

SANTA RITA CAVES

There are two famous caves in the Santa Rita Mountains, Onyx Cave and the Cave of the Bells. Both of these caves are available for spelunking by the public.

ONYX CAVE - Onyx Cave is located in a limestone outcropping called Onyx Hill near Cave Creek on the eastern slope of the Santa Rita Mountains. The limestone formed from the remains of tiny sea creatures deposited in layers over a vast period of time. Eventually, geological forces deformed, cracked and uplifted the limestone. The cave was formed when acidic water percolated through the cracks in the limestone and enlarged them. Onyx Cave is one of the premier spelunker caves in Southern Arizona. It is a “wet” cave which means that it is still growing. It is about a half mile long and is comprised of a series of passageways and rooms that honeycomb an outcropping of limestone. There are some forty-foot drop offs and shafts that require ropes to fully navigate the cave. There are some large rooms in the back with ponds and beautiful displays of stalactites and stalagmites. Most rooms are connected by claustrophobic crawl spaces.

The cave is first mentioned in the accounts of pioneer ranchers and miners who came to the area in the 1870’s and 1880’s although the presence of various artifacts in the adjacent small shelter cave indicate that it was used by a succession of Native Americans, explorers and hunters.

Increased use of the cave in the 1940’s and 1950’s led to heavy vandalism. Broken formations and paint-scarred walls became the rule rather than the exception. The entrance was gated in 1963 in an effort to preserve the cave but the gate was soon removed by a dynamite charge. No further efforts were made to preserve the cave until 1974 when Escabrosa Grotto, Inc., a Tucson spelunker group, gained control of the cave through a lease from the Forest Service and installed a new gate. Escabrosa Grotto now controls public access and you must contact them at least two weeks in advance of an intended visit to allow time for reservation registration and key transfer.

CAVE OF THE BELLS – The Cave of the Bells is located in Sawmill Canyon on the eastern slope of the Santa Rita Mountains. Like Onyx Cave, the Cave of the Bells is a “wet” or living cave and is known for its unique and varied suite of minerals and formations. It is about ¼ of a mile long with many passages and 60-foot shafts. Access to most rooms was via ropes dropped down steep tunnels or through crevices just wide enough to accommodate a medium sized human body. There are many precipitous drops, pools of water and slippery-lipped ledges that framed the varied limestone stalactite and stalagmite formations. Lake Tunnel, one of its most notable and accessible passages, leads through a large room to a permanent lake about 250 feet below the entrance level. The air in this area of the cave is unusual in that it is warmer than the air at the entrance of the cave instead of cooler. The temperature of the water in the lake has been measured at 76 degrees Fahrenheit which indicates that the lake may be heated by sources below it. The cave is also home to a flock of Sanborn Longnose Bats and access is closed during September to protect the young bats prior to their migration.

Lynn Hodgson is recognized by geologists and speleologists for his thorough explorations of the cave. Hodgson was first made aware of the cave in 1941 by miners working the nearby Snyder Mines who warned him that there was deadly mine gas in the cave. He found the 3-foot diameter entrance described by the miners and noticed air flowing from it. He surmised that the presence of circulating air minimized the threat of mine gas and boldly entered the cave he would come to know like the back of his hand. Hodgson used only carbide lamps and flashlights to combat the darkness, ropes to descend the steep tunnels, occasionally a companion for support and a camera to document his finds plus a lot of confidence to overcome the many unknowns. He called one of his discoveries the Cathedral Dome Room. In it he found some stalactites that were of a much lighter color than the others. He found that if you gently struck them, they produced a sound that was similar to that of bells. These phenomena eventually gave the cave its name, The Cave of the Bells. Unfortunately, subsequent cavers were not as gentle in playing the “bells” and all of these stalactites were eventually broken. It wasn’t until the 1960’s that enough concern was developed over the fragility of the cave that public access was restricted by the installation of a locked gate. Access is by permit only and the key can be obtained at either the Nogales Ranger District or at the Coronado National Forest Supervisor’s Office in Tucson.

The Cave of the Bells is currently closed (August 2008). Refer to the Coronado National Forest Recreational Activities Web Site for information as to when the cave will be reopened to public access.

Summary prepared by T. Johnson from U.S. Forest Service Web Sites, the Santa Cruz Valley Sun and research by Tracy Ackerman.

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