



The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America

**RICK'S ROADS**

Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What



BLOG POST: 2022.08.25-26  
Lava Beds National Monument, California



*The entrance to Upper Sentinel Cave*

In 1990, Blighguy and I paid this place a visit. We were here for maybe three hours, popping in for some elementary spelunking, and then resuming our trip to rescue Kelzo from Reno. So, I knew *roughly* what to expect.

I did not remember the ride here being so desolate. The park covers 46,000 acres (77 square miles), and sits 15 miles south of the CA/OR state line, 75 miles west of the CA/NV border, 137 miles east of the Pacific Ocean, and 42 miles northeast of Mt. Shasta. And there is a whole lotta nuthin around it. True desert.

Coming in from the north, the 13,000-acre Tule Lake Wildlife Refuge was to my left. It was bone dry. Hopefully it was a seasonal thing.



My Senior Lifetime Pass let me in for nothing. The Park Ranger at the gate cautioned me that I would have some delays due to road construction. Just like at Mt. Rainier NP, the national infrastructure project was in high gear, bringing long-overdue repair and fresh pavement to the roadways throughout the park.

I had mixed emotions about that. I love beautiful, newly paved roads, and I know they do not happen overnight. If it's occasionally my turn to sit idly for a while as the construction process unfolds, then so be it. If it happens all the time, though, it sucks.

Besides, I was in no hurry. I had booked a site for two nights at Indian Wells Campground for only \$10 per night. There'd be no electricity or water hook-up there, but it was a legit place to sleep without needing stealth. I had 40-plus hours to explore LBNM, and I knew that would be plenty.

It was scorching hot out. The temperature under cloudless skies was right around 100°. The temp readout on Maxx's dash read 117°, but that thermometer is right under the metal skin of the van, which skews things a good bit.

Still, I had to pity those poor, suffering bastards out there laying down steaming hot, black asphalt. Good lord.



Meanwhile, I was *far* from miserable, parked on the roadway among a dozen other vehicles, sitting in shady, air-conditioned comfort in Maxx's living room, snacking on a ham-samich and sipping a tall, cold beverage.

See, *this* is the kind of delay that doesn't vex me. It might irk me sometimes, but it does not vex me. A 15-minute delay on the Interstate, edging a foot or two forward every half-minute or so: **that** vexes me. You can't rest. You're constantly on edge.

But like this, I could just chill. When it was time, I saw the cars ahead begin to stir into motion and I stepped onto the flight deck, buckled up and drove on.

The Lava Beds area is a shield volcano, in a reasonably flat landscape. It's rolling and has hills, but it's not mountainous. As a result, many of the lava tubes are fairly level.

The tubes formed when thick gushes of magma flowed across the plain. The top of the river cooled from contact with the air and solidified into basalt rock. This thick crust provided insulation that kept the lava underneath hot and flowing. When the magma flow finally subsided and drained away, the sturdy outer crust remained. The floor cooled to solid rock, and, hey-hey, we got us freaking tube, Rube.

"Rough" is a good word for LBNP. The photos give a good representation of most of the caves here. Except for Mushpot (the "Intro" cave near the Visitor Center), none of the lava tubes have lights or electricity or illuminated info signs, nor have they been smoothed by anything other than footsteps. They are raw.

The mouths of some cave have been excavated to some extent to provide easier access, and some also have steel ladders or platforms to climb in, out, or between levels.

One thing they all are, though, is **dark**.



Go figure, right? Solid rock above, below and on all sides. Once you get away from the entrance and around the first bend, you might as well be blind. This is a dark that your eyes will not “get used to”. Gotta have a good flashlight. Having two is even better; if you drop your only light and break it, you are ucked-fay.

Blighguy and I found that out the hard way. We had gone into a two-level tube billed as an “ice cave.” At first, it was a long, reasonably level tube, tall enough to walk comfortably in. We carried the two large flashlights that I had in Max (my original Max –



with one x -- a 1987 Dodge Conversion van). Those flashlights were the kind with the big block of a battery. New, they could cast a beam to Jupiter. With aging batteries, though, that beam started bright and confident, but got tired with extended use.

We just saw the confident part, and began our spelunk feeling the same way.

Well, we were only halfway down that long, reasonably level tube, when his light flickered and died. We laughed and congratulated ourselves on bringing two.

Soon, we came to the multi-level, steel staircase the led us down about 40-50 steps into the ice cave. It was really cool in there – in both ways!

Cold air sinks, hot air rises. We all know that. So, it just makes

sense that cold air settles into the lowest places. It gets chilly in northern California in winter, and that winter cold gets trapped in the deep caves.

Cold air also condenses, and that moisture drifts down onto the floor, where it accumulates and freezes. Over many, many years, enough of it builds up to create a thick, smooth floor of ice throughout the cavern.

That’s what we found ourselves on. The floor was as smooth as glass. We were sliding around on it like it was a hockey rink. Blighguy was a human laugh machine anyway, so he was giggling like a fool. It was fun!



Till *my* light suddenly went out. Flicking the switch off and on did nothing. It had proclaimed “quittin’ time” and clocked out. Our mirth stopped ... for a second, then we burst out laughing at our stupidity. Man, it was dark in here! Very disorienting.

Simple fix, right? Get to a wall of this medium-sized, roundish chamber, and feel along that wall till we find the stairway, then follow the handrail up to the main tube, and get to the entrance the same way. Cake, right?

I started feeling along the wall to the right, Blighguy went left.

After a short while. “Anything?”

“Nothing.”

Another short while. “Anything yet?”

“Nope.”

Another while. “*How big is this freaking room???*”

Then we were both surprised when we bumped into each other.

*“Where did the damn staircase go???”*

*“You mean, it came down in the middle of the room?? Ohh craaap.”*

We never lost our sense of humor. The space was finite. We would eventually blunder into the metal structure.

It probably didn't take long, but it took long enough to make us start to wonder if we had strayed into an unnoticed side chamber. Our laughter was just starting to sound a bit strained when ... *clang*.



I had no qualms about the stairs; they were predictable and regular. However, that long, winding, pitch dark tube would be another matter. That floor was anything but smooth.

Fortunately for us, we had just reached the top of the steps when we saw the faint glint of a flashlight in the distance. We had too much pride to call out for help, partly because we knew they were headed our way anyway. But we did give a “hey” when they got close so we wouldn't be ambushing them in the dark.

They laughed at our plight. That was OK, we were laughing at ourselves too. They went down into the ice cave. We waited for them and mooched off their light on the way out to daylight.

So today, when I went to the Visitor Center, I had that harrowing incident in mind. I purchased one of their best Cave Flashlights (\$40!!) when I went to get my map.

I was the only visitor there. The young woman at the desk seemed to be happy to have someone to talk to. She eagerly opened up a map to go over it with me.

As it turned out, quite a few of the caves were closed because it was the season when mama bats were giving birth to and raising their young. Bats are respected by cavers and such a time is “leave ‘em the hell alone” time.

I had no problem with that. The caves are the bats’ homes, not mine; I am the intruder, and when I’m not welcome, I will stay out.

Besides, the last thing I need in a dark cave is to get strafed by a pissed-off flock of creepy flying mammals.



The VC woman also grilled me about my shoes. If I had been in a cave in any other area, I'd be a risk for spreading White Nose Syndrome. I assured her that my Timberlands were caving virgins. She was happy about that.



The Visitor Center is very well placed. The highest density of caves is along Cave Loop Road, a 1.9-mile loop that runs off to the southwest from the VC. No fewer than a dozen caves can be found along this circuit, with names like Labyrinth, Golden Dome, Lava Brook, Thunderbolt, Blue Grotto, Catacombs, and (my favorite) Hercules Leg.

The Leg was closed for bat weaning, as were several of the others. I hiked a few, the longest of which was Sentinel Cave. Unlike most of the tubes, which are out-and-back hikes, Sentinel is open at both ends, and is a kilometer (0.6 mile) long. I was the only one on the entire loop, so right away I was violating one of the prime Rules of Caving.

In fact, I didn't do very well on the list as a whole. Let's see:

- I didn't tell anyone where I was going.
- I was very much alone. No one would have found me till tomorrow, or later.



- I did stay on trails. Yay, me.
- I did pay attention to my route, but still missed on fork on a return in one of the caves, and I ended up crawling on my belly to get through a tight space.
- No helmet, wore shorts, but had new Timberlands on my feet.
- I did watch for hazards, and I did avoid them (thankfully).
- I only had one flashlight, though I had my iPhone for backup.

So, that's nothing to brag about, but I did live to tell the tale (which you are now reading).

In Sunshine Cave, which had been cleared of bat concerns, I was surprised to have a bat encounter.

It has that name because at roughly the halfway point, part of the cave roof collapsed a long, long time ago, and sunshine pours in. It's pretty refreshing to come upon that point after hiking in darkness.

I had almost reached that point when I heard a rustling noise rush past my right ear. At the very edge of the flashlight beam, I saw a dark streak and heard another *whoosh* past my left ear a moment later. And that one was *close*.

Coming around a bend, faint light from the sunshine hole gave me a chance to look around. As I turned, a black shape zoomed right past my face. This bat was not screwing around.

There was a metal walkway that I had to use to cross a deep trench, and I got another strafing as I was halfway across. *Dayummm, bat, what the hell??*

I got across and looked back. I didn't see the bat, so I turned to continue on. Then, just at the far edge of the illuminated area. I saw another flash of black pass me. I turned and saw the bat hovering about ten feet away, and eye level. Mama Bat was clearly telling me to get the fugout.

So I did. I swiftly recrossed the walkway and retraced my steps to the entrance. I did not see Mama Bat again.

## Cave Safely



Tell someone where you are going, when you'll return.



Do not enter caves alone.



Stay on the trail, if one exists.



Pay attention to your route.



Wear a helmet, long pants, and sturdy footwear. Caves may be cold all year.



Watch for low ceilings, uneven footing, and other hazards



Carry several sources of light.

Cavers were asked to report bat activity to the VC. It was closed when I got back that way, but I did my duty the next day. I suspect Sunshine Cave was subsequently closed to hikers. There was a man on duty when I made my report. He gave me funny look when I got to the last part of my tale.

“Ummmm, bats don’t normally hover,” he said.

“This one did.” *Fine, don’t believe me. I know what I saw.* I didn’t say that, but the look I gave him did. Then I departed to sit in middle-of-nowhere traffic for a while.

There was enough daylight left to take a drive to one of the more remote caves (remote relative to the VC, at least). I saw Heppe Ice Cave on the map and chose it immediately.

The drive to get there was awful. The delay at the main construction site was a good (or bad) 20 minutes long – and there was another 10-minute slag a couple of miles later -- but the road that I had to branch off onto was *brutal*. It, too, was under construction, but this must have been a total overhaul. Much of it had been torn out completely and a basic layer of gravel was all that had happened to it since.

The washboard was infuriating. About the best I could manage without feeling like I was abusing Maxx was 10 MPH. It was only about 2½ miles to the trailhead, but it felt like ten times that. (And, of course, I’d have to return that way later.)

It was sad, too. The Cave Loop was mostly an open space, but up here in the hills, it was more forested, and the sense of death was everywhere.

Half of Lava Beds – 31,000 acres (more than 44 square miles) – burned to the ground in the Caldwell Fire of



2020. This is California, yes? Such calamities are common here. One look at Tule Lake will give you a clue why.

That was just two summers ago, and very little of the ground layer was showing any signs of renewed life. The landscape was both depressing and fascinating.

There were very few trees that got through the Caldwell unscathed. Most that I saw were black and skeletal. Some tenaciously held on to reddish-brown, dead needles.

Hillsides, where the fire found more fuel and thus burned the hottest, looked as if they had been shot full of black arrows.

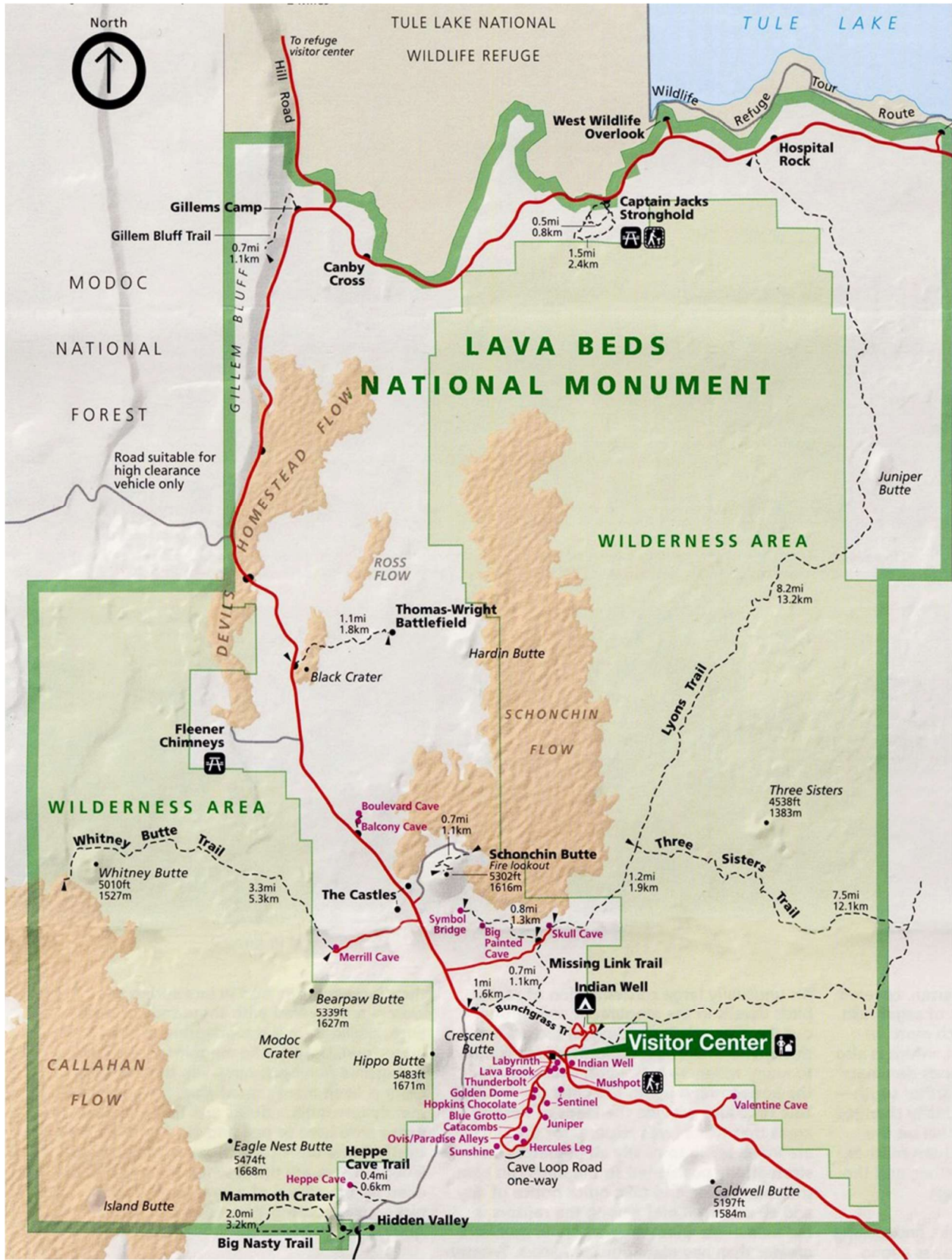


For a long time, this region has carried the nickname “Land of Burnt-Out Fires”, partly for its volcanic history, and partly for the many brush fires that have roared through here over the centuries.

Blue Maxx was the only vehicle parked at the trailhead. Heppe was about a half-mile hike away. It was about dinner time by now, so the sun was much less intense, but the scent of ashes permeated the charred fields that I walked through. This immediate area was not a thick forest, so what trees were there stood out, black and grim against the torched landscape.

It was so quiet out here. There was a bit of wind, but nothing for it to rustle.



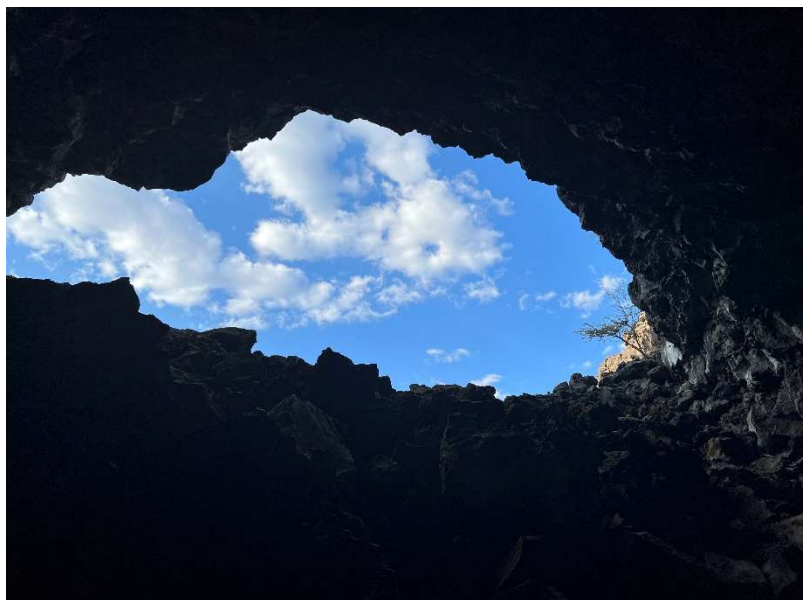


Heppe was an odd cave. A wide opening quickly funneled down to a narrow footpath that threaded between thousands of basalt boulders down to the bottom of a 50-foot deep hollow, where it just ends.



I suppose it ends there because that's where the ice would be. Apparently, this cave is not enclosed enough to hoard cold air year-round. There certainly was no ice here on this hot summer day, which was a bit of a disappointment.

What there was, though, was a big opening high up on the other side. It was beckoning to me. There was no trail, but the boulders looked clamberable.



It was a more arduous climb than I had expected. The footing was not bad; the boulders were about the size of a cube refrigerator, but they were not often level, and the hoist-up from one to the next was sometimes significant. And when I got up there, the view was ehhhh.



Heppe opened up into a large bowl-like depression. A long clamber across very rough terrain would be needed to reach the dark opening on the other side. The map showed no cave over there, so I suspected it was just a small recess that would not be worth that degree of effort.

Plus, I had pushed my luck far enough; I was way off the established trail, and I faced a precarious descent back into the not-icy hollow.

As I say often, climbing upward is much less treacherous than climbing down. Had I been less careful and missed a step while clambering up that steep tumble of boulders, I probably would have gashed my shin, or rolled my ankle, or – shudder – broke my leg.

That sounds bad enough, but if I were to lose my balance and plummet *down* that unforgiving slope, I would no doubt shatter multiple bones, including my precious little skull. It might be days before my lifeless body would be found. Not that I'd know.

So, as cautious as I had been on the way upwards to this ledge, I'd have to be multiple times moreso on the clamber back down.



My process for this kind of clamber is: chose my landing spot, slowly place my right foot in the middle of it, move my body weight onto it tentatively to be sure it is steady and secure, locate the next landing spot before moving my other leg, get a sure balance, then move my left leg to that new spot (or maybe to the same rock as my right, if the rock is large enough).

Choose, place, test, balance ... repeat, repeat, repeat. No rush at all. It will take as long as it takes. I estimated about sixty such steps to get me back to the bottom. Some would be steep drop-offs and might require hand or butt assistance.

It was going well, but I knew I must not lose my focus.

I was close to the bottom and feeling good about myself when I stepped onto a firm foothold and brought my left foot forward. As I did so, my weight caused the boulder to rock (no pun intended) and pitch dramatically forward. *Ohhhh, shhhhhitt!*

Launched forward by the sudden pull of gravity, I channeled my inner Flamenco dancer as I plunged in a downbound direction. Remarkably, my quick feet found enough rocks that were firm enough and not-pointed enough to allow me to staccato-step across them and land on the dirt spot a few feet forward.



As soon as I landed, I clenched, waiting for an avalanche of boulders to roll down onto me. Happily, none did. Whew.

I think I broke all seven Cave Safety Rules here, but, fortunately, that's all I broke.

I was happy to see Blue Maxx waiting patiently for me, and I settled into the pilot's seat with a renewed appreciation for the comfort of my noble steed. The road out sucked, as expected, but then we headed off to claim our campsite for the night.

Like the caves, I had Indian Wells Campground to myself too. Well, almost. There are 43 sites, and only one other vehicle was there when I pulled in. It would have been kind of funny, but mostly weird, if I had pulled into the site next to that RV. I chose the site as far from it as I could (more for my solitude than for his).

This was the most cheerless NPS campground I have ever seen. Everything was dead. The grass was brown or missing. The evergreen trees were either bare or scorched dry. A couple of stalwart trees showed some small sprigs of green in a plucky sign of recovery, but otherwise, it was just plain grim.



Day 2 of my LBNM stay dawned hot and sunny. Seems like that must be pretty common around here. My first target was Valentine Cave, the only featured cave southeast of the VC. I admit that dodging construction was a factor in my choice; most of the roadwork was to the north, in the central part of the park.



A paved walkway leads the way down and in. Valentine (1625 feet long) is rated as a Least Challenging Cave, though “some ducking would be required” for most people.

I was barely inside before this cave wowed me. A central pillar mushroomed out from the gray floor into a textured, golden ceiling. It’s hard to tell from the photo, but the path on the right was tall enough to walk in.



And the cave behind that was *classic* lava tube. Rounded, smooth walls and ceiling, and a rough floor where the final dribbles of magma had stopped and solidified. Those lower ridges that look like curbs are all natural, not man-made.





This cave is where I chose the wrong fork on the way back out and ended up slithering like a worm to get through the tight space. I am very glad I did not get stuck. In retrospect, doubling back to take the correct fork would have been *much* smarter.



I lost about a half-hour of my life sitting at a construction stop on the way my next spelunk: Skull Cave, so named because early explorers found animal bones within.

Skull is a three-level cave, with each level downward getting colder. I'm pretty sure this is where Blighguy and I had our harrowing Dancing In The Dark adventure. Unfortunately, the lower (ice) level was gated off today. So, it was a quick and uneventful back up and out.





*Check out that crazy ceiling!*



My longest surface hike (a little less than a mile) was my final one of the visit: the Symbol Bridge Trail. The trailhead was only a couple hundred yards away from Skull Cave's, so I didn't even move Maxx; I just added that yardage to my walk.

This hike was through wide open areas of dead grass and occasional magma features: several dark and chunky hollows; and a few lava humps, some of which turned out to be magma bubbles that had burst or collapsed.

It was hot and dusty, but some tall, light brown grass kept the parched landscape from looking fully dead.





The funny thing about hiking to a cave, though, is that you don't see it till you are right on top of it. Symbol Bridge is not called a "cave", probably because you can look right through it and see the daylight on the other side. It's not an "arch", as such, either, though. The rocky surface crust spans the shady, stone-strewn pit below.







There was a dusty footpath wound a crooked path down the slope and towards the cave mouth. As I reached the shaded entrance, I saw the first of the symbols for which this place is named.



I'm always skeptical about the age of such markings.

There's a roadside site near the Needles Area of Canyonlands National Park in Utah called "Newspaper Rock" (photo, right >>) The smooth, dark, side surface of an enormous, split boulder has numerous designs scraped into it. Many look like ancient native art or symbols, but there's a peace sign, the initials J.E.R. and other





clearly more modern “contributions.” Hard to believe that all the native etchings just stopped in the year 1300, and that nobody in the last 700+ years messed around with it.

Same here. It would have been easy for me to scrawl a few prehistoric-looking symbols of my own, but *I’d* never do that in a place like this. Less scrupulous people might. (Still, a nice, discreet, convincingly-sketched unicorn would have given the next visitors something to ponder. Hehe.)

In the full-page photo of the underside of Symbol Bridge (2 pages ago), you can see how rugged the floor is. There is a fairly smooth, dirt-and-rock path along the right-side wall so I could explore deeper without precarious clambering. I had had enough of that activity yesterday at Heppe.

I studied the ceiling for a while. Hmm. Lava chunks formed on the ground would not form such blocky shapes, nor would those shapes pile on top of others. Hence, I deduced, all of these ton-plus basalt boulders had fallen from the ceiling above me.

That was a bit disconcerting. I wondered how long it had been since the last one fell. A hundred years? Ten years? Ten months? Ten days? Ten minutes??? Hmmmm. I calmly climbed back up to the entrance.

On the far side of the wide cave mouth – which took some clambering to reach (I just can’t resist a good clamber over rocks) – there were several more of the symbol rocks, plus a few others that got my attention for other reasons.



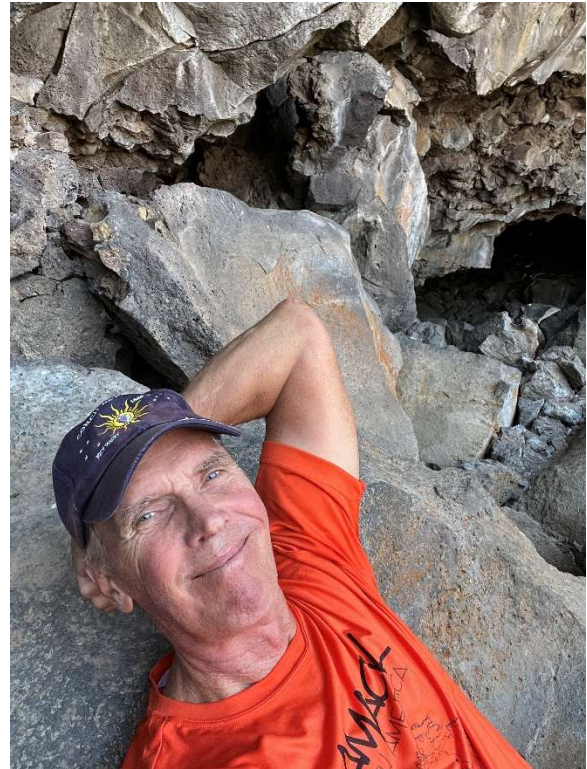
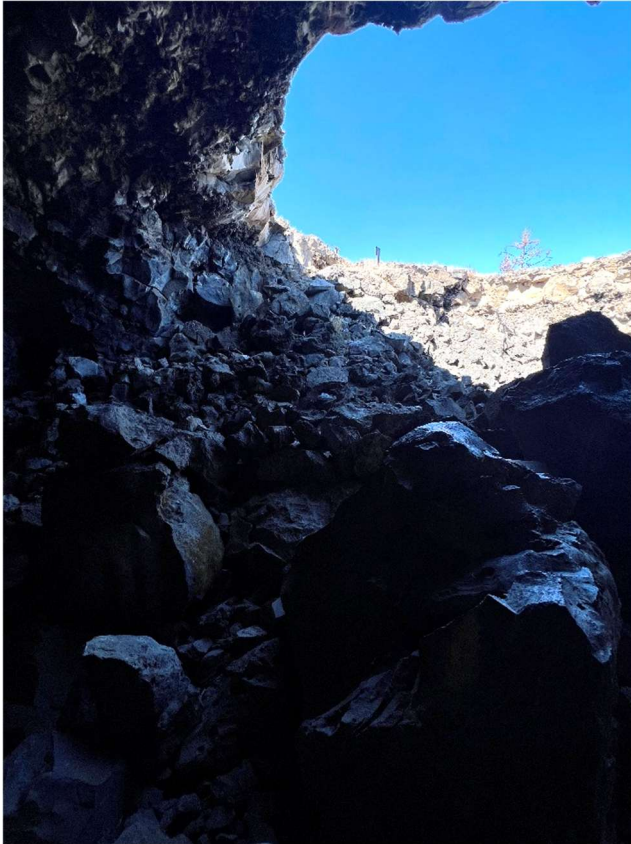


One had been sharply and precisely cracked across the middle.



Another had a rounded, bowl-like depression on its top side. I found this one to be particularly inviting, and I sat down on it to have a little rest.

That “little rest” turned into about an hour.



My seat was under the edge of the big, rocky overhanging bridge, and the afternoon sun cast a long cool shadow over it. It was surprisingly comfortable, for a stone. Not the softest seat, but it contoured well to my back.

The view of the deep blue sky, with the basalt bowl framing it, was nice.

I was in no hurry to climb back up into the hot desert sunshine, or to begin my 15-minute, dusty stroll back to Blue Maxx.

So I stayed. This was my last cave of the my stay at LBNM, I was totally alone (as I had been the whole time), and this was my last chance to bond with the geology of it all.

It was a most excellent daydreaming episode. Eventually, though, the cold beverages in BM whispered their way into my mind. It was a compelling enough message to stir me into action. I was pretty sure I'd have no trouble finding a campsite for tonight at Indian Wells.









