

## Trip 2 – Episode #51 – Carl’s Not So Bad Cavern



Back in December, when we told people the general route we were going to be taking out west, many asked if we planned to go to the Carlsbad Cavern. We didn't stop there, partly because, frankly, one member of the team was not all that keen.

Two years ago, when we were in New Zealand, I was eager to experience one of the caves where they have "glow worms" (which turned out to be maggots, but that's beside the point). We went into a cave which became smaller and darker until it was pitch black. We got in a rowboat and floated for a while until we saw the worms glowing above like a million stars. I was thrilled. Only after we got out did I discover that Jim is a bit claustrophobic. And while I was gazing up in awe, he was really wishing we were somewhere else.

So, going into another cavern was not high on his list. But everyone insisted that this would be a totally different experience and not at all scary. So Jim said he was willing to give it a try.

The evening before our planned visit, we arrived in White's City and checked in at the Carlsbad KOA.



It had one of the more unusual campground stores.



To say the cavern is in the middle of nowhere is understatement. This gives you an idea:





As does this.



As we got nearer to the cavern, we could see evidence of other lesser caves.

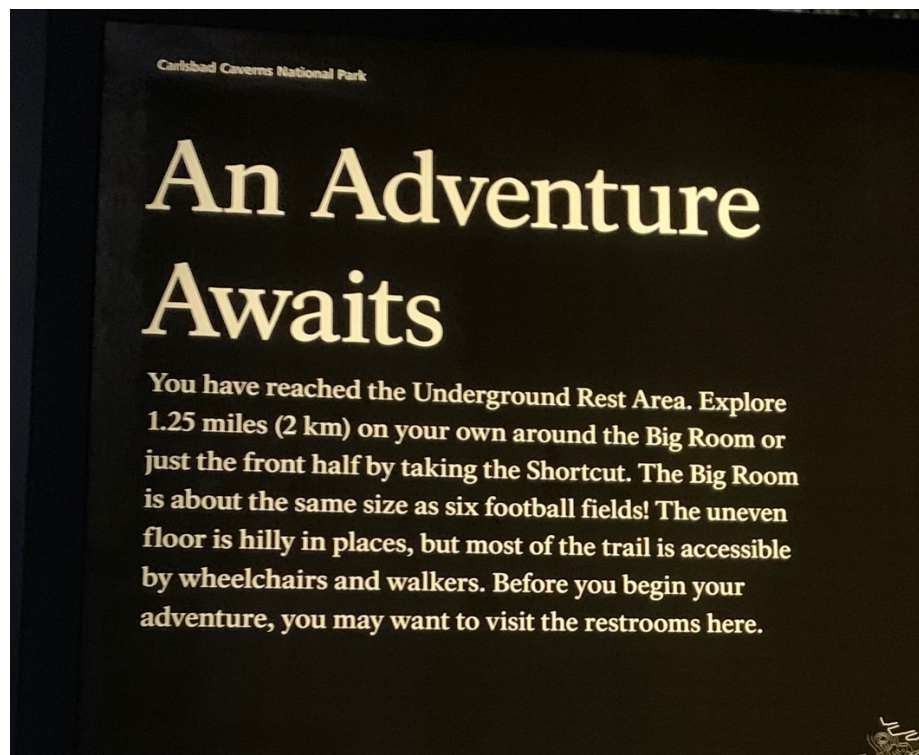




A long, twisty-turny road led us to our destination.

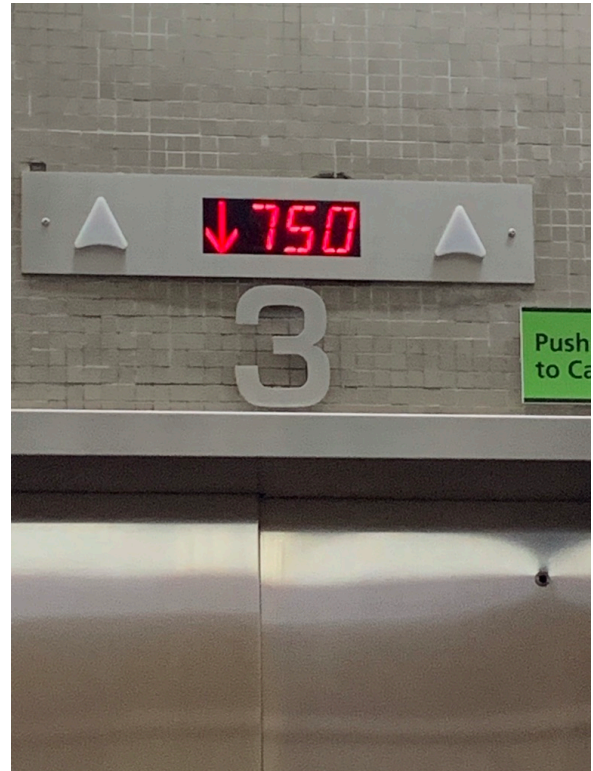


It's a very well organized visitor center, with lots of guidance to help you make your way through.





You can, if you choose, walk to the “natural” entrance, which is about a 2 km hike from the visitor center. But it also requires walking down (or up) 750 feet — equivalent to a 75-storey building. Fortunately, they also have an elevator. So...



Once we got to the entrance, we found signs that helped explain the extraordinary sights we would see over the next hour and a half.

**The extremely fragile cave formations have been growing at an unbelievably slow rate. Rain and snowmelt from the surface mixes with carbon dioxide, making the water acidic before filtering through the ground toward the cave. The water contains dissolved calcite from the limestone. Drops of water seep through the ceiling of the cave, evaporate calcite, and leave a tiny amount of calcite behind as part of a formation.**

It's hard to imagine how long it must have taken for single drops of water to create something like this:



Like the Grand Canyon, no photograph will replace the experience of being there. But, again, that didn't stop me from trying.





Around each bend, we'd be surrounded by totally different looking formations.





















## Ancient Shorelines

The smooth, flat calcite floor around the edge of the pool is called shelfstone. It marks water levels of the past. Shelfstone starts out as paper-thin sheets of calcite that form on the surface of a quiet pool and float like rafts. These rafts can become attached to the edge, creating a platform. As water flows down the cave walls or stalagmites and into the pool, the rafts become thicker as they grow outward toward the center.

It was fascinating to see what looked like pools of rippled water, knowing they were solid and had looked like that for thousands (millions??) of years.









The walkways were quite well-lit, and despite any concerns we (meaning Jim) might have had, they felt perfectly safe.



However, as we were walking along them, I couldn't help thinking about the people who first discovered this cavern, and didn't have any such help.



And this spot served as a reminder of how treacherous the trek must have been and how daring those explorers were.

No thanks.

## Dangling in the Dark

See that ladder of fence wire and sticks? It was made by Jim White, an early explorer. Imagine climbing down into Lower Cave as the ladder swayed above the dark pit. Dr. Willis T. Lee did just that in 1924. Lee's photo expedition with the National Geographic Society covered many miles, revealing new tunnels and rooms. It followed Lee's first expedition a year earlier, which led to the establishment of Carlsbad Cave National Monument on October 25, 1923.





# Silent Bell

Crystal Spring Dome is the largest active stalagmite in the cavern. It is special for another reason: it includes a rare type of bell canopy at its base. The pool below the stalagmite was once as high as the shelfstone between the trail and the formation. As water flowed down the stalagmite, shelfstone reached out from the base if the water was still. But drips continually disturbed the water surface. The shelfstone couldn't grow. The calcite backed up to the stalagmite, building a ramp with a flat bottom, much like a bell.

This looked like it was a huge mountain of solid ice.

















Sometimes, the surfaces looked like delicate folds of fabric.









Others looked like plant life.









And still others looked like scenes from a scary fairy tale.



But my absolute favourite moment happened when I suggested to Jim that we do a selfie. I had the flash on, so I couldn't really tell if we were in the shot or not. When I checked to see if it was okay, I burst out laughing.





Oh Jim.

Suffice to say we won't be exploring any caverns again anytime soon.