

GOUFFRE du FRIOUATO, MOROCCO

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Discovery, location and statistics

According to a Moroccan tourism website, Gouffre du Friouato is the largest known cave system in Northern Africa. It was discovered by Norbert Casteret in 1930 and the current entrance was made for tourists in 1932. Cavers have reputedly explored it to a depth of 272m. It is located 160km from Fez and 14 km southwest of the town of Taza, at an elevation of 1492m. The temperature in the cave is 13° Celsius.

A well kept secret

Gouffre du Friouato did not appear in any guide books I had seen. I learnt of it through our wonderful tour guide in Tunisia. He was a caver (one of only about forty in Tunisia) with a Moroccan mother. He had gone out of his way to include Tunisian caves on our itinerary (though there was only time to divert past their locations). When he heard we were also going to Morocco he suggested we may be interested in visiting the only show cave he knew of in that country. The only information he had was that it was somewhere near Fez.

Naturally we made enquiries of our Moroccan guide, who had never heard of any caves near Fez, or indeed anywhere in Morocco. But, being a good guide he investigated for us. It turned out there was a cave within a day of Fez. He thought it might actually be a wild cave, but we would be able to access it. He arranged a taxi driver for us from Fez, in lieu of a day spent visiting a nearby village with the rest of the tour group.

Our driver was very helpful, though he spoke no English, and the drive cost about 100 dirham (not much) from memory. Moroccan taxi drivers have to pass a test similar to our Driver Authority check and need to go to the police to register before they can take you outside the town limits. Our tour guide said they are very trustworthy, when I asked could we leave valuables with him, and indeed our driver was.

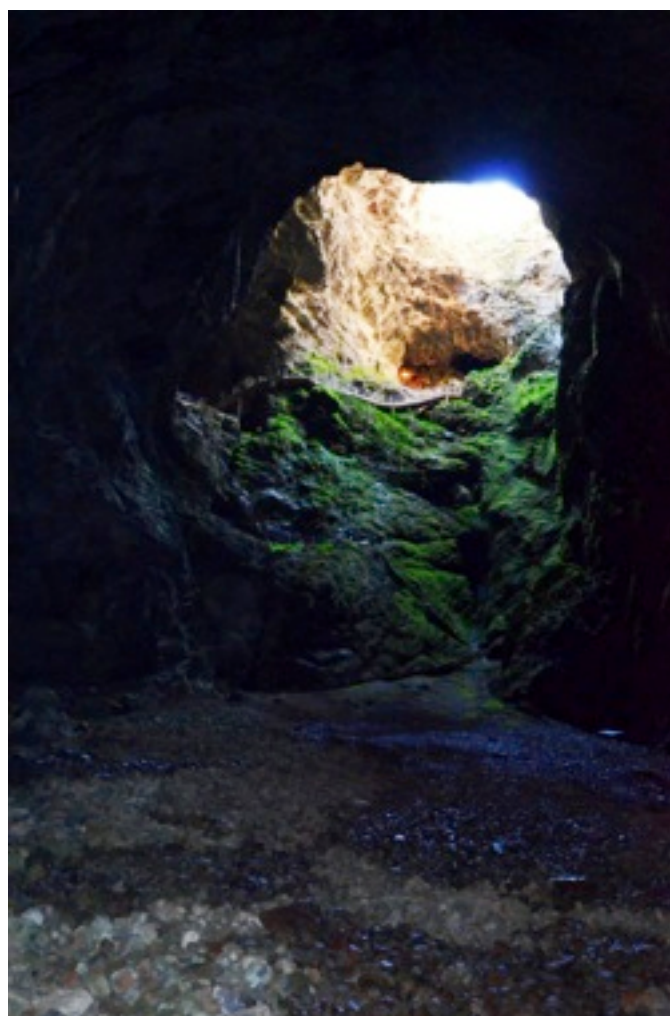
The drive itself was wonderful, taking us through ancient cork forests in the Tazekka National Park and past sweeping views of the snow-capped Middle Atlas Mountains. Eventually, after passing through the large town of Taza, we ended up on the high plateau, home to the nomadic Berber people. The road was mostly bitumen.

Access management

With no-one at the cave speaking English, and us having a distinct lack of Arabic and very basic French, communication was difficult; however the welcome was warm. As we inspected the cave I tried to find out as much as possible about its management and history.



*Entry sign
Photo: Sasa Kennedy*



*Looking up from base of doline
Photo: Sasa Kennedy*



Jemel, our cave guide
Photo: Sasa Kennedy

The entry price to the cave was very reasonable, from memory five dirham (less than a dollar) each to enter the doline and 200 dirham (about \$25) for a tour of up to 3km into the cave. Interestingly, visitors could choose to go with a guide or venture in on their own. We chose to go with a guide, knowing the value of this, even with language limitations. The maximum number per guide is 10 visitors, with the site being very busy in summer.

Visitors who choose to go with a guide must wear construction helmets during the tour and are given a torch. We used our own headlamps. The construction helmets were a constant problem, falling off when you looked up or when knocked by a camera, and being difficult to fit a headlamp to. This proved to require quite a juggling act when trying to take photos. I would strongly advise visitors to take their own helmet!

Our guide, Jemel, did not use any of the helmets, but was insistent we kept ours on. Interestingly visitors who choose to go through the cave without a guide are not offered a helmet. Unfortunately Jemel could not understand our questions about this aspect of the tour management. We were also told we would not need



Minimal impact signage
Photo: Sasa Kennedy

water, but with 520 stairs straight up out of the doline my advice would be to take at least a litre, as the climb out is relentless and the individual steps very high.

Also on our tour was a German couple. The man was concerned about his camera gear in the cave, but was assured there wouldn't be any problems with it; his partner was claustrophobic, but was also told she would be fine, as the cave was spacious at all times.

Tour management

The cave entry is quite discreet, being through a locked door and short, natural passageway. Then you emerge into a magnificent doline, with a 20m wide skylight at the top; large enough that visitors at the base appear as ant-sized. The collapse hole allows in sufficient light that there is abundant vegetation on the upper sections of the cavern and ample light to see the chamber clearly. Unfortunately there was also plenty of graffiti.

There was no pressure from Jemel at any time to hurry and our group took many photos. At the bottom of the doline we had to reverse through a very low set of steps, where the smallish entry to the next chamber had been largely bricked in, presumably to limit access at some previous time. A lack of any type of gate meant it no longer served this purpose, but was possibly affecting air flow to the following chambers. On a wall just past these steps was a profusion of graffiti, much of it (unsurprisingly) in Arabic.

It was at this stage that the German couple decided to turn back. He was having trouble with the helmet/camera juggle and, though we all tried to help, the woman's claustrophobia prevented her getting through the tight entry to the inner cave. The couple were allowed to depart the group and make their way back through the doline without a guide. There was no radio or other communications to let the visitor centre staff know to look out for them, but as visitors are allowed access to the doline without a guide this was to be expected.



*Stairs down into the doline
Photo: Sasa Kennedy*

We continued on and discovered that this was indeed more of an adventure tour than a show cave. From this point there was no pathway or handrails, though a sturdy ladder and a plank over a chasm did prove helpful in negotiating a few spots. The cave was very slippery throughout. On many occasions I had cause to regret my lack of a backpack, as I struggled to keep my camera dry and secure, and my hindering, unsecured helmet in place while in effect needing both hands for caving.

The cavern was extensive, with scattered formations including a shower-head similar to those found in Mulu, a lovely crystal pool of water which I drank from (being quite thirsty after the long descent) and some nice formations high in the roof. There are also some large crystal formations on the floor and many large, though shallow, rim pools on the floor of the cave.

In all it was quite well decorated in places and we would have loved to spend longer, but we needed to get back to Fez that evening and were aware of our patient driver waiting outside in the heat. Where a water crossing would have necessitated our getting quite wet (and risking the camera getting even wetter) we reluctantly turned back. The section of the tour we completed took

about two hours. Our guide would have happily continued with us for as long as we wished – great value for 200 dirhams.

At the point where we decided to turn back there was a group, with no caving experience and no caving gear, heading further into the cave unaccompanied. Given some of the terrain we had crossed this could potentially be quite risky. With better language skills I would have loved to ask our guide more about the management decision that permitted this effectively unrestricted access.

The minimal infrastructure in the cave certainly resulted in a more adventurous experience of a less disturbed cave than that of most guided tours. Obstacles such as the narrow plank over the 2-3 metre chasm, however, could cause issues for many visitors.

Cave management

The website for Friouato explains the need for, and details of, minimal impact practice in caves, but the only evidence of this being carried through at the site was a sign asking visitors not to touch the speleothems.



Cave graffiti
Photo: Sasa Kennedy



Sasa Kennedy crossing a pool
Photo: Richard Kennedy

The locked gate and the sheer height of the doline would prevent most unauthorised entry and further damage to the cave. However, there did not seem to be any verbal minimal impact instructions given to visitors touring with a guide. There was some litter throughout the doline, but none seen in the dark chambers.

Throughout the cave we had seen quite extensive wiring, indicating the cave had previously been lit, which would have made guided tours quite a different experience. Our guide said they had discontinued lighting the cave as it was causing temperature changes. He may have meant lampenflora resulting from the heat/light combination. It also seemed highly likely that there would have been problems with keeping moisture out of the system, as the cave was very wet. It would be good to see the wiring removed if there is no plan to restore the lighting system, to avoid any leaching of materials into the cave and remove a visual detractor.

Other infrastructure included a very sturdy set of wooden steps, a wooden ladder and the aforementioned

plank. The website indicates plans to improve infrastructure in the cave to allow easier and safer passage.

Conclusion

While we found the tour an enjoyable experience, and a welcome break from the heat above ground, there were many aspects of the cave management which were puzzling. Some can be explained by the laissez-faire attitude to rules and authority which prevails in Moroccan society in general; others by a probable lack of funding. However, stricter enforcement of minimal impact practice would result in less rubbish littering the cave and visitor safety would be improved by ensuring groups other than experienced cavers were accompanied by a guide, at least in the sections of cave past the doline.