

SHOW CAVES in the MOTHER LODE COUNTRY of the SIERRA NEVADA, CALIFORNIA

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There are several show caves scattered along the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada (which roughly translates from Spanish as “snowy mountains”) and when the mountains are being battered gale-force winds, rain, sleet and, at higher altitudes, too much nevada, what better way could there be to spend a day away from the ski slopes than to head into some caves.

Marjorie Coggan and I had visited Moaning Caverns several years ago and in February this year, we had an opportunity to visit Black Chasm Cavern and Mercer Caverns, thanks to the unfriendly weather.

All of the caves noted below are in an area of the Sierra Nevada foothills known as the Mother Lode Country, an area about 200km long and a few kilometres wide that was the source of much of the gold discovered during the California Gold Rush in the 1850s. Following the initial gold discovery in 1848, prospectors poured into the area and it is hardly surprising that all the caves - or caverns - mentioned here were discovered by prospectors.

Many American show caves are called caverns and the distinction between a cave and a cavern is not immediately apparent, but on reflection, it seems that many small American show caves are called caverns whereas many large ones are simply called caves. In other words, cavern would appear to be used for marketing reasons and it reminds me of the old joke:

What is the difference between a cavern and a cave? ... About \$15!

Mercer Caverns

Mercer Caverns is a short distance along a sealed, but narrow and winding road from the town of Murphys, a small town about 150 kilometres southeast of Sacramento, the state capital. The cave was discovered by Walter Mercer while looking for gold early in September 1885. At first, all he could do was drop rocks through a small drafting hole, but after borrowing equipment from a nearby mine, the hole was soon enlarged and Mercer and a friend were lowered in. Their quest for gold was in vain, but they did find several human skeletons and Mercer emerged from the cave with a thigh bone and the germ of an idea in his head. Within weeks Mercer had gated the entrance and was charging a fee to show visitors into the cave. He called his discovery New Cavaleras Cave – Cavaleras apparently meaning “place of the skulls”.



*Entrance to the Mercer Caverns Property
Photo: John Brush*

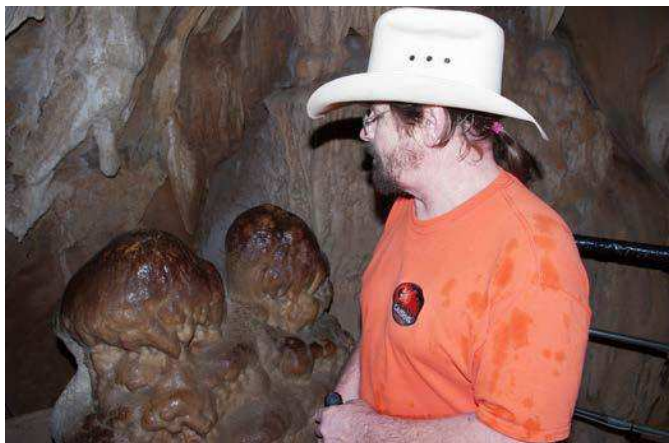
Walter suffered from ill health, partly due to a fall sustained in the cave after a rope broke and he died in 1900 at the age of 46 and so never experienced the electric lighting that was installed in 1901. Over time, the cave became known as Mercer Cave and it remained in the Mercer family until it was sold in 1946. At that time, the new owners renamed it Mercer Caverns.

Not long after Walter Mercer discovered the cave, he built a small house right beside the entrance. In later years the cottage was used as a ticket office and gift shop and today it remains as a historic relic and, as we



The original cottage built by Walter Mercer right beside the cave entrance later became the ticket office and gift shop and is now a historic relic. The artificial exit tunnel is to the right of the cottage.

Photo: John Brush



A Mercer Caverns guide explaining that this twin stalagmite is the one and only speleothem in the cave that visitors are allowed to touch.

Photo: John Brush



Aragonite crystal clusters, Mercer Caverns.

Photo: John Brush

discovered on the day of our trip, its veranda serves as a very welcome rain shelter while waiting for cave tours to start. As we waited under the veranda, a jovial character emerged from the cave clutching a large tripod and camera gear and introduced himself as “Steve”. It was Steve Rawlings, the cave owner and current President of the National Caves Association, the American equivalent of ACKMA.

In a few minutes, our guide arrived and after Steve headed off, the party was ushered into the cave. From the entrance, steps lead down to Gothic Hall, the largest chamber – or is that cavern – in the cave. This chamber is not overly decorated but it does have some notable features including, a brown-stained twin stalagmite, which since Walter Mercer’s day has been the sole speleothem in the cave that visitors are allowed to touch, and nearby, a 1.5 metre stalagmite with an inclined drill hole near the top which was apparently used in the early days as a lantern holder. From here, the steps continue

down past the Angel’s Wings, a superb pair of shawls that are about a metre wide and over 2 metres long. They are protected from inquisitive hands by a sheet of clear plastic.

Passage dimensions in the lower section are relatively modest but many of the walls are encrusted with clusters of branching aragonite crystals. The clusters are spectacular and it was not surprising to hear that one removed from the cave was exhibited at the Paris World Fair in 1900 and won the Grand Prize.

The cave is about 60 metres deep with the tour route bottoming out at nearly 50 metres (and 208 steps) below the entrance. On the trip out of the cave, involving a climb up 232 steps, we began to wonder why all the iron handrails had been wrapped in black plastic insulation tape. Was it to reduce the risk of electrocution from any faulty wiring? Or was to improve visitor comfort by covering up the rusty pipe-work? A branch in the path took us back up by another route and out through a



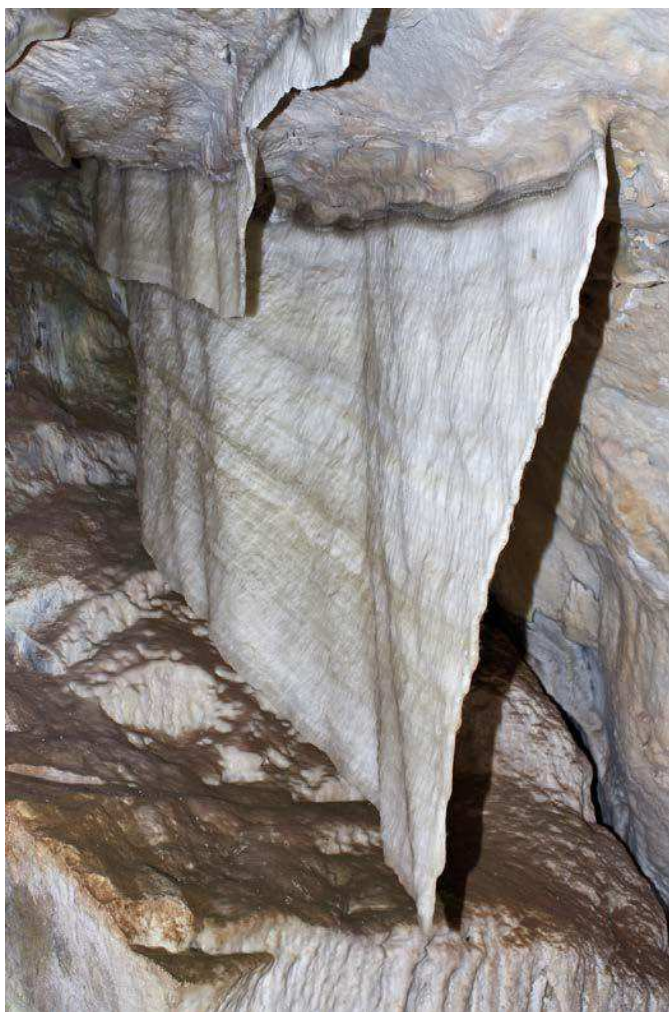
PVC-wrapped handrails in Mercer not only reduce any risk of electrocution, but are also smoother to the touch.

Photo: John Brush



An early form of lighting in Mercer. On climbs, the paddle handle was clenched between teeth.

Photo: John Brush



*The Angel's Wing shawl.
Photo: John Brush*

second entrance that was dug out by Walter Mercer and which was, incidentally, the site of his unfortunate fall.

Although the cave is relatively small, there is much to see during the 45 minute tour. Photography is allowed in the cave, but as I had not intended to do any cave photography on this trip, the results with the equipment to hand were a little disappointing.

Black Chasm Cavern

Black Chasm lies in wooden hill country near the town of Volcano, about 60km (by road) north of Mercer. The short gravel road into the property leads steeply uphill to a large and welcoming visitor centre and gift shop. The shop has a wide range of cave publications on sale as well as the more usual racks of T-shirts and jackets, polished 'gem' stones, and plastic trinkets. Browsing through it all easily filled the 30 minute wait for our tour.

As with Mercer, this cave was discovered by gold miners. The first documented trip was in 1854, but it is likely the cave was known to miners for two or three years before that. In the late 1850s, miners enlarged the entrance



*Queueing to enter Black Chasm Cavern.
Photo: John Brush*

and constructed steps and a wooden viewing platform in the upper level and tours were offered for several years during the 1860s. After just a few years of use, the wooden infrastructure deteriorated and tours ceased. The cave is about 50 metres deep and those early visitors would have been lucky to see anything of the lakes in the inky depths below the viewing platform.

The cave lay forgotten for many decades until cavers took an interest in exploration, including diving the lakes, in



*An array of helictites in the Landmark Room showing
Black Chasm Cavern's trademark dragon.
Photo: Lisa Boulton © Sierra Nevada Recreation
Corporation.*



Visitors admiring decorations from the viewing platform in The Landmark Room, Black Chasm.

Photo: John Brush

the 1950s and 1960s. Although there were very early references to spectacular crystal growths in the cave, it is cavers who are generally credited with discovering the extensive displays of large helictites near the end of the current show cave route.

The cave is adjacent to a quarry and was in danger of being destroyed during the 1960s. However it was reprieved by a fall in the price of limestone, which slowed quarrying, and lobbying efforts by the National Speleological Society. Continued lobbying to formally protect the cave and its magnificent helictites resulted in the cave being declared a National Natural Landmark in 1976. The quarry owner subsequently separated off the cave area and in 1996, the cave property was bought by the Sierra Nevada Recreation Corporation. After several years of offering adventure-style trips, the company installed lighting and low-impact (corrosion-resistant) walkways and steps that enabled normal show cave tours to commence in 2000.



Fine drapery display in The Landmark Room, Black Chasm.

Photo: John Brush

Tour group size is limited to 20 and on our Saturday afternoon tour, we must have been approaching that number, making for a very slow descent on the steep and narrow stairways. However, the show cave route is quite short, and there ample opportunity to see everything – and take photos – during the 50 minute tour. The show cave route ends in The Landmark Room and from the elevated viewing platform there are spectacular displays of speleothems in all directions and it is difficult to decide which way to look first. Towards the undercut flowstone cascade, or the magnificent draperies, the helictite wall or perhaps the helictite clusters on the roof above?

The return trip follows the same route back to the entrance, enabling another look at the interesting features along the way.

Moaning Cavern

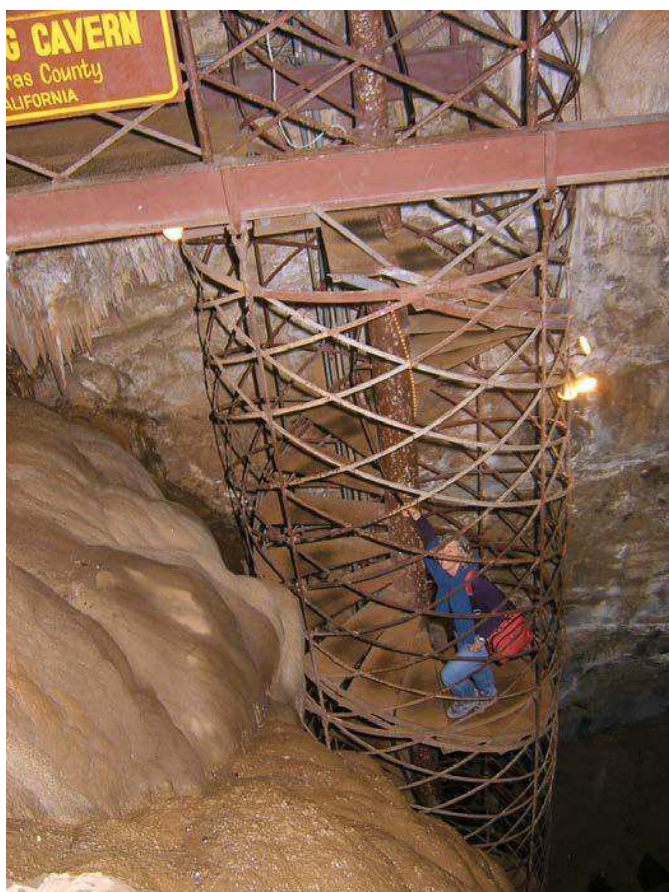
Moaning Cavern can be found about 12km south of Mercer Caverns. We did not visit the cave on this trip, but were able to see it while in the area with Californian caving friends in 2007.

The show cave route starts inside the Visitor Centre and descends on narrow wooden steps and walkways in a



The steel spiral staircase in Moaning Caverns dates from 1922 – and looks it. Note the abseiler, top left, who has chosen a possibly safer means of descent.

Photo: John Brush



*Marjorie Coggan near the top of the 8-revolution spiral staircase in Moaning Caverns.
Photo: John Brush*

tight fissure before opening out into a huge pit, the floor of which – and the end of the tour route – is about 50 metres down. Total depth of the cave is about 125 metres. Arguably, the most spectacular feature of the cave is a 30 metre steel spiral staircase with 144 steps in 8 revolutions that takes visitors to the floor of the pit. The staircase was fabricated in 1922 using steel from the hull of a World War I battleship and was apparently the first arc-welded project in California. Superficially at least, the staircase looks to be showing its age and for the faint-hearted, an abseil descent is offered as an extra-cost alternative. However, abseilers still have to use the stairs to return to the surface.

The cave was discovered by gold prospectors in 1851, but as no gold was found, the cave was soon forgotten. It was rediscovered in 1919 and tours were first offered to the public in 1920. At first, visitors were lowered in an ore bucket on the end of a rope. Access became much easier – and safer – after the spiral staircase was built.

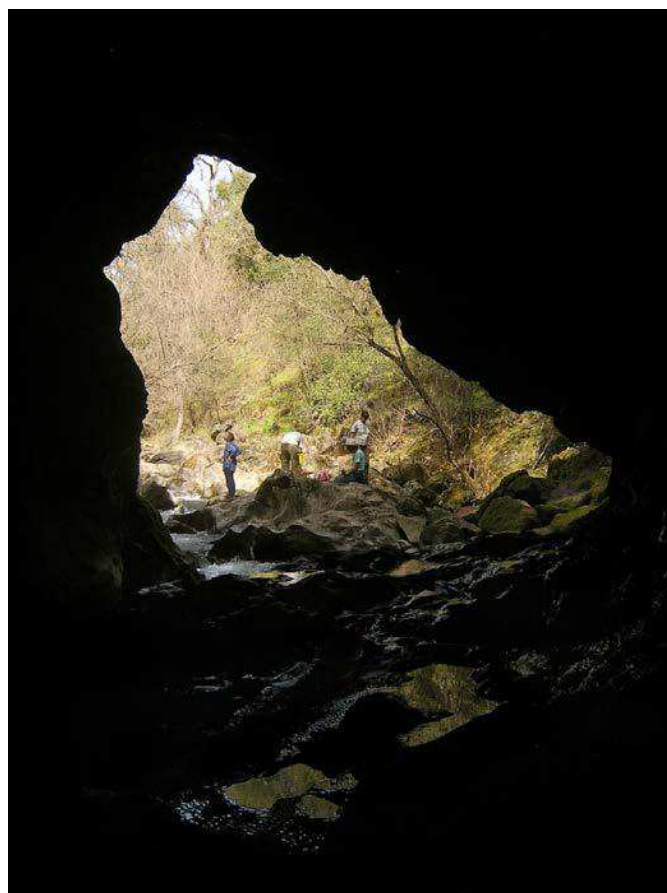
The early gold explorers are reputed to have named the cave after a moaning sound that could be heard in the pit and listening for it was a feature of the ore-bucket descents. However, by the time the spiral staircase was finished, the sound had disappeared and in subsequent decades the moaning sound was little more than a

legend. When the cave was purchased by the Sierra Nevada Recreation Corporation in 1977, its principals Steve and John Fairchild, became intrigued by early reports of the moans. After considerable research they discovered that the sound was made by water drops falling into drip holes in flowstone on the floor of the pit. The moaning ceased when debris from construction of the staircase partly covered the drip holes and the dripping water was diverted away from the steel structure. And so, with this discovery, the Fairchild brothers were able to restore the moaning sound that was last heard in 1922. Somewhere along the way, the cave also became a cavern.

California Cavern

We did not have time to visit California Cavern, which is about 40 minutes' drive north of Mercer Caverns, but it sounds like an interesting cave. It is the largest show cave in the area and appears to be the most varied. It also lays claim to being the first show cave to open in California, in 1851.

The cave is another in the Sierra Nevada Recreation Corporation portfolio. Two tours are offered, depending on the season, as well as several adventure caving options.



*Upstream end of the lower Cavaleras Natural Bridge.
Photo: John Brush*



*Upstream end of the lower Cavaleras Natural Bridge.
Photo: John Brush*

The Cavaleras Natural Bridges

Strictly speaking, the natural bridges are not show caves, but they are spectacular, publicly-accessible features that are well worth a visit. They are just a few kilometres down the road from Moaning Cave and to visit them involves an easy 20 minute walk from the road.

The bridges are in travertine and formed as deposits from spring waters slowly covered over two sections of

Coyote Creek. In other words, they are accretion caves. The upstream cave is larger and at 70 metres is slightly longer than the downstream cave. Both are well decorated and the lower one has actively-forming rimstone dams. On a hot summer's day, a swim through the caves would be a pleasant through-trip, but in late winter, the time of our visit in 2007, the water is decidedly frigid.

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