Lehman Caves

NATIONAL MONUMENT • NEVADA

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WE'RE JOINING THE METRIC WORLD

The National Park Service is introducing metric measurements in its publications to help Americans become acquainted with the metric system and to make interpretation more meaningful for park visitors from other nations.

ADMINISTRATION

Lehman Caves National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Baker, NV 89311, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

In the heart of a region of wide basins and high mountain ranges lies Lehman Caves National Monument. It is on the eastern flank of Wheeler Peak (3,982 meters—13,063 feet), one of the highest mountains in the Great Basin and the pinnacle of the impressive Snake Range, on the eastern edge of Nevada. Eastward, beyond the flats of Snake Valley, rise range after range of mountains, *fading into the hazy distance.*

The monument, containing 259 hectares (640 acres), is in the pinyon pine and juniper belt, at an average elevation of 2,133 meters (7,000 feet). On opposite sides of the monument are Baker and *Lehman Creeks. These perennial streams flow out* of the glaciated canyons to the north and south of Wheeler Peak, in Humboldt National Forest.

In the spring and early summer, many kinds of wildflowers bloom, including lupine, yellow aster, larkspur, locoweed, globemallow, columbine, pricklepoppy, and cactus. As the season advances, the blossoms appear higher up the sides of the mountains. In late summer, flowers bloom in profusion in the high country and along streams. In autumn, the mountain slopes are streaked with the blazing gold of aspen. For fully half the year the higher peaks are clothed in a glistening mantle of snow.

Mule deer can be seen feeding in the higher meadows or bounding away through the forests of pine, spruce, fir, and mountain-mahogany. Cougars are not unknown, and you may see an occasional coyote. Owls, bluebirds, dippers, and many other birds are found in the monument and along nearby streams.

HISTORY

Indians undoubtedly knew of the cave long before the first white settlers arrived. There is, however, less certainty as to how the bones of several Indians got into the cave.

Although the first written mention of the cave is found in an 1885 newspaper, it is possible that it was discovered somewhat earlier by homesteaders or miners. Absalom S. Lehman, who moved to the area in the late 1860's, was probably the first to realize the special interest of the cave. Taking time off from his ranching, he explored the cave and guided parties through its underground galleries from about 1885 until his death in 1891.

GEOLOGY

Wheeler Peak has been carved into its present shape by mountain glaciers at the heads of Baker and Lehman Creeks, and by rushing waters of these and other streams. This peak is the highest point on the vast arch of thick quartzite, originally a sandstone. On the east flank of the peak is limestone of Cambrian age. A granite intrusion at the contact of the quartzite and limestone had little effect on the former, but its heat did change some of the limestone to its metamorphic state, marble. It is in these rocks that the Lehman Caves have been formed.

Millions of years ago, when the Snake Range was higher and rugged and the climate was much more humid, the first stage in the formation of the caves began. Water, charged with carbon dioxide, filled the cracks and joint planes in the marble, widening and enlarging them as the process of solution continued. The more soluble rock was dissolved, leaving large, vaulted rooms, and fault and joint planes were widened into connecting passageways until they eventually formed a labyrinth of straight corridors and smaller winding tunnels connecting larger chambers.

As the climate became less humid and the water table gradually lowered below the cave floor, the process of cave decoration began. The calcite-laden water, seeping down through the overlying rock, gathered as drops or spread out in thin films on the ceilings and sides of the caverns, and deposited some of its load as dripstone. As a result, myriads of stalactites developed from the ceilings, and kept growing longer and thicker. Water dripping from stalactites built up stubby stalagmites. In places, thin films of calcium-laden water flowing down the walls built graceful draperies and transparent ribbonlike "bacon strips" of calcium carbonate.

Thin, round disks of calcite form the uncommon cave formations called shields or pallettes, which are abundant throughout Lehman Caves. Usually occurring in angular positions on the walls and floors, these formations remain a geological puzzle.

Pools of water on the floors have built beautifully terraced miniature dams around their edges and web-like ridges of rock throughout the pools themselves. Huge, fluted columns reach from floor to ceiling. These columns, with their repeated "nodes," or terraces, seen also on stalagmites, are abundant in Lehman Caves. Twisting helictites, peculiar, popcornlike lumps, and frosty incrustations grow on many of the formations and cover walls and ceilings where other forms of decorations do not occur. Some are buff or chocolate, others creamy white, orange, or red.

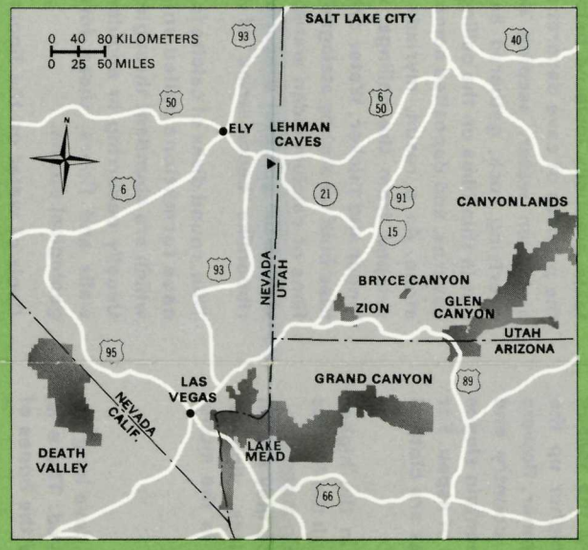
Along the trail, which winds among weird stalagmites taller than a man, are "tom-toms," strange stone faces, animals, figurines, rippled overhead curtains of stone, and rooms with high-arched and color-splashed ceilings. Rock forms, color, and shadow stimulate one's imagination. No two rooms are alike: each has its own set of elements.

FOR YOUR SAFETY

While in the cave, watch for low ceilings and slippery conditions. Use the handrails and stay with your group.

If you have a heart condition or have difficulty in breathing, remember the high elevation and take it easy.

During the summer months be on the lookout for rattlesnakes. Avoid going through the brush and when walking the nature trail, always stay on the pathway.



ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The monument is 8 kilometers (5 miles) west of Baker, Nev., near the Nevada-Utah boundary. U.S. 6 and 50 are 16 kilometers (10 miles) to the north, and U.S. 93 is 64 kilometers (40 miles) to the west.

Trips through the cave are conducted every day over a 1-kilometer (2/3-mile) paved trail with stairways. About 1-1/2 hours are required for the tour. A modern electrical system provides indirect lighting. The temperature averages a chilly 10°C (50°F); warm clothing is suggested. Children under 16 must be accompanied by an adult.

Flash photography is permitted, but no tripods, please.

The National Park Service maintains picnic facilities in the headquarters area, and a concessioner sells refreshments, meals, and souvenirs from April through October. There are no overnight accommodations, and camping is not allowed. Humboldt National Forest, adjacent to the monument, has four campgrounds.

PLEASE HELP PROTECT YOUR MONUMENT

Keep your pets on leash or in your car; they are not permitted in the buildings or in the caves.

Fires are allowed only in the picnic area.

Flowers, trees, rocks, and other natural features must not be marred, destroyed, or removed.

Do not disturb, injure, or kill the wildlife.

Prospecting and locating mineral claims within the monument boundaries are not allowed.

While in the caves, please stay on the trail and with your guide at all times. Do not remove, touch, break, mark, or deface the walls or any formations.