

ROAD ROMP 2004

Day 5: Monday, 14 June 2004

FOCK 1: Carl's Bad Caverns

Mondays can suck sometimes, but there was no reason to mutter and grumble about *this* one. It was Flag Day, for one thing. But, more significantly, it would involve the first National Park of RR04: Carlsbad Caverns N.P.

The twenty-minute ride to the Park was invigorating. The sun was blindingly bright in this dry air, and the slight hint of cool that lingered in the shade contrasted sharply with the focused heat of direct sunlight. Cacti began to proliferate.

This being the first National Park, it was also my first chance to wield the N.P. Pass that I had purchased at Lake Mead in Nevada in June of '03. The card, which cost \$50, gives the bearer free access to any and all National Parks and National Monuments and National Recreation Areas within the US. It is valid for twelve months from the month of purchase, giving you until the last day of that month, even if you bought the pass on the first day of the month. I bought mine on the 14th of June '03, so I had all of June '04 to use it.



So, not only did I get Grand Canyon NP, Arches NP, Zion NP, and Cape Cod NS (National Seashore) on the card in '03, I'd be getting TEN more in '04. What a bargain.

Getting from the park gate to the cave entrance involved a lengthy climb on a winding seven-mile road through classic desert hills. Sagebrush coated the rolling terrain like a tufty carpet, with short, bladed cactus plants adding irregular clumps. There were none of the red

tones that make Utah so beautiful; this was all grays and beiges and not-bright greens. The dim colors of ground level made the azure sky look almost sapphire.

The seven miles was even emptier than West Texas had been, if that's possible, so I really got a good guffaw when I rounded a bend and was faced with another "Slow: Congested Area" sign. I mean, I've never seen one of those in New York City or Boston!

The landscape caused me to ponder a bit more about pioneer days. I wondered how long yesterday's 475 miles would have taken in a wagon train. Stagecoaches, which should be faster than a cumbersome caravan, traveled at an average speed of 5 MPH, so a full day of riding, given good trails to follow, probably meant 50 miles or less. For a full



wagon train, I'd bet it would be half that. So, my San Antonio to Carlsbad day would have been two to three weeks of sweaty, thirsty, dirty, smelly, bumpy, and, I'm sure, grumpy travel through potentially hostile territory.

Those people were brave, I'll grant them that, but they must have also been desperate. Some of them must have been totally nuts, too. The Mormons, for instance, who tried wagon training it through the Rockies in the dead of winter. You have to be mucked in the head to do something like that. There were times when they were reduced to *one mile per day*, in bitter cold and waist-deep snow. They froze to death by the hundreds and even resorted to cannibalism to stay alive. So, I have to ask: was life back east really *that bad??*

I also had to wonder: would I have done that? As a fit and brazen young man, would I have shunned the crowded city life and ventured out into the Great Plains and wilderness beyond? I don't know. The sense of adventure and exploration would have been there, but I'm not sure they would have outweighed the craving for comfort.

I feel fortunate to live at the time that I do. I can ride in climate-controlled comfort at a better than a mile-a-minute. I can see thousands of miles worth of mountains, lakes, rivers, prairies, seashores, forests, canyons, cities and towns all in a couple of weeks – it would have taken a lifetime in the 1800's. I can still see such wonderful things all around the country: highways and technology connect them all, but they don't overwhelm them *yet*. The Internet has brought information and images about any place on earth (and beyond) right to my fingertips, in the comfort of my nice cushy desk chair.

Just like I could see all this desert in the comfort of Moby's cushy captain's chair. If I had to get here with my ass on a plank of wood, following some stenchy horse's ass for hundreds of miles, I think I'd pass. If I thought the sight of sagebrush got a little old in just one afternoon, how would I feel about it after twenty days of seeing nothing else but?

Anyway, it seemed odd that I'd be climbing several hundred feet up to get to the entrance to an underground area. I had envisioned Carlsbad Caverns as being deep underground, and, to me, getting to them should require going *down*. Shows how little I know, duddinit?

I parked at the Visitor Center and felt myself rushing to get inside, as if driven by the need to beat the crowd, so I could get solitude, and uncluttered photos. Haste on vacation was unbecoming, and self-imposed stress at such a place was dumb. I forced myself to chill for a bit in the gift shop, and look around at the this's and that's before heading down into the Caverns themselves in a much more mellow state.

The Visitor Center is at 4406' above sea level, so it was about a 1300' ascension from the town of Carlsbad to the cave entrance. The walkways down into the Caverns would descend 755 feet, so it was a pretty extreme example of going up to go down.



The area just outside the cave entrance has been constructed into a stone-benched amphitheater, which curves and slopes to focus on the cave's opening. Every summer evening, the arena fills up to see the show: bats. About half-a-million Mexican free-tailed bats stream out of the cave just at nightfall and fly off to the south to feed on moths and other insects. The bats return before dawn and spend the day snoozing in an area of the Caverns called Bat Cave (clever name, huh?).

They crowd onto the ceiling, with as many

as 300 bats per square foot. Think about that for a second: 300 bats in one square foot – 144 square inches, so more than 2 bats per inch. And that’s all over the entire ceiling of the cave! The bats only stay from late spring until about October, and then they all migrate back to warmer climes in Mexico. Bat Cave is not available for public touring, which was fine with me, though the walkway does go right past its entrance.

That walkway must have been dang difficult to build. It’s very even – though definitely not level – footing. The caves stay a constant 56° all year round, and the humidity in the lower



chambers hangs at a clammy 95%. The dampness in the air makes it feel like your feet could easily slip out from under you on the steepest sections of trail. But round steel-pipe handrails line the walkway at almost all times, often on both sides. This is for safety, but also to discourage free-style spelunking.



For latter-day visitors, the walk is a piece of cake, but only because we have that walkway to use. The original explorers of this network of caves had to crawl and

slither their way down the sharply angled throat and into the belly. We had the benefit of low lighting – always aimed away from us and onto the rock. The scope of the project is impressive: building the walkway, and the railings, and the electric lighting – not to mention the elevator shaft – including the arduous task of lugging all that material down there, pre-walkway, in the first place.

The first 200 feet of the downbound trail is very steep, and has been laid out as a long series of switchbacks. It becomes a fairly straight and gently-sloping tunnel for a while before dropping through another zigzag of switchbacks to the Devils Den, at 500’ below the surface.



There are several unusual shapes and formations along the way, whetting the appetite



for what lies ahead. The tunnel continues past Witches Finger and Iceberg Rock, then through The Boneyard, until you finally arrive at The Lunchroom.

While the first three of those are calcite formations, the fourth – The Lunchroom – is exactly that: a cafeteria. Sandwiches, snacks, and beverages are available for purchase, with tables and benches to sit on. Restrooms are located there as well, and the sound of the pumps periodically kicking into action carries a good way. The Lunchroom happens to be directly under the Visitor Center – 755 feet directly under – and an elevator makes the run a couple hundred times a day.

The walk from the amphitheater to the lunchroom is about a mile in length and takes the usual douchebag about an hour. I, being an unusual douchebag, strolled it in a leisurely 40 minutes.

But the coolest stuff is yet to come. Just a couple hundred feet outside the lunchroom, the cave opens up wide into an area named The Big Room. And it is big: *14 acres* big! Floor to ceiling is 40-50 feet in places, and the cavern just sprawls in front of you, and Nature's bizarre calcite artwork is on display everywhere.

The developers of Carlsbad Caverns did not use colored lights, as a place like Ruby Falls Caverns in Virginia does. Carlsbad is lit with white lights, displaying the natural colors.

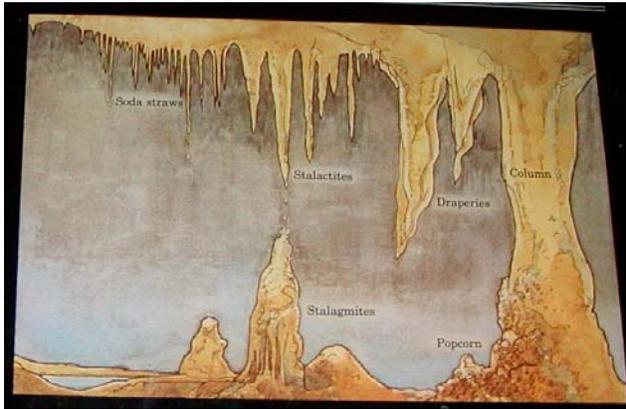


Calcite is a crystal that is left when a mineral-laden drop of water evaporates. Over the eons, these drops seeped through the porous cavern ceiling, each one leaving a miniscule amount of calcite behind. As drops dripped from a particular spot, they landed, evaporated, left a trace of calcite, landed, evaporated, left a trace of calcite, landed, evaporated, left a trace of calcite, and so on. You get the picture. After a few billion of these drops, the calcite has begun to pile up a bit. Drops would splatter on the rounded top of the pile, run down the sides, and the water would spread thinner as it slid down the side, until it just stopped and evaporated, leaving more calcite to cling.

This was also happening from above, as the slowest drips clung to the drip hole, evaporating before they ever fell, and leaving their calcite stuck up there. That would form just like an icicle does. Some drops would make it all the way down and splatter on the growing column below, while smaller drops would not make the whole length of the icicle, and, hence, would add to it.



Those are the most commonly known calcite formations: stalactites and stalagmites. You basically take a fifty-fifty chance on which is which. Stalactites hang down, and stalagmites stand up. I've been looking for a mnemonic way to remember that – some easy breezy thing



like righty-tighty-lefty-loosey – but I haven't come up with one yet. The "stalag" thing reminded me of prison (Stalag 13 in *Hogan's Heroes*, for instance), but that didn't help because I couldn't remember if I was picturing the prison bars rising up or hanging down.

The much more common thinner stalactites are called "soda straws" and irregular clumps of calcite are called "popcorn." Some stalactites become wider and wider as they lengthen, and those are termed "draperies" because they kinda look

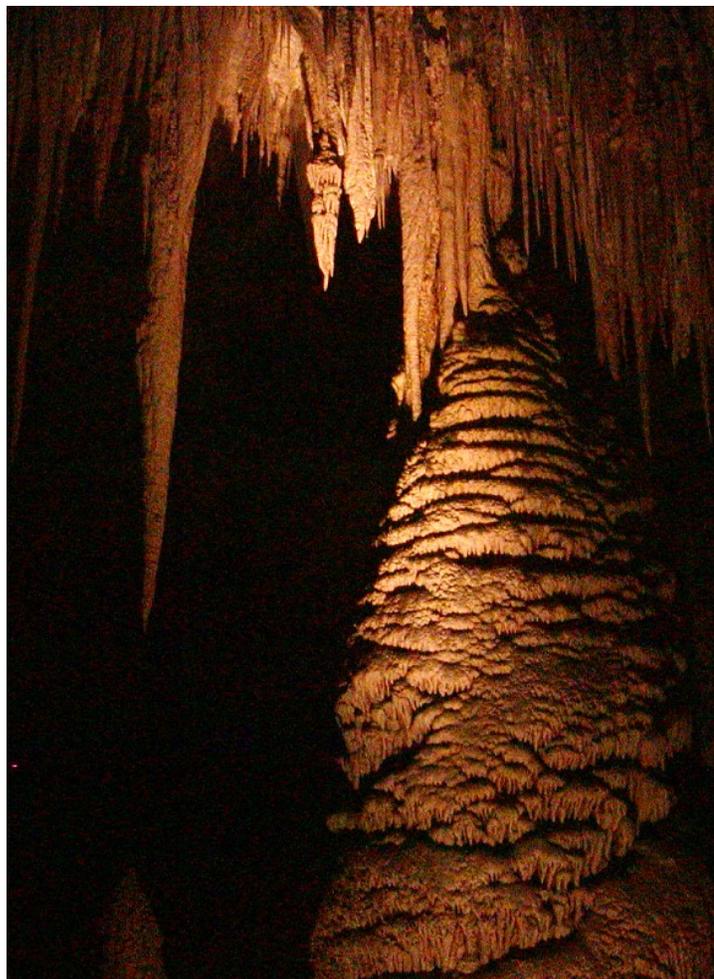
like draperies if you squint and cock your head a little.

Sometimes a stalactite reaches so far down, and a stalagmite reaches so far up, that they actually meet. The gap closes (with great fanfare, I'm sure), and the connection eventually thickens, leaving a column of calcite called, well, a "column."

The most eminent of the speleothems (as all such formations are called) is the Totem Pole, a thick, multi-faced stalagmite that rises a good twenty feet tall, and nearly mingles with the thinner stalactites that dangle from the high ceiling.

Other features, bearing names like Rock Of Ages, Painted Grotto, Bottomless Pit, Top Of The Cross, Caveman Junction, Giant Dome, Mirror Lake, and Temple of the Sun stand or hang or fall along the mile-long walkway around the Big Room's perimeter. The brochure advises visitors to expect The Big Room Tour to take about 1½ hours. Even as an unusual douchebag, I took that and maybe a little more. I stopped often to snip-snap some picky-wicks, and took a couple of short sit sessions to just savor the place.

Loud talk and lots of flash photography are discouraged, but I didn't see anybody who was inclined to do either. I snapped



one flash photo shortly after entering the cave, and was appalled at how it changed the view of everything. It also startled the crap out of the elderly couple who were a little ahead of me on the trail, so I took the rest of my photos with a steady hand (and a small tripod) in low light.

Everyone kept a very respectful tone in their conversations, and the soft mingle of so many low voices bouncing off the walls and all around the Big Room made it easy to imagine that it was the formations themselves murmuring to one another. Maybe it was, and I just thought it was the humans.

The Big Room Trail looped us hikers back to the Lunchroom, where the elevator whisked us to the surface. Hiking back up to the entrance is not allowed, for some reason. Perhaps they deemed two-way traffic to be too much on such a narrow walkway. I didn't argue with it anyway; I had seen all that already, and a one-hour walk up 755' of elevation didn't seem necessary at that point.

Besides, now that I had sucked the marrow from the famous Carlsbad Caverns, it was time to find more Southwestern marrow to suck.