

CAVE EXPLORING

A cave is a natural hole in the earth large enough to enter. Caving, in brief, is the exploration of caves, while speleology, on the other hand, is the scientific study of caves. Both terms are further confused by a third term, "spelunking", which was coined to describe visiting caves for recreational purposes. For many years, spelunking and caving were pretty much synonymous, but among cavers today the word has fallen out of use. "Spelunker" now refers to a person who goes caving but is not prepared with the right knowledge and/or equipment to cave safely - a sort of weekend Indiana Jones looking for the lost treasure of El Dorado. A true caver is serious about visiting caves, has the proper equipment and training, and understands the fragility of the underground environment. Cavers do over 90% of all cave exploring in the world, and work with landowners to protect the destruction of their caves from spelunkers, or rescue them when they get trapped or lost.

Caves hold a special appeal unappreciated by those who have never been underground. One exhilarating aspect is being in a completely different, alien environment; smells are different and earthy; sounds are strangely close and muffled yet reverberate in the enclosed spaces. A caver dresses differently - usually in tough, loose coveralls, kneepads, sturdy climbing boots, a hard hat with a lamp and sometimes gloves; and carries supplies, emergency equipment, ropes and climbing gear. Cave plant and animal life are surreal - bats, molds, tree roots, albino salamanders and fish with visible internal organs. Forget the straight lines and comfortable Euclidean-plane easiness of moving about above ground. Half the time you are using your hands as well as your feet, shoulders, elbows, and knees for support or leverage. You often work in a distinctly

three-dimensional, multi-leveled, maze-like space. Tunnels switchback, drop away, and lead upward, only to feed you into a cavern from which the only exit is a tight squeeze-through near the cavern's ceiling. Eventually one learns to visualize caves as three-dimensional models that can be viewed from different angles and rotated to suit the needs of any relative position in which the caver finds himself.



One of the first methods of exploring a cave was on foot by torchlight. Mauritius (Scott 617) issued a stamp on the 10th Anniversary of the World Tourism Organization depicting the Patates Cave with a tour guide holding a torch. The rather small cave is limestone and has a few speleothems usually common to tropical limestone caves. Cuba (Scott 3192) issued a stamp for the 50th Anniversary of the Cuban Speleological Society, showing early man using a cave as his home and place to depict art, lit by torches and fires.

Later, the carbide lamp was the principal source of light. Water and calcium carbide mixed produce acetylene gas which, when burned, provides a luminous halo of light around the caver up to 10 meters away. Eventually, electric lamps/lights were used. A halogen light can illuminate objects up to 100 meters away.



Two cancellations illustrate the carbide and electric lamps. The carbide hand lamp is illustrated in the April 30, 1994 cancellation from Semriach, Austria. It shows a caver in Lurgrotte cave, which happens to be a "through" cave, meaning you can start in Semriach, the upper part, and exit in Peggau, the lower end. It takes over 8 hours to traverse the cave. On the day of issuance of the Lurgrotte cave stamp (Scott 1497) and its cancellation, eighteen covers carried 75 pounds of mail through the cave to get town cancellations at both ends. The second cancellation is from Sullivan, Missouri where the National Speleological Society held their 1997 annual convention. It shows two cavers looking at cave formations by electric light.



In 1864 Jules Verne wrote "Journey to the Center of The Earth". Behind this novel were the extraordinary theories of John Symmes, United States Infantry Officer, who surmised the earth was actually hollow and open at both poles, and that within the hollow core one could escape the magnetic field of the earth that created the northern lights. His theories were so firmly believed, that in 1838, the United States Congress sent an expedition to the Antarctic to see for themselves. Needless to say, the trip was in vain.

The geographer Deville, who explored the volcanoes of Tenerife and Stromboli, also supplied Verne with ideas. By combining the stories from Symmes and Deville, Verne got the idea the volcanoes of Europe might be connected by passages through the earth. In his novel, the underground trip lasted around 30 days, yet the discoverers had no problems with their equipment. They used a hundred meter ladder, had dried food and even gin! Once in a while they lost some of their gear, but this was hardly a problem. During the journey they encountered nearly all of the geological phenomena of which

one can dream: limestone and lava caves, charcoal, minerals and even the inside of a working volcano. Their lights even worked continuously and this before the energizer battery had been invented!

The Monaco stamp (Scott 346) depicts the heroes with high hats and carrying lights in their hands, and even shows a real caver with a firm ladder, additional rope for security and a helmet on his head with a matching lamp. One can also identify two fighting prehistoric animals that have no relation to caves and were never found in them.



Southwest of the tip of Hinshu, Japan is the most renowned and intensively studied and researched region in Japan called the Akiyoshi-dai. It is a huge karst limestone plateau having a total area of 130 square kilometers. Its longest cave is Akiyoshi-do with over 2 miles of tourist passages containing resurgence streams and many spectacular decorations like the "Golden Pillar" (Scott 665) illustrated on the stamp. Szemlohegy Cave (Scott 3196 - Specimen) in Budapest, Hungary was discovered

in 1930 yet not opened to the public until 1986. The cave is approximately 2 miles long with only about 1/2 mile of it open to tourists during a 40-minute tour. Both stamps show tourists viewing the formations within the caves.

Another method of exploring caves is by boat. In "The Divine Comedy", written by Dante Alighieri from 1306 - 1321, Dante Pilgrim and Dante the Poet are the main character and author respectively. Dante Pilgrim was not a good boy and his dead love Beatrice asks the Virgin Mary to help him see the errors of his ways. Mary accepts and Dante is sent on a three-day trip through Hell, up Mount Purgatory on the other side of the world, and finally to Heaven.

Dante is spiritually lost at the beginning of the story, so he needs guides to help him along. His first guide, through Hell and Purgatory, is Virgil (author of the Aeneid). At the vestibule of Hell in Canto 3 line 94 "they meet Charon who ferries them across the underground river Acheron". They encounter many interesting sinners on the way and Dante learns to hate sin. The stamp issued by San Marino (Scott 623) in 1965 uses the drawing of Gustave Dore to illustrate Charon on the River Acheron.



The Reverend William Thomson, an American Missionary, discovered Jeita Grotto in Lebanon in 1836. In 1873 W. J. Maxwell and H. G. Huxley explored 1,060 meters of

the grotto and were stopped by "Hell's Rapids". Sealed in a bottle, on the top of a stalagmite about 825 meters from the entrance, their names and the details of their exploration can still be seen today. Tourists who visit the Jeita Grotto experience a boat ride of over 600 meters in the lower galleries. (The upper gallery is also about 600 meters long and can be explored on foot.) The Grotto is over 8,330 meters and in 1961, Lebanon (Scott C313) issued a stamp to help promote tourism in the country. The oarsman shown on the stamp is Mr. Maroun Hajj who still leads boats tours of the cave.



The grottoes de Han-sur-Lesse (Belgium Scott 1612), the subterranean bed of the River Lesse, are an active cave system. The river disappears in the Gouffre de Belvaux and reappears 24 hours later on the other side of the hill near the Trou de Han. The grotto is over 16,000 meters long and the first part of the exploration tour is done by boat. At the beginning of the sixties divers discovered an archeological treasure trove on the riverbed.

Finally, the only way to explore some caves is by diving, as they are completely or partially submerged under water. The Romanian Postal Stationary shows a cave diver with full equipment diving "the sump" (a place where water is up to the cave ceiling) to further push his exploration.



Add to this feeling of navigating and exploring caves in a unique and seldom tread, almost privileged world, the challenge of putting yourself to the test and one can safely say caving can be very demanding, both physically and mentally.