

Lava Beds

National Monument

National Park Service

Lava Beds Caves

The volcanic turmoil which produced the raw materials for the surface landforms which you see in Lava Beds National Monument also left a vast array of lava tubes below ground. Over 400 caves have been discovered and the number grows each year. A few lava tubes display evidence of having "blown their tops" from accumulated gas pressure during their formation. In most cases the entrances which permit discovery and exploration are the result of collapse a short time after the tubes were formed. Other entrances were enlarged by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930's to make access easier for cave visitors.

Formation of lava tubes was the result of very hot fluid lava issuing from cracks or fissures on moderate slopes. As the lava flowed it began to cool and solidify on the sides eventually meeting in the middle. The confining crust insulated the molten lava as it continued to flow. When the eruption ceased, the remaining lava drained away, leaving lava tubes. The surfaces collapsed to permit entrance into the caves we know today.

REMEMBER!! Lava tube caves are irreplaceable treasures. Lava formations will not grow back once broken. Please do not break, deface, remove, or otherwise vandalize any caves or cave formations (lava, ice, etc.) in any way.

For your safety please exercise the following precautions:

- Carry a light for EACH person in your group
- Carry two EXTRA sources of light per person
- Go with a friend--DO NOT EXPLORE ALONE
- Protect your head from low ceilings
- Wear sturdy shoes or boots and watch for uneven footing
- Carry an extra sweater or light jacket
- Tell someone WHERE you are going and WHEN you expect to return
- Do not deviate from your planned itinerary
- Explore only the caves in the IMMEDIATE VICINITY of your vehicle

Many caves have been "developed" to facilitate public use. Such development may simply consist of a trail to the entrance and a stairway or ladder into the cave. In some cases a developed trail continues inside the cave with additional interior stairways and bridges. Crawling may be required to negotiate parts of several caves. Listed below are the "developed" caves of Lava Beds:

Mushpot Cave An extension of the Visitor Center, this cave has lights and signs which explain the various formations. Recommended as an introductory cave.

Indian Well Cave Easy access, high ceiling. Unusual ice formations in winter. An intermittent pool of water in the bottom of the cave accounts for its name.

Labyrinth and Lava Brook Caves These caves are connected by way of a segment requiring some crawling and twisting. Features include frothy pahoehoe, lava pillars, lava benches, and lavacicles. Length: 2,098 feet

Thunderbolt Cave Some crawling is required. Collapses have obliterated much of the common features found in other lava tubes.

Golden Dome Cave The portion of this cave downstream from the entrance ladder is the most easily accessible. The outstanding feature is the extensive yellowish deposits of bacteria which, when covered with water droplets, provide a beautiful golden luster in the light of a flashlight. Also watch for pulloffs, rafted blocks, and pahoehoe floors. Length: 2,229 feet

Hopkins Chocolate Cave Watch for E. L. Hopkins' name on the right hand side of the tube. He named it for the rich brown color of the lava coating the ceiling and walls. Other features include pillars, benches, and cascades. Length: 1,405 feet

Blue Grotto Cave The floor is rough, but it is a fairly easy and fun cave to explore. Watch for the pale powder-blue to blue-gray color of the ceiling inside "the Blue Grotto." Length: 1,541 feet

Catacombs Cave Easily entered but gradually increases in difficulty. There are many interconnected passageways which provide just enough uncertainty to cause the anxiety of suspecting you are lost without really being lost. This cave may be confusing, particularly to inexperienced cavers. EXTENSIVE crawling and squeezing required in lower sections. Length: 6,903 feet

Paradise Alleys Upstream continuations of the Catacombs tube system, separated into individual caves by a series of collapse trenches. Length: 1,033 feet

Ovis Cave When discovered in the 1890's, this large cave contained 36 bighorn skulls. "Ovis" is a Latin derivative for "sheep."

Sunshine Cave A small, but interesting cave with a rather unusual ceiling. Two collapses allow sunlight to enter where interesting "hanging gardens" can be observed. Watch for lava cascades. Length: 466 feet

Hercules Leg and Juniper Caves Rather "physical" caves, requiring some stooping and crawling on hands and knees. Watch for rafted blocks, as well as excellent formations on the walls and ceiling. Length: 4,310 feet

Sentinel Cave The trail through this cave is an easy walk and requires no stooping or ducking. There are, however, tubes leading away from the trail which require some physical exertion. Watch for a tube within the tube. Length: 3,280 feet

Valentine Cave This cave has a remarkable floor. You can easily see where the crust on the surface of the lava flow sagged as the liquid beneath it drained away. Other outstanding features include multiple benches, pools, cascades, falls, and unusual ceiling formations.

Skull Cave When E. L. Hopkins discovered this cave he found two human skeletons, bones of antelope and mountain goats, and bighorn skulls for which he named the cave. It is a remnant of two large lava tubes, one on top of the other. The entrance is the largest in the monument. The lower level has an ice floor year round.

Merrill Cave Similar to Skull Cave in structure (two tubes, one above the other), yet on a smaller scale. Ice year round in the lower level.

Balcony & Boulevard Caves From the parking lot, short trails lead to the caves. Watch for a natural bridge, balconies, and pillars in Balcony Cave, and a very smooth floor in Boulevard Cave.

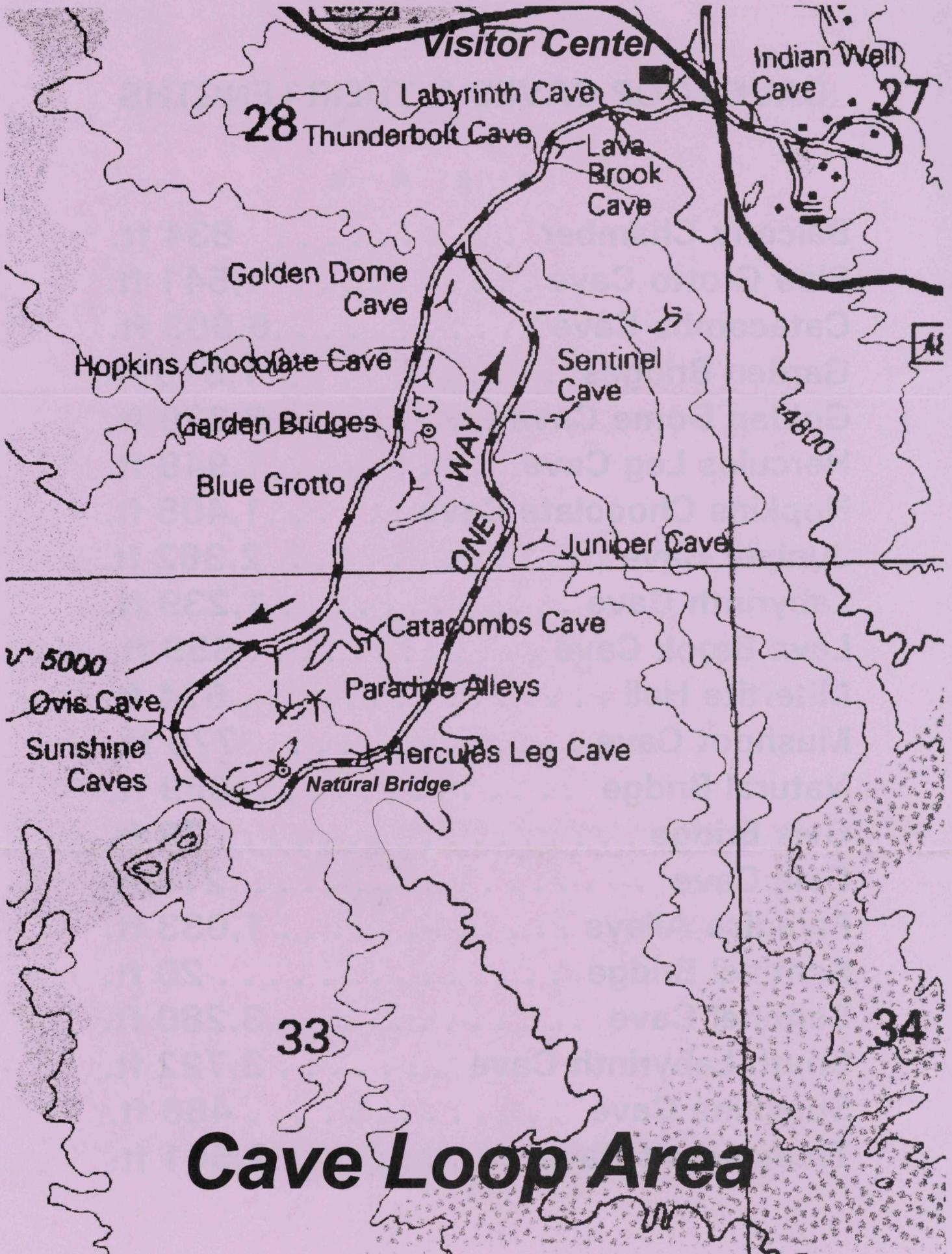
Big Painted Cave and Symbol Bridge Reached by a 3/4 mile foot trail. Lights recommended for Big Painted Cave, but not necessary to see the pictographs at Symbol Bridge.

There are more than three hundred "wilderness" caves which have not been "developed." Some are as easily explored as those on the Cave Loop behind the Visitor Center; some require the most advanced rock climbing skills. Registration at the Visitor Center is highly recommended. It provides you with important information, and us with your itinerary.

CAVE LOOP CAVES & THEIR LENGTHS

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Balcony Chamber	834 ft.
Blue Grotto Cave	1,541 ft.
Catacombs Cave	6,903 ft.
Garden Bridges	1,515 ft.
Golden Dome Cave	2,229 ft.
Hercules Leg Cave	1,948 ft.
Hopkins Chocolate Cave	1,405 ft.
Juniper Cave	2,362 ft.
Labyrinth Cave	1,239 ft.
Lava Brook Cave	859 ft.
Mitertite Hall	674 ft.
Mushpot Cave	770 ft.
Natural Bridge	659 ft.
Ovis Bridge	38 ft.
Ovis Cave	216 ft.
Paradise Alleys	1,033 ft.
Sentinel Bridge	20 ft.
Sentinel Cave	3,280 ft.
South Labyrinth Cave	3,722 ft.
Sunshine Cave	466 ft.
Thunderbolt Cave	2,561 ft.



Cave Loop Area