

## Caves and Caverns

*By CC Huffhines*

A cave or cavern is defined by Wikipedia as a natural void in the ground, specifically a void large enough for a human to enter. Caves form by the weathering of rock and often extend deep underground. The word "cave" can also refer to much smaller openings such as sea caves and grottos. A cave is exogenic, meaning it's deeper than its opening is wide.

Most caves are formed in soft karst rock formations. Slightly acidic water seeps through cracks, eventually creating vast openings in the rock. It takes more than 100,000 years for one of these openings to open large enough for a standing human. Thus, most caves are ancient formations.

The U.S. has many caves. I have only visited Carlsbad Caverns, which is in a national park in New Mexico. Though naturally dark inside, the cavern is lit with electric lights that reveal the many colored walls, stalactites and stalagmites. Entrance can be through the original cave opening, which involves working yourself down slippery slopes, or descending in an elevator. Once inside the cavern, helpful signs guide you to the vast views, including the main room which is colossal in size. It would be easy to get lost in the vast spaces.

Another huge cave, found in Kentucky, is called Mammoth Cave. It is several miles long. I have never visited this cave.

Caves exist all over our planet and National Geographic Magazine has featured many excellent photos of many of these caves on the web. These pictures are in vivid colors, creating a desire to visit each one.

Mexico's Yucatan area is dotted with many important caves. My visit to the Loltun Caves, a few miles south of Merida, was memorable. Though not as developed for tourism as Carlsbad, this cave gave me a sense of silence and darkness that is found in less developed caves. The walls of the cavern have ancient Mayan art and inscriptions, which fascinated me, a passionate fan of the Mayas.

There are even caves found in ice glaciers, formed by heat currents and meltwater, though I imagine they are super tricky to explore.

The largest known rock cave is located in Borneo, though that title may soon be lost to a cave currently being explored in Vietnam, called Hang Son Doong Cave. So far, they have discovered a cavern measuring 1.2 miles long, 500 ft. wide and 600 ft. tall.

I think the cavern in Hawaii, formed by a flowing hot lava tube that empties the lava in the Pacific Ocean, is the most exotic of all.

Once, I was near the famous Reed Flute Cave in China, but managed to miss it on my journey. I feared the partial darkness in the cave, and the vast spaces of the cave, that other travelers commented upon; plus my inability to call for help in the Chinese language.

Last year, on a road trip from Oslo to Bergen through Norway's spectacular scenery, we drove through a tunnel that was 24 miles long. Though man-made tunnels do not qualify as caves, I

felt that I had been in a small but lengthy cave for the entire time.

Caves and Caverns are truly wonders of our world. I recommend that everyone explore all the caves that they can, and to become amateur tunnel spelunkers. You don't need to be a professional spelunker to enjoy the mysterious world of caves.