

CAVE of the WINDS

John Brush



Cave of the Winds Canyon

Cave of the Winds is a well known show cave near Manitou Springs in Colorado. Perched high in Williams Canyon on the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains, it attracts some 400,000 visitors a year and in 2011, it celebrates its 130th anniversary as a show cave.

An opportunity to visit the cave arose in February this year while Marjorie and I were in Colorado for a skiing holiday. Faced with the prospect of daunting long weekend queues on the slopes, we decided a 200 km detour to visit the cave was a more inviting option.

We had previously visited Cave of the Winds back in 1995. On that occasion we were fortunate to have been invited by local cavers to visit the spectacular Silent Splendor section of the cave. This is an upper level passage off the show cave route and beyond a tricky vertical muddy squeeze. It was discovered in 1986 and has very restricted access to protect its delicate helictite, anthodite and crystal displays.

When we thought back about our 1995 visit, we realised that although we had entered through the normal show cave entrance and walked on some of the tourist paths, we had seen almost nothing of the show cave. This year, we were determined to fix that omission.

But had we picked the right day? It was a sunny Saturday on a long weekend and, judging by the number of vehicles in the car park, it was apparent that not everyone in Colorado was hitting the ski resort slopes that day. What were all those visitors coming to see?

Inside the huge visitor centre (i.e. gift supermarket and tour sales counter), there were dozens of people milling around, shopping or queuing for tickets. Hmmm! More doubts about trying to see the cave today. On eventually reaching the front of the queue, we were offered a choice of tours; the standard Discovery Tour (45 minutes for \$18) or the Lantern Tour (90 minutes for \$22).



Yes, there were limits on party size and yes, there were lots of people ahead of us and we would have to wait our turn. However, the wait would be only 30 minutes. And yes, provided the first tour returned on time, we would be able to make the last lantern tour of the day with 5 minutes to spare. So, we handed over our money and signed up for both tours.

As we admired the T shirts, coffee mugs, jewellery, fossils and hunting knives in the gift shop, we noticed tour groups were heading into the cave every five minutes. Very efficient and the operation was running like a well-oiled machine. All too soon, "Group 17, with blue cards" was called. It was our turn - and before we had even finished inspecting all the merchandise on offer.

Access to the cave is via a short suspended walkway from the rear of the visitor centre and through a short tunnel excavated in 1895. Once inside the real cave, our guide explained we had to bunch together in family groups or with friends to have our photos taken. Sensing we were all thinking this was just a ploy to extract more money, the guide quickly added that although our photos would be ready to inspect as we left the cave (but with no obligation to buy), the most important reason for the photos was for our safety. If anybody got lost, management would know what they looked like. This seemed like spin to us, but we later came to realise it was a plausible story. Our guide took only a minute or two to photograph everyone using a camera bolted to a hand rail and a flash affixed to the cave wall that was aimed at a small carpeted alcove where we were directed to stand.

As we left the photo area, someone from the office retrieved the memory card from the camera and inserted another one ready for the next party, due in two minutes time.

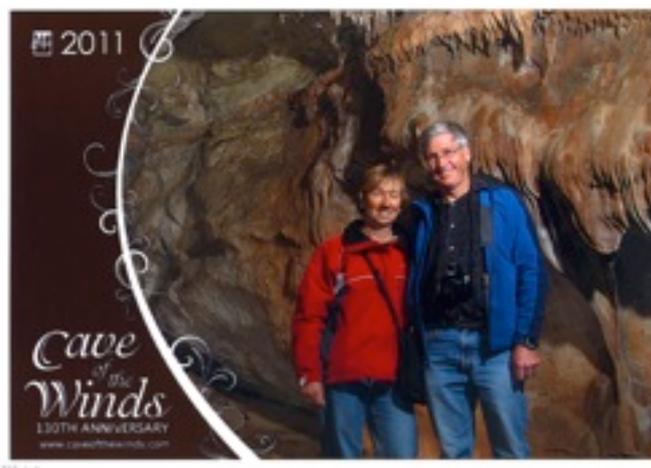
The cave is a joint-controlled phreatic maze with many narrow fissure-like passages along its 3km length. The show cave route is not overly endowed with decoration, due in part to vandalism in the 19th Century.

Our path through the cave took us along many passages and around several loops. We encountered several other tour groups in our travels and at times we had to wait as another group squeezed by.



During two of these encounters we nearly picked up some extras, so perhaps the guide was right about the group photos being a safety measure. Our party was a bit slow, or at least slower than the guide expected, because an elderly woman had brought her mother who had recently suffered a stroke and was, understandably, having some difficulty negotiating the steep and narrow steps and ladders. "They never told us there were any steps", the daughter kept saying. Bringing up the rear of the party, we helped them along. Of course, this had nothing to do with our desire to get back on time to make that second tour.





Souvenir photo

protection for the naked flame and a degree of fire safety for visitors. The light output was feeble, but at least it was possible to see the outline of the low passage immediately in front of us. Soon however, the passage dimensions increased and once our eyes became accustomed to the dim glow of the 20 assembled lanterns, it was possible to see something of the cave. The lanterns certainly added a historic air to the tour. Our guide added to the historic theme by outlining the early commercial, property and legal disputes associated with Cave of the Winds and the rival Manitou Grand Cavern in which we were standing at that moment.

Amazingly, we returned to the entrance almost right on time. As we stepped into the afternoon sunshine, the guide handed out the photos mounted in attractive souvenir folders, with a cheery “keep it if you like and pay \$10 at the shop, or hand it back to me before you leave”. Oh well, it’s only \$10.

Before long, it was time for our lantern tour. This was to take us into an unpaved, unlit part of the cave and we were to be issued with candle lanterns, or at least their modern equivalent. But first we had to pass through a cut-out of a cave passage. As our young guide explained, if we couldn’t bend down and get through this, we wouldn’t make it through the cave. Fair enough. Back into the cave for another ‘safety photo’ and then it was a quick trip along the same tourist route as before, but this time there was no stopping, except at the traffic congestion points.

At the end of the concrete path, we stepped onto earth floor and climbed a set of wooden stairs. At the top, there was a gate and a rack holding rows of metal buckets. The buckets, as we were soon to discover, were our lanterns. Each had a hole punched in the side and into this was inserted a small wick lamp - a glass bottle filled with a kerosene and wick protruding through the lid. A wire running from the lip to the bottom of the bucket formed a handle, so that the bucket was carried on its side with the inside of the base acting as a reflector and the sides providing a degree of wind



The lantern rack

Cave of the Winds was discovered in 1869, but it was not opened to the public until 1881 when George Snider and Charles Rinehart formed a partnership to open the cave. However, the partnership soon soured with, amongst other things, claims by Snider that Rinehart was more interested in collecting (and pocketing) the admission fees than in developing the cave for visitors. In 1884, Snider saw an opportunity to develop another cave he had found in the area and soon traded his half share in Cave of the Winds for forty acres of land near his new cave. Now wary of partnerships, he opened his new cave, Manitou Grand Cavern, to the public in 1885. Before long, there were commercial rivalries between the two operations.



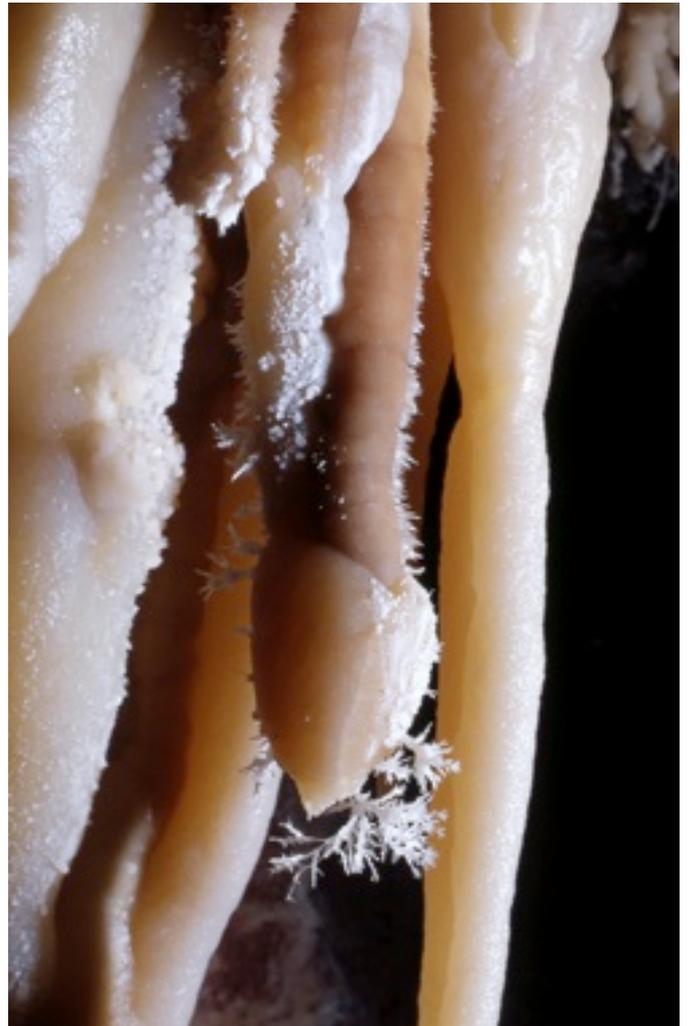
The Tulip- Silent Splendor

The majority of visitors (and revenue) apparently gravitated towards the more spacious and better decorated Grand Cavern, which before long, also advertised an Indian skeleton as an additional viewing attraction. Then there were ownership disputes - under whose property did the caves lie? Both sides scored victories in the courts. However, the legal claims and counter claims that started in 1886 were not fully resolved until 1916 when Snider sold up and moved to California. This followed the final court battle brought by Rinehart's daughter, Emma, which resulted in the Grand Cavern operation being handed over to Cave of the Winds. Under common management, Grand Cavern soon fell into decline and in 1921 the entrance collapsed after heavy rain. In 1929, an underground connection was discovered between the two caves, but it was not until 1973 that the public was again able to visit the Grand Cavern passages on an adventure caving trip. The adventure tours were phased out in 1996 in favour of the lantern tours.

The lantern tour was a relaxed affair and with a captive audience for 90 minutes, the guide had ample time to talk about the fascinating history of the cave and to point out relicts dating from the early 20th Century tours. However, as with our earlier tour we were not overly burdened with information about speleogenesis or morphology of the cave.

Upon returning to the entrance, we eagerly pounced on the souvenir photos. Oh well, it's only another \$10. Interestingly, most people appeared to purchase their photo, so the arrangement seems to be a real money spinner for the operation.

Despite the disappointing spiel on the first cave tour and the general paucity of scientific information about the cave, we came away with a positive impression of our Cave of the Winds experience. Being there on such a busy day certainly demonstrated the management team was able to efficiently handle large numbers of people and, apart from the occasional need to briefly queue in the cave, the numbers did little to diminish our experience. The idea of taking photos of all visitors is something that some local cave operators might give some thought to.



The French Tickler - Silent Splendor



Silent Splendor