

Carlsbad Caverns: Off the Beaten Path in New Mexico

by Jane Price, PassPorter Guest Contributor

One of my favorite '50's "monster" movies is Journey to the Center of the Earth, starring James Mason (aka Capt Nemo of Disney's 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea). Since a good part of the under the earth segment was filmed in Carlsbad Caverns, I was attracted to this national park, plus I love caves in general and have visited several of note.

Carlsbad Caverns, like [Lake Powell](#), is another place you really have to want to go, as it too is off the beaten path. The most scenic way to get there is go northeast from El Paso, Texas, passing through the panoramic Guadalupe Mountains National Park. While it may be sweltering in El Paso, be sure to bring your sweatshirt or jacket when you stop in the Guadalupe (and for the cave, too). The small detour to the visitor's center is worth it, as the view is incredible. It breaks up the long, mostly boring drive to the caverns, as well.

The turn off from US Routes 180/62 to the entrance to the caverns is a narrow, winding road going ever upward. The town at the turn off entrance is White's City, whereas the town of Carlsbad is about 20 miles north. White's City has a few hotels, a gas station, a campground, and tourist trap/souvenir store. For more selection of hotels/restaurants, Carlsbad is a better bet.

When you reach the Visitor's Center at last at the top of the winding road, you are treated to another spectacular vista of eastern New Mexico. Take some time to enjoy it before heading into the Visitor's Center.

There are two main tours offered at the center: the short (or "Big Room" tour) or the longer "Natural Entrance/Big Room" tour. Other, more strenuous tours are offered by reservation only and book up fast. If you plan to take the longer tour, which I highly recommend, be sure to arrive before 3:00 pm, as you will not have time to complete it before the cave closes. If you drove all this way, I think the long tour is in order to get the most out of the cave. Just be sure to wear good rubber-soled shoes and be in decent physical shape.

You need to purchase tickets inside the visitor center, and you will be given a time to start your tour. The tour is really self-guided, but to start, a park ranger takes you to the natural entrance and gives you a short orientation about the history of the cave and the rules for touring.

The entrance to this cave is really impressive. The human history goes back approximately 1000 years due to this large entrance. For a while you walk down, down, down with not a whole lot to see but rocks. You quickly lose the natural light and now depend on the low lights provided by the park service (you may bring along your own flashlight). Slowly you come upon some cave "decoration" as you continue ever downward.

Some sights along this way are Devil's Spring, Devil's Den, Witch's Finger, and Iceberg Rock. The most intriguing, to me, is the Boneyard, which I instantly recognized as having been featured in Journey to the Center of the Earth. The formations look like highly magnified pieces of bone structure, or Swiss cheese. After about one to one-and-one-half hours of walking down hill, you reach the underground rest area/lunch room. This is a good spot to take a break, use the underground restrooms, and eat/drink a little something.

This marks the spot of the beginning of the shorter Big Room tour. You descend on an elevator to here if you chose it over the longer tour. From here the walk is mostly level with wide walkways. The "Big Room" says it all, covering over 57 acres, with the tallest ceiling height of 255 feet. The features here are too numerous to mention, all spectacular to behold. To do this part of the cave justice, allow another one to one-and-one-half hours to tour. To return to the Visitor's Center, all must take the convenient elevators next to the rest area.

There is more than just what you see in the Big Room. Over the years, spelunkers have discovered other caverns tucked away in the top of the ceiling. In fact, the whole Guadalupe/Carlsbad area is rich in caves, with over 100 discovered since 1930. Included in these discoveries is Lechuguilla Cave, which extends over 112 miles and is, unfortunately, not open to the public.

Carlsbad Caverns is also home to hundreds of thousands of bats. The main resident is the Mexican Free-Tailed Bat, an insect eating machine. In summertime evenings, the park rangers have a bat flight program. A stone bench amphitheater is next to the natural entrance. Visitors are seated here near dusk and a ranger gives a short talk about the bats before the main show, thousands of bats swirling up out of the cave on their way to feast on insects and pollinate the desert. I attended this when my kids were young. It was a unique, moving experience and for years my son had a poster of this event hanging on his bedroom wall. Don't worry, the bats completely ignore the human gawkers!

For more information on the Carlsbad Caverns, check out <http://www.carlsbadcaverns.com>

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About The Author: Jane lives in southeast Arizona with her husband, three granddaughters, and the family parrots. She is an Annual Passholder for Disneyland as well as a Disney Vacation Club member.

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