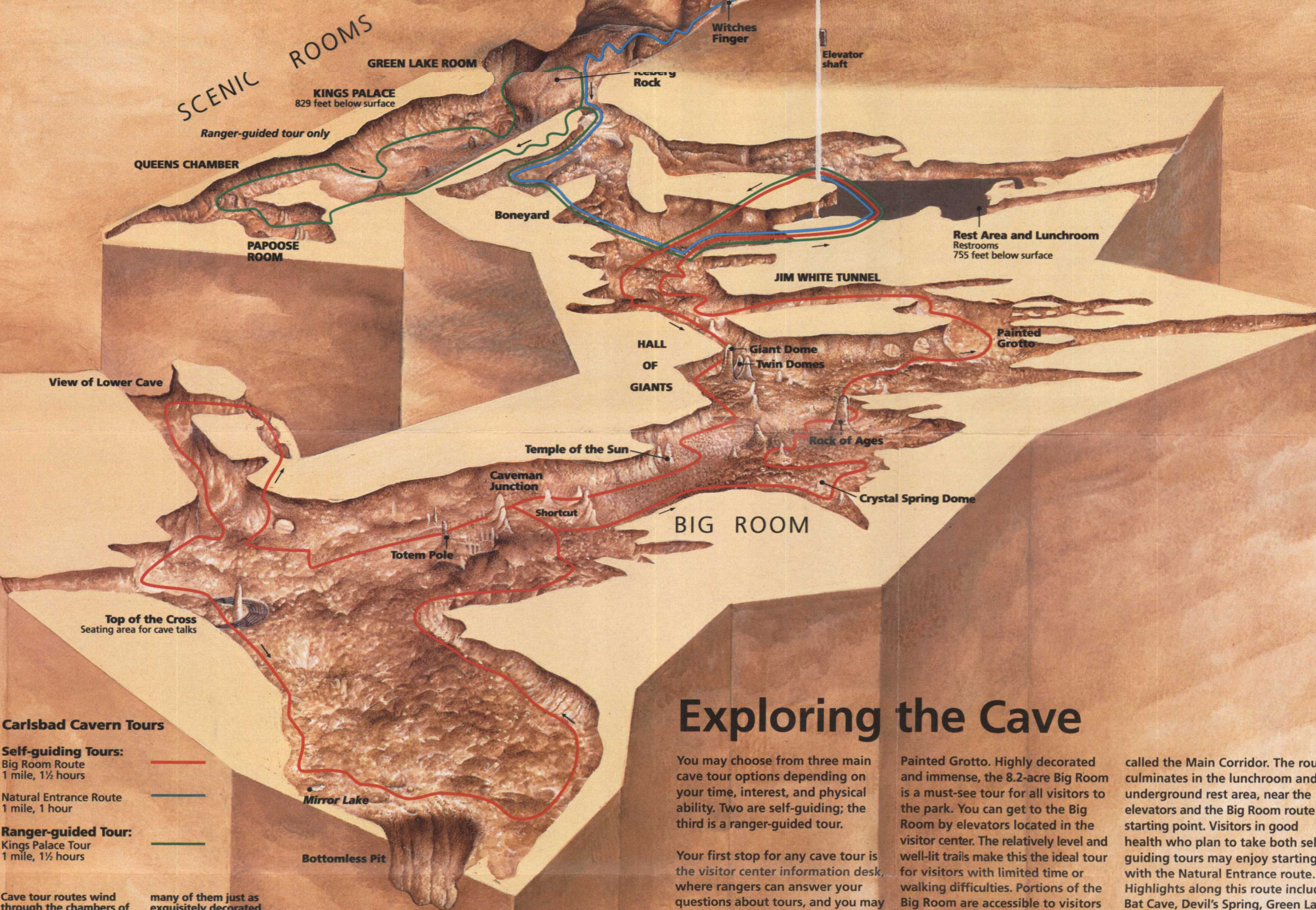


A Journey Underground

Your encounter with Carlsbad Caverns National Park begins in the Chihuahuan Desert of the Guadalupe Mountains. But beyond the somewhat familiar surroundings of rugged mountains and broad plains is another world. Away from sunlight, away from the flowering cactus, away from the songs of the desert birds and the howl of the coyote, lies the celebrated underground world of Carlsbad Cavern. It is an incomparable realm of gigantic subterranean chambers, fantastic cave formations, and extraordinary features. The first adventurers entering Carlsbad Cavern had no idea what to expect as they walked, crawled, and climbed down into the darkness. Today many of the wonders of Carlsbad Cavern are well known, yet the experience of exploring its chambers is every bit as exciting.



Carlsbad Cavern Tours

Self-guiding Tours:

Big Room Route
1 mile, 1½ hours

Natural Entrance Route
1 mile, 1 hour

Ranger-guided Tour:

Kings Palace Tour
1 mile, 1½ hours

Cave tour routes wind through the chambers of Carlsbad Cavern, shown in the illustration above. Public tours view only part of the cave. Beyond these passages are more underground rooms,

many of them just as exquisitely decorated. Altogether over 30 miles of passages have been explored. The deepest chamber is 1,037 feet below the surface.

Safety in the Park

To ensure that your tour of Carlsbad Cavern is comfortable, enjoyable, and safe, please follow these important rules and recommendations.

- Wear low-heeled, non-skid shoes for walking on the paved cave trails, which can be steep and

- slippery. • Use handrails where available. • Take a jacket or sweater; the cave's temperature is a constant 56° F. • Stay on trails. Beyond the trails are steep drop-offs where you could fall and injure yourself, and there are unlighted passages where you could

- get lost. Also, fragile formations on the floor, walls, and ceilings can be damaged by anyone straying from the trails. • Do not leave pets unattended in vehicles during the summer months. Kennel services are available at the visitor center.

Exploring the Cave

You may choose from three main cave tour options depending on your time, interest, and physical ability. Two are self-guiding; the third is a ranger-guided tour.

Your first stop for any cave tour is the visitor center information desk, where rangers can answer your questions about tours, and you may purchase tickets. The basic entry fee allows you to take either, or both, self-guiding tours. Rangers at the information desk can provide information on special ranger activities. They can tell you about wild cave tours that may be available.

Big Room Route

The basic tour through Carlsbad Cavern is the Big Room Route, a one-mile, self-guiding, underground stroll around the perimeter of the largest room in the cave. Taking approximately 1½ hours, this circular route passes many large and famous features, including Bottomless Pit, Giant Dome, Rock of Ages, and

Painted Grotto. Highly decorated and immense, the 8.2-acre Big Room is a must-see tour for all visitors to the park. You can get to the Big Room by elevators located in the visitor center. The relatively level and well-lit trails make this the ideal tour for visitors with limited time or walking difficulties. Portions of the Big Room are accessible to visitors in wheelchairs; a map is available at the visitor center information desk. Visitors in wheelchairs should only go into the Big Room with assistance.

Natural Entrance Route

The Natural Entrance route is a self-guiding tour available to visitors with plenty of time and in good physical condition. This one-mile tour follows the traditional explorers' route, entering the cavern through the large historic natural entrance. The Natural Entrance route descends over 750 feet into the Earth following steep and narrow trails through a tall and spacious trunk passage

called the Main Corridor. The route culminates in the lunchroom and underground rest area, near the elevators and the Big Room route starting point. Visitors in good health who plan to take both self-guiding tours may enjoy starting with the Natural Entrance route. Highlights along this route include Bat Cave, Devil's Spring, Green Lake Overlook, and the Boneyard, a complex maze of highly dissolved limestone rock reminiscent of Swiss cheese. Watch for Iceberg Rock, a single 200,000-ton boulder that fell from the cave ceiling thousands of years ago.

Kings Palace Guided Tour

A third option is the Kings Palace tour, a 1½-hour ranger-guided tour through four highly decorated scenic chambers. Departing from the underground rest area, the Kings Palace tour descends to the deepest portion of the cavern with paved trails, 830 feet beneath the desert surface. Although not as difficult

The Bat Flight

The evening flight of the bats of Carlsbad Cavern is a natural phenomenon as fascinating as the cave itself. In a mass exodus at dusk, thousands of Mexican free-tailed bats (also known as Brazilian free-tailed bats) fly from the cave for a night of

feasting on insects. You can view this exciting spectacle from the outdoor amphitheater at the cave's natural entrance. Before each flight a park ranger gives a short talk on bats. Because the bats winter in Mexico, the flights occur only from

early spring through October. Check at the visitor center for the scheduled time or call 505-785-3012. To protect the bats, cameras and camcorders are not allowed at the bat flight program.

Preserving a National Treasure

Protection and preservation of Carlsbad Cavern is the mission of the National Park Service. It's your responsibility, too. Unfortunately, over the years careless people have damaged many of the cave's smaller and more delicate formations.

Experimental techniques, like those that enable rangers to match pieces of broken stalactites and painstakingly glue them back together, are sometimes successful, but in practically all cases damage is irreversible.

Cave Regulations
Please help preserve Carlsbad Cavern and other park caves by observing park regulations.

Touching any cave formation is prohibited. Formations are easily broken, and the oil from your skin permanently discolors the rock.

Smoking or any use of tobacco is not permitted. Eating and drinking are not permitted except in the underground rest area and lunchroom.

Throwing coins, food, or other objects in cave pools is forbidden. For-

eign objects ruin the natural appearance of the pools and are difficult to remove. Also, the chemical reaction among the foreign objects, the water, and the rock can leave permanent stains.

Photography is permitted on most cavern tours. Photographers should not step off the trails or rest tripods or other camera equipment on formations.

Strollers are not permitted because parts of the trails are steep and narrow.

as the Natural Entrance route, this one-mile tour does require you to descend—and later climb—an eight-story-high hill. Look for speleothems or cave decorations including helictites, draperies, columns, and soda straws. Rangers often conduct black-out programs during this tour, briefly turning off all artificial lights to reveal the permanent inky blackness of the natural cave environment. Reservations are suggested; contact the park or see our website. A separate fee is charged for this tour.

All trails in the cave are paved and well lit. You should wear comfortable, closed-toe shoes with rubber soles for maximum safety and traction. The cave temperature varies little from the annual 56°F average, making a sweater or light jacket appropriate year-round. You may want to bring a camera and a flashlight. Strollers are not allowed in any underground cave area, but infant backpacks are permitted on the self-guiding tours.

A pre-tour restroom stop is advisable because restrooms are only available in the visitor center and at the underground rest area and lunchroom. All tours are preceded by a mandatory cavern orientation briefing to promote resource protection and cavern safety. All tours exit the cave by elevator.

Rangers are available throughout the cave to protect park resources and to help you with information and questions. On both self-guiding tours, audio guides are available to provide you with in-depth information about ecology, history, and cave formation. To enjoy the natural quiet of the cave, please speak quietly.

The cavern is open daily except December 25 and operates on summer and non-summer hourly schedules. For current hours and information contact the park at 505-785-2232 or www.nps.gov/cave.