



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: 2022.09.27  
In the Cool of Carlsbad Caverns



### **Carlsbad Caverns NP, White's City, NM**

I know that I was paying attention last time I was here, but WOWWWW anyway. I guess I was focused on the “exhibits” back in 2005, because this time, the Big Room shots and wide views just blew me away. I was in there for a good 2.5 hours. So comfy cool and dark. They did a great job with their illumination: highlighting special points of interest, but keeping the ambience ultra-low-key. Such a hushed silence prevails as well, giving a cathedralish air to this vast and elaborately decorated chamber.

What the hell was it like in there before the walkways and lights?? Candles and lanterns only glow so far. You'd have no chance of seeing that 250' ceiling, or some of the bizarre formations just a few yards away.



Can you imagine inching and feeling and bumping your way along, wary of an abrupt drop-off into an abyss or bottomless pit, already freaked out by all those bats that buzzed your tower back near the entrance, and suddenly seeing **this** loom up in front of you? →→→→

I'd be thinking it was the Black Beast of Aaaaarrghhh.



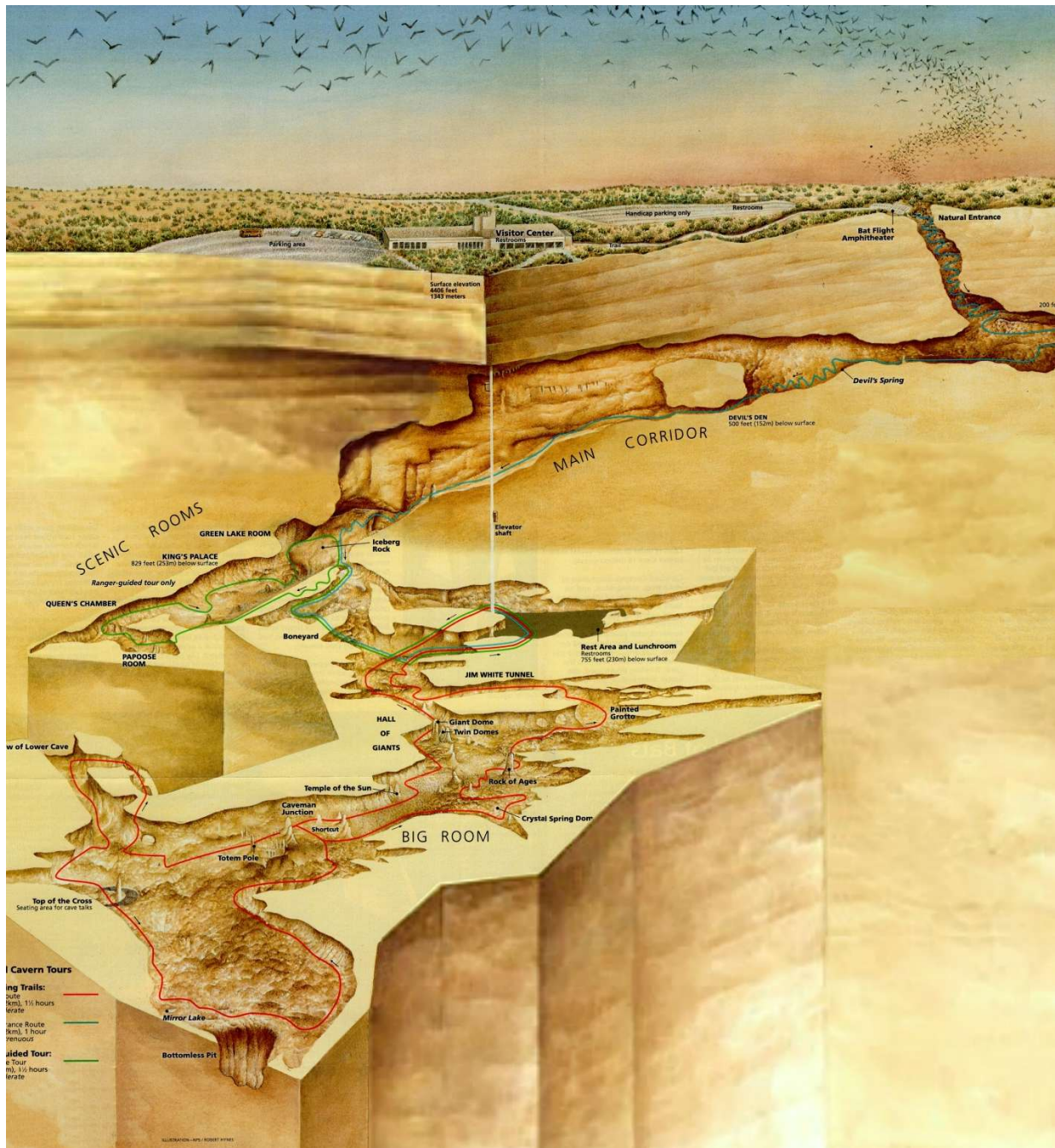
Carlsbad Caverns NP is about 18 miles from the town of Carlsbad. The park actually lies within the boundaries of White City. But, really, which name clicks with you better? Right? Alliteration will win almost every time.



The featured self-guided tour is the trail through The Big Room. It's a simple name, but accurate. Almost 4,000 ft (1,220 m) long, 625 ft (191 m) wide, and 255 ft (78 m) high at its highest point, TBR is the largest chamber in North America and the 32nd largest in the world. [Thanks, as always, Wikipedia.]

Think about those numbers. 4000' is more than three-quarters of a mile. 625 feet is more than two football fields wide.





<http://nps.history.com/publications/cave/index.htm>

SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles is huge, right? But you could fit two them in here. The structure at SoFi is just under 2000' from farthest tip to farthest tip. That's only *half* of the length of the Big Room.

At its widest, the stadium is about 825', though, so it wins on width by 200'.

As for the height, TBR's ceiling is 80' higher than SoFi's (which is 175' above field level). You could fit a *20-story building* under that 255' high limestone cavern roof,

though I'm not sure how you'd get it in there. No way it would fit through that small cave mouth. You'd probably have to bring in the materials and build it in place. Sounds like nutty concept, I know, but, you know what? There's an elevator in that cavern. Somebody *built* it. And with 1932 technology! It is **754** feet tall!!

So, wrap your head around all of that. But what's crazier still is that you have to drive to the top of a high hill to get to the CCNP Visitor Center and cave entrance.

As you drive to it from the town of Carlsbad (where you slept in a hotel parking lot the night before), the area is mostly flat and arid, and then you see one big bump sticking up a few hundred feet in the middle of nowhere.

Eschewing the elevator ride down, you approach the natural entrance and see ... an amphitheater? Bench seating for a couple hundred spectators. But to see what??



Bats. Lots and lots of bats. A nightly swarm of thousands and thousands of Brazilian Free-Tailed Bats gush out and fly off to remote areas for, as the brochure puts it, "a yummy insect dinner."

I dunno. That phrase doesn't work for me. I don't even like pepperoni, so flies, moths, spiders and grasshoppers are *nowhere* near my menu. It's all good, though. The bats can have my share of insectia, and I will have their share of pizza, lasagna, cheeseburgers, Nestle's Crunch Ice Cream Bars, and beer.

The swarms occur between May and October, pouring out around sunset and streaming back in around sunrise. So, if you like bats, this place is for you!

Meanwhile, back down in The Big Room...

While I was savoring the bizarre stalactites (growing from the ceiling down), stalagmites (growing from the floor up), flowstones, popcorn, and other, lesser known calcite formations, I was doing a camera test as well.





When I had purchased my mirrorless Sony a7 just before my Eurohopping spree in 2017, one of the significant reasons was its low-light capability. I anticipated taking a lot of after-dark photos in the cities of Europe – especially Paris, Prague, London and Rome – but I was also thinking ahead to less cosmopolitan things, like, ohhh, cave exploring maybe.

I had been here 18 years before, and, to be frank, those photos sucked. I felt pretty good about them at the time, but this many years later, I can't even look at them.

You could see the shapes OK, but either the resolution was terrible or the noise level was ridiculous, or both. I craved (crove?) better photos in semi-darkness. Hence the a7.





In the meantime, though, smartphone cameras kept getting better and better. It used to be laughable for a customer to request a wide format photo print from a phone camera. That stupid 100 KB file barely looked good on a screen, let alone a 16x20 poster. But, now, you get files that exceed 5 MB, and open on your laptop as 54" x 36" images. Crazy.

So now I had both, and the perfect laboratory for my experiment. I took hundreds of photos in the Big Room, probably at a 3:2 ratio in the iPhone's favor.

I had set the white balance, shutter and aperture the best I knew how on the Alpha-7, but let the Apple's auto settings do what they could.



Back in Blue Maxx hours later, as I pored over the photos from both, I was more than a little surprised to see that the iPhone's immediate results were *clearly* better. Lighting, contrast, and color, were all definitely superior.

**But**, given a bath in photo editing software, the a7 images matched and surpassed the phone photos. Lighting, etc., was at least as good, and details for zooming or enlarging were a clear win for the DSLR camera.

I grudgingly admit I had been a little bit camera snob, albeit a timid one. I still very much bowed to the long-lensed, monopod-wielding, two-bag (plus belt) wearing zealots of the photographic brother/sisterhood. I have never used a light meter in my life, and I admit to envy when I see one deployed.

My pics might not be of that same quality, but I think they are pretty good, and I like them, and I hope you do too. And mine cost **a lot less** to create! Haha.



















These formations are incredible! When you take your time (like 2.5 hours) and are in the right frame of mind (thank you, St. Canato!), you can ponder the process that created them.

Limestone, which the roof/ceiling of the cavern is made of, is porous. Even though we're talking about a couple/few hundred feet of rock, in an area that sees little rain, some water does seep through. As each drop squirms its way through the limestone, it gathers tiny – even microscopic – bits of calcite and carries them along.

When the drop finally squeezes through to the open chamber, it does one of two things. One, it drops to the floor, but most likely in a place where other drops have fallen before. Each splat of a drop disperses the water, but the residue of calcite remains. Maybe an hour later -- maybe a *month* later? -- another drop hits the same spot and leaves another grain.

So here I am, gawking at a 22-foot-tall spire that looks like a melting candle, and pondering how many billions of drops – at, what, one per week?? – it took to create it.

And if the drop doesn't fall to the floor, it exits the ceiling at a spot where others have, and it slowly flows down the side of what is already there: the billions of miniscule





particles that have clung together after their watery taxis have spread itself too thin, evaporated, and left them behind.

How many drops did this beast take???























This place is freaking amazing. The temperature is a constant 56°F. It is really comfortable in here. There are a few benches to sit on and contemplate time and the universe and how puny and insignificant you might be – though you know better, wink, wink – but I did have more miles to cover this afternoon.

Carlsbad Caverns NP was the last “planned stop” on my 2022 tour. Texas loomed next: big, wide, empty, hot and stupid. Several hours of daylight remained.

Check out Guadalupe Mountains NP, maybe? Just cuz it’s less than an hour from here and basically “on the way”? Hard to turn down another National Park, right?

Then the San Antonio Riverwalk? Perhaps Austin? Yeah, gotta check out Austin, say hi to Scott and Jenn.

Meanwhile, my Florida Friends and “Family” are getting blasted with rain and wind from Hurricane Ian. Prayers to y’all; Ian looks nasty. It’s not often that I’d pick West Texas over South Florida, but right now was surely one such time.

















*Count the drops...*