

Carlsbad Caverns

NATIONAL PARK
NEW MEXICO

On the northeastern slope of the Guadalupe Mountains in southern New Mexico is Carlsbad Caverns, a place of contrasts. Unlike many other natural parks, it reaches deep within the earth to preserve and interpret a subterranean wonderland acclaimed as "king of its kind." On the surface, the land is harsh and rugged, with the steep rock-strewn ridges covered with cactus and other spiny plants. Temperatures are often extreme and rainfall is sparse. But below ground, huge galleries lavishly decorated with delicate stone formations are always cool and moist.

Some 66 caves are preserved in the 18,916-hectare (46,753-acre) park. Carlsbad, the largest, has one room with a floor area equal to 14 football fields and enough height for the U.S. Capitol building in one corner.

You can tour vast underground chambers, explore deep, winding canyons on the surface, study Permian Age fossil reef, view unusual desert plants, and witness spectacular evening bat flights when the migratory colony is in residence.

HOW THE CAVERNS FORMED

The limestone in which the caverns formed was deposited near the edge of an inland arm of the sea during Permian times, about 250 million years ago. Its core is a fossil barrier reef built by lime-secreting algae and other marine organisms. To the north are layered rocks which formed in a lagoon behind the reef, and to the south are exposures of talus, or rock fragments, broken from the reef's crest by storms on the ancient sea.

In time, growth of the massive reef was halted and it became buried under layers of sediment. A pattern of cracks then appeared in the rock which set the stage for the formation of the caverns.

Rainwater, converted to a weak carbonic acid by absorption of carbon dioxide in the soil and decaying matter above, seeped into the cracks and worked its way down to the permanently saturated zone—water table. It then slowly dissolved the rock to create immense underground galleries.

As mountain building forces raised the caverns above the water table, air filled its chambers and mineral-laden water filtering in from the surface began to decorate the rooms with stalactite and stalagmite formations. A few of these are still slowly growing, but no change is noticed in a human lifetime.

THE BATS

For thousands of years, bats that winter in Mexico have used one portion of the main cavern as a summer home. From late spring until the first major frost in October or early November, these tiny flying mammals spiral out of the cavern entrance in incredible numbers at sunset each evening. They fly southeastward over the escarpment rim to feed at night on flying insects along the Black and Pecos Rivers. Before sunup the colony returns to the cavern where the bats sleep during the day. Up to 5,000 bats per minute may boil up through the cavern opening, depending on weather conditions and the insect food supply.

THE CAVERNS AND MAN

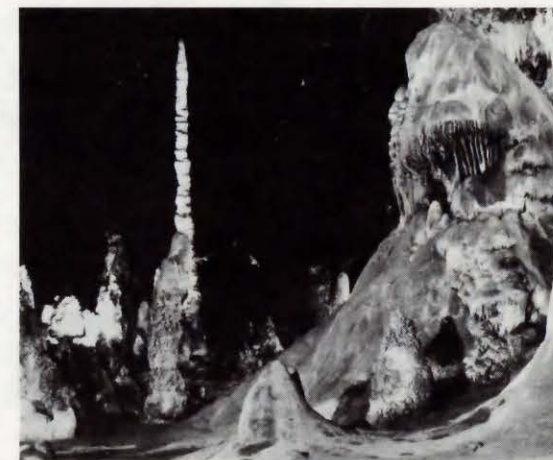
More than a thousand years ago, prehistoric Indians left paintings on the entrance wall of Carlsbad Caverns and cooked agave and other desert plants in a rock pit just outside. They were attracted to the cavern because of the shelter it could provide, as were the Apache Indians of more recent times.

More permanent settlers arriving after the Civil War were attracted to the cavern by what appeared to be smoke against the sky; they would ride to the cave and discover that the dark cloud consisted of literally millions of bats streaming out of the opening. Later, finding huge guano deposits beneath the bat roost valuable as natural fertilizer, the settlers' interest in the cave became commercial. Mining claims were filed on the "Bat Cave" and more than 90,700 metric tons (100,000 tons) of guano were removed in 20 years.

James Larkin White, a young cowboy who was fascinated by the cavern and its bats, became a foreman for the guano mining companies and spent more than 20 years exploring, building trails, and escorting people through portions of the cavern he had discovered. His efforts, along with those of others, led to a visit by Robert Holley of the General Land Office, to a 6-month National Geographic Society expedition under Dr. Willis T. Lee, and finally to designation of the cave as a national monument in 1923. Additional land and caves were added in 1930 when it became a national park.

FROM DESERT TO MOUNTAINS

The landscape of the park holds as much interest as the awesome caverns beneath. Elevations range from 1,097 meters (3,600 feet) above sea level at the base of the escarpment on the east boundary to 1,936 meters (6,350 feet) atop Guadalupe Ridge on the west boundary. Slicing through the rugged backcountry are numerous canyons with intriguing names like Slaughter, Bear, Walnut, Rattlesnake, Lefthook, Midnight, Yucca, and Double.



The Totem Pole was formed on the cavern floor by droplets of water, each holding a minute quantity of dissolved limestone. As the water fell and splashed against the stalagmite, the lime it carried precipitated and was deposited on the tip of the pole, building it higher and higher over the centuries.

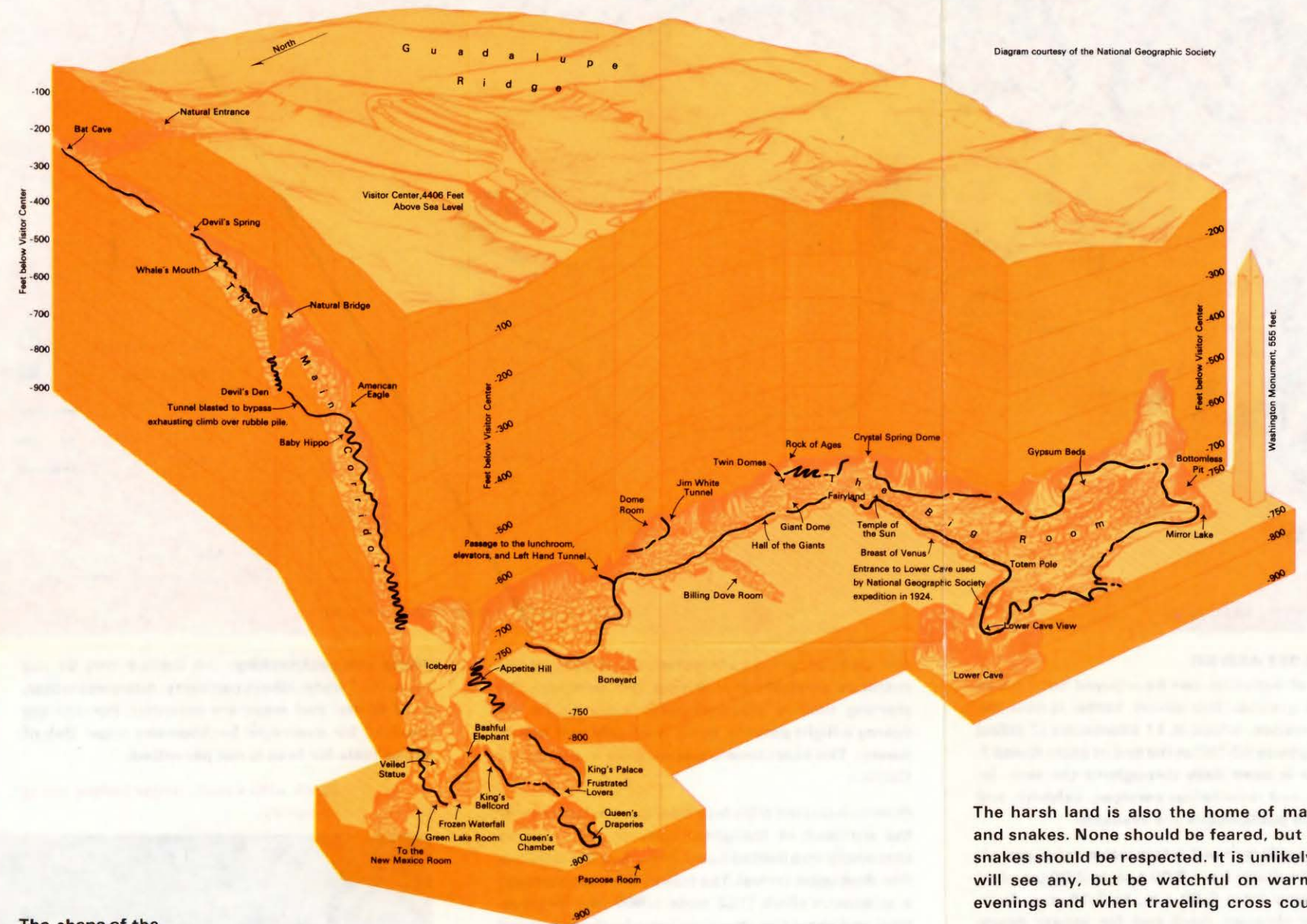


Diagram courtesy of the National Geographic Society

FOR YOUR SAFETY IN THE CAVERN

You should wear shoes with low rubber heels and non-skid soles in the cavern.

An entrance or user fee is charged for visiting the park's features. Annual Golden Eagle and Golden Age Passports are honored.

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

The shape of the land in the park has created wide variations in temperature, soil, sunlight, and moisture, and these in turn have resulted in a wide variety of life forms. On the flatlands near the base of the mountains are creosote bush and other drought resistant shrubs. In the canyons, black walnut, hackberry, oak, desert willow, and other trees are common. The canyon walls and ridge tops are covered mostly with agave, yucca, sotol, ocotillo, and desert grasses; and at the higher elevations are juniper, pine, Texas madrone, and, occasionally, a Douglas-fir. In all, more than 600 plant species have been identified. In wet years, a succession of colorful annuals cover the canyons and ridges with a carpet of blooms from spring into fall.

Wildlife abounds, although the nocturnal habits and natural camouflaging of many species keep

them from being seen readily. Most commonly encountered among the mammals are jackrabbits, ringtails, raccoons, skunks, foxes, gophers, wood rats, mice, squirrels, porcupines, and mule deer. Seen less often are coyotes, badgers, bobcats, mountain lions, and elk.

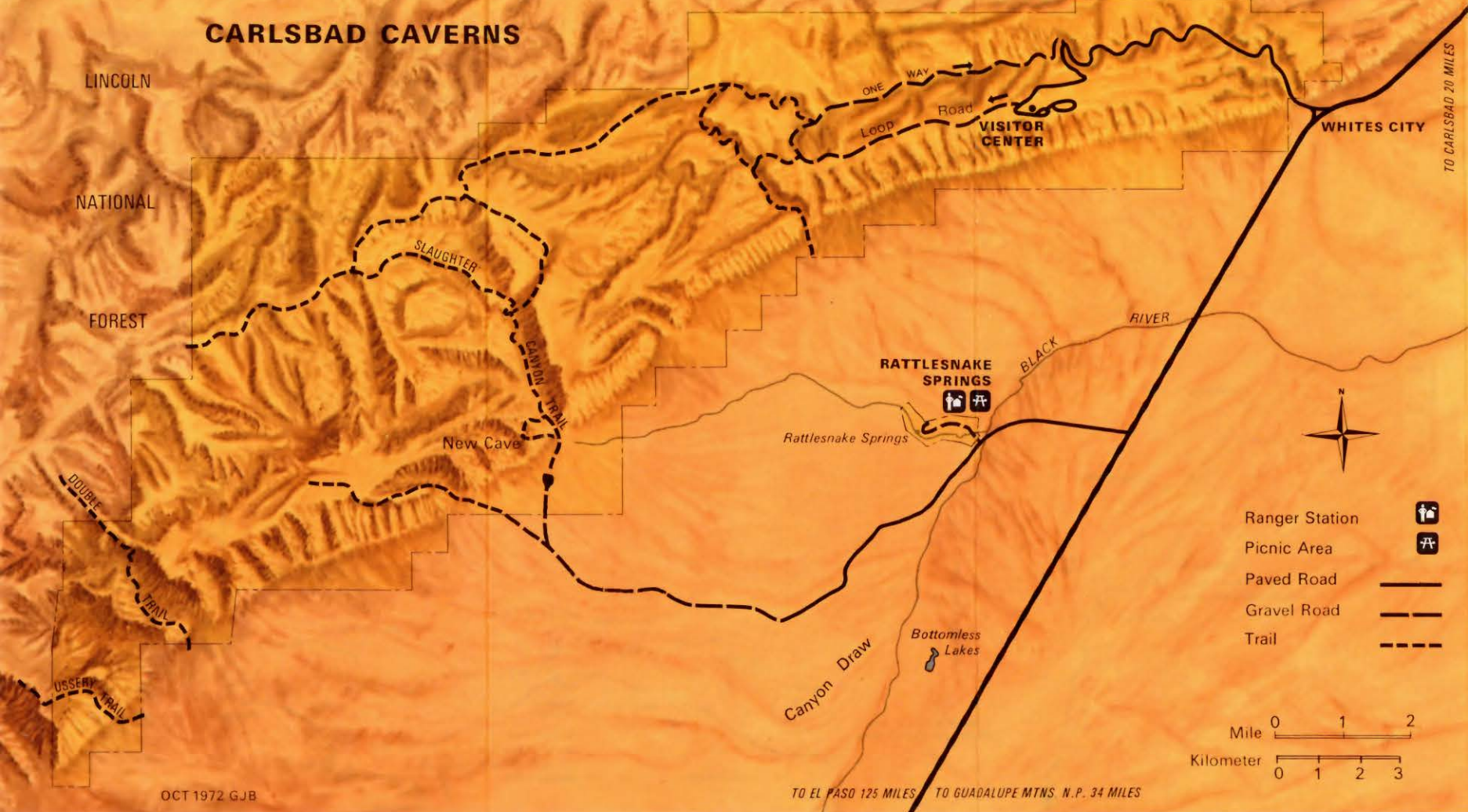
More than 200 species of birds, ranging in size from tiny hummingbirds to the majestic golden eagle, have been identified. During the summer, turkey vultures glide on thermal currents above the canyons, and cave swallows rear young in mud nests plastered high up on the walls of several caves.

The harsh land is also the home of many lizards and snakes. None should be feared, but the rattlesnakes should be respected. It is unlikely that you will see any, but be watchful on warm summer evenings and when traveling cross country.

CLIMATE AND SEASONS

Summers are usually warm and winters mild. However, extreme changes can come suddenly at any season of the year. If moisture comes early, *spring* brings an abundance of color as wildflowers and cactus come into bloom. It also brings strong winds. In the *summer*, the bats are flying, agaves blooming, and the fruit of the prickly pear cactus is ripening. Thunderstorms accompanied by brief but often heavy downpours may bring flash floods to the canyon bottoms. In *autumn* squirrels fatten themselves on fruits and seeds in preparation for a long winter sleep, reptiles go into hibernation beneath the rocks, and the bats migrate southward. In *winter* the normally mild weather may be broken by a shortlived snowstorm or a bone-chilling "cold front" sweeping through on gale force winds. In the caverns the temperature remains constant at 13°C (56°F) year round. Average annual precipitation is 35.5 cm (14 in.).

CARLSBAD CAVERNS



This aerial view of Slaughter Canyon shows the typical rugged, rock-strewn ridges and desert washes of the park.



A ringtail peeks out of its favorite habitat.



PRECAUTIONS

The following suggestions are offered to help make your visit safe and pleasant.

Wear proper shoes and clothing. Shoes with synthetic soles often slip on wet downhill trails in the cavern; wear shoes with rubber soles or heels. Boots are advised for surface hikes and the New Cave trip.

Stay on cavern trails and do not run. Steep drop-offs and deep pits lie just off the cave trails in many places, and thin crustlike deposits often conceal cavities below. Parents should keep small children at their side. Use the handrails provided.

If the electrical power fails while you are underground, stop and remain quiet until the lights come on again. Provisions have been made for such emergencies and standby lighting will be in

operation within a few moments. Such failures are relatively rare.

Observe posted speed limits. The park roads have been designed for sightseeing and not for high-speed travel. Be alert for deer bounding across the roadway, and for people who have stopped their vehicles to observe or to take photographs.

Watch for rattlesnakes when hiking on the surface. If you should see one, do not kill it, simply detour around it.

Beware of the cactus and other desert plants; their spines can inflict painful injury. The knifelike lechuguilla agave can even pierce leather shoes.

HELP PROTECT YOUR PARK

Touching or tapping on cavern formations is prohibited. Many of the smaller formations are so fragile that they can be broken by a mere touch, and all can be stained by repeated handling. Once damaged, or destroyed, the loss is permanent, for most of the decorations are no longer growing.

Collecting or disturbing rocks, plants, or wildlife either above or below ground is prohibited by law.

Pets are not allowed within the caverns, public buildings, or backcountry, and must be kept on a leash in other areas. Kennel service is available.

Entering backcountry caves and undeveloped portions of Carlsbad Caverns without written permission of the park superintendent is prohibited. Permission is granted only to individuals qualified in "caving" skills and engaged in investigations which have demonstrable value to the National Park Service in its management and understanding of cave resources.

Hunting or molesting wildlife, the use of firearms and metal detectors, and prospecting for mining claims are also prohibited.

HOW TO REACH THE PARK

Carlsbad Caverns National Park is on U.S. 62-180, 32 kilometers (20 miles) southwest of Carlsbad, N.M., and 242 kilometers (150 miles) east of El Paso, Tex., both served by bus and air transportation, with rental cars and bus service to the park.

ACCOMMODATIONS AND FACILITIES

A restaurant, gift shop, nursery, and kennel are next to the visitor center. Lunches and refreshments are also available underground. These facilities are provided by The Cavern Supply Company, P.O. Drawer Y, Carlsbad, NM 88220. There are no overnight accommodations or campgrounds in the park, but numerous motels, campgrounds, and trailer parks are located nearby. Picnic facilities have been provided at Rattlesnake Springs, a detached unit 13 kilometers (8 miles) southwest of the park entrance on the Slaughter Canyon Road.

ADMINISTRATION

Carlsbad Caverns National Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is 3225 National Parks Highway, Carlsbad, NM 88220, is in immediate charge. For further information call 505-785-2233.

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

A variety of activities can be enjoyed both above and below ground. The visitor center is near the cavern entrance, which is 11 kilometers (7 miles) west of highway 62-180 at the end of State Route 7. The center is open daily throughout the year. Information and orientation services, exhibits, and interpretive publications are available.

Complete underground interpretive trips are offered continuously from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. and elevator trips from 8:00 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. from September through April and for longer hours during the summer. Visitors have a choice of either walking in through the natural entrance on a *complete* 5-kilometer (3-mile) trip, or entering by elevator for a 2-kilometer (1½-mile) walk around the *Big Room*. On both trips you return to the surface by elevator. Although you may walk at your own pace, the *complete* trip is somewhat strenuous and is not recommended for persons with walking or breathing problems. The most scenic portions of the Big Room are reached by a relatively level trail that will accommodate wheelchairs. Wheelchairs are not available at the park.

A light sweater or jacket and comfortable walking shoes with rubber soles or heels are recommended.

Photography, including flash and time exposures, is permitted on all trips. However, photographers must remain on cavern trails and must not rest cameras and tripods on cavern formations.

Bat flight programs are scheduled nightly at the entrance amphitheater during the summer. The starting time is adjusted periodically to fit the colony's flight pattern, but it is usually just before sunset. The exact time is posted daily in the Visitor Center.

Primitive lantern trips into New Cave, which is near the entrance of Slaughter Canyon, are available seasonally on a limited basis. Inquire at the information desk upon arrival. The trail to this cave involves a strenuous climb (152 meters/500 feet in elevation) and should be attempted only by those in good physical condition.

Nature trails near the cavern entrance and along the Walnut Canyon entrance road offer an opportunity to become acquainted with plants of this semi-arid land. Guided walks into the desert are also scheduled periodically during the main travel season.

Sightseeing by car can be both enjoyable and educational when traveling the park entrance road as it winds through lower Walnut Canyon and then climbs to the top of the Capitan Reef Escarpment. Along the 11-kilometer (7-mile) route are opportunities to view exposures of the ancient reef and lagoon deposits, wildlife, and unusual desert plants. Roadside exhibits interpret natural features along the route. On clear days, a sweeping panorama of the entire reef escarpment and the Delaware Plain extending more than 161 kilometers (100 miles) southward into Texas awaits you on the reef crest.

Hiking and backpacking are limited only by the amount of water hikers can carry. Adequate water, good boots, and maps are essential. Permits are required for overnight backcountry trips. Use of native fuels for fires is not permitted.

For safety, check with a park ranger before going into the backcountry.



Bats leave the cave's natural entrance on their evening flight.



The collared lizard sometimes runs upright on its powerful hind legs.