

## CAVE of the WINDS-PART 2

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**The Cave of the Winds is a major draw card for nearby Manitou Springs, about 120kms from Denver, Colorado. The passages are filled with stalactites, walls are covered in flowstone and they are open 364 days of the year. They sell season passes, arrange individual tours for groups of 15 or more and each year a number of weddings are performed in the main cave.**

My wife and I wound our way from the highway upwards towards the Cave of the Winds car-park, following ample signage. The car-park is about the size of a cricket pitch and the attractive walkway to the main building is lined with raised stone flowerbeds and yet large enough to accommodate a queue of coaches dropping off and turning. There is no entry fee: anyone can walk in and buy souvenirs, junk-food, soft-drinks, and they are welcome to do so from 10am till 7pm daily, even 9am till 9pm on public holidays.

On first impression this confused me. We just walked in and no-one asked us for money. We walked around the balcony, took photos of the wonderful cliffs on the opposite side of the gorge, took turns on the coin-operated binoculars, then we even walked over to the glassed display of cave history. The limestone was

deposited during the Paleozoic era, some 500 million years ago, the seas that covered Colorado receded around 70 million years ago, the area was lifted and is now classed as high altitude, and the rooms and decorations formed some 4-7 million years ago. Learning this didn't take long as the glassed displays occupy a small corridor, tucked out of the way of the fast-food and souvenir shops.

We wandered into the gift shop and found ourselves in retail paradise. Wall to wall, floor to ceiling souvenirs: mugs, stuffed toys, games, magnetic rocks, books, table mats, tea-towels, you name it, they sell it. There were two checkout areas, at either end of the store, and both had customers queuing. We wandered around and then joined a queue to purchase tickets for the next tour of the cave. A variety of themed tours were on offer such as the "Lantern Tour" which, as the name implies, is conducted with lanterns. We chose the regular tourist tour and spent the next forty minutes browsing through the souvenirs or watching people pan for gold outside. A working sluice keeps the water flowing, pans are supplied, all you need do is buy a bag of "ore". While we were waiting, two other tour groups formed and entered the cave, then it was our turn while about another 50 people milled around behind us, awaiting their tours, shopping or panning for gold. This cave hosts many thousands of visitors per year.

We entered the cave and immediately everyone was required to pose for a photo in front of a green screen, the antithesis of nature-based tourism. We politely refused but clearly we were mistaken and needed the process explained to us in simpler terms. Disapproving frowns at our individualism over, our tour guide could have worked in Disney, pattering off her scripted safety



*Pay binoculars and opposing cliffs*



*The walk from the carpark to the entrance  
Photo: Cheryl Buzzacott*

brief and politically correct joke, all of it simple enough for children to grasp. The footpaths are well maintained, there are 200 or so stairs but the pace is slow enough for herds of tourists to puff their way along. Today the chatty guide delivered the usual spiel about rainwater dissolving the limestone above and we listened to how stalactites hang down and stalagmites grow up and they're both grown by depositing calcium and so on. The lighting was static but restrained, (I didn't spot any algal growth), and the decorations ranged from massive frozen flows to delicate helictites. In one of the blander passages someone had thoughtfully written on the wall (in stone) "DREAMS OF MOUNTAIN AS IN THEIR SLEEP THEY BROOD ON THINGS ETERNAL", which gave everyone something to think about. Mainly I wondered where the pieces were that people had snapped off.

We found ourselves back at the gift shop just as another group entered the cave to have their photos taken in front of the green screen. Their tour guide gave the same safety brief, made the same politically correct joke and they wandered off down the passage. A few of us purchased digitally-enhanced fake photos, all of them now printed and hanging in rows, but most ended up in an overflowing bin destined for landfill.

The Cave of the Winds is professionally managed and one of the most popular show caves in the USA, even more so since Al Gore announced this is where the "man-bear-pig" lives in an episode of South Park. Aside from the well-trodden paths, there are wild sections closed to the public, hidden bat colonies and rare crystalline speleothems housed in controlled humidity. But, from a show cave management perspective, the Cave of the Winds is also worth a visit to see how efficiently people can part with their money. No-one does this as well as our American colleagues so the next time you're passing call in – it's free to go in and look around...



*Above Some of the more than 200 steps*

*Below left Silent Splendor Photo: John Brush*

*Below right Wide paths and ample lighting*

