ladders used by early explorers; a bat that strayed far from the nest and died and now lies permanently in a stalagmite; the mid-century cigarette pack. And after we had been walking for some time, we followed Viv into a hallway of sorts that grew thinner and thinner until we were suddenly crouched in a low-ceilinged room. Viv told us to sit.

She called for lights out. We switched off our headlamps and sat there, seven strangers and two guides, in absolute blackness. I could hear Viv's voice a few feet away on my right as she began to tell some sort of story about early explorers who had died or had seen a ghost or something. I did not listen.

Instead, I very foolishly began to visualize the weight above me, the 840 feet of dirt and rock and clay. I could feel the pressure in my chest, somehow. Suddenly, I was no longer in a small room, but in a hole one-sixth of a mile below the surface of the earth. Panic set in. I wanted to stand up and scream.

I realized, suddenly, that Viv had stopped talking.

Nobody spoke.

What was happening? I could hear someone breathing next to me, but he seemed far away, on the opposite side of the room. Had everyone moved without my knowing it?

"Hello?" Viv suddenly asked.

No answer.

"Danny?" she said. "Still with us?"

I heard rustling where Danny had been sitting the last time I had seen him. Apparently, he had missed his cue as counterpart in the ghost story. I do not think any of us noticed.

"Sorry," he said to the dark.

We sat there for a long time. Too long, waiting for someone to cough or clear a throat and say, "Enough already. We ain't scared. Let's move." Above, in the world of light, a restless gesture might have done the trick.

After some time--10 seconds? 30 minutes?--I lifted my arm, and I felt very strongly that I could see the heat of my hand as I waved it in front of my face.

Of course, the human eye cannot see infrared. There was nothing there but my imagination, as big and vivid as a Macy's parade balloon, taking up space, filling in the gaps.

Carlsbad Caverns National Park (3225 National Park Hwy., Carlsbad, N.M. 88220, 505-785-2232, <http://www.nps.gov/cave>) is in southeastern New Mexico, about 165 miles from El Paso, Tex., and 275 miles from Albuquerque. American offers connecting service to El Paso from Washington and is currently quoting a round-trip fare of \$362, with restrictions.

It's best to visit in the spring and fall, when temperatures range from a high of 80 to a low of around 45. Summer temperatures soar well into the hundreds, but drop considerably at night to around 50. There is no lodging in the park, but back-country camping is available. In addition, there are three campgrounds and eight hotels in the town of Carlsbad (a few miles north of the park entrance); Whites City, just outside of the park entrance, has nine hotels and one campground. Information: Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 910, Dept. B, Carlsbad, N.M. 88221, 505-887-6516.

Pamela Gerhardt last wrote for Travel on family vacations.