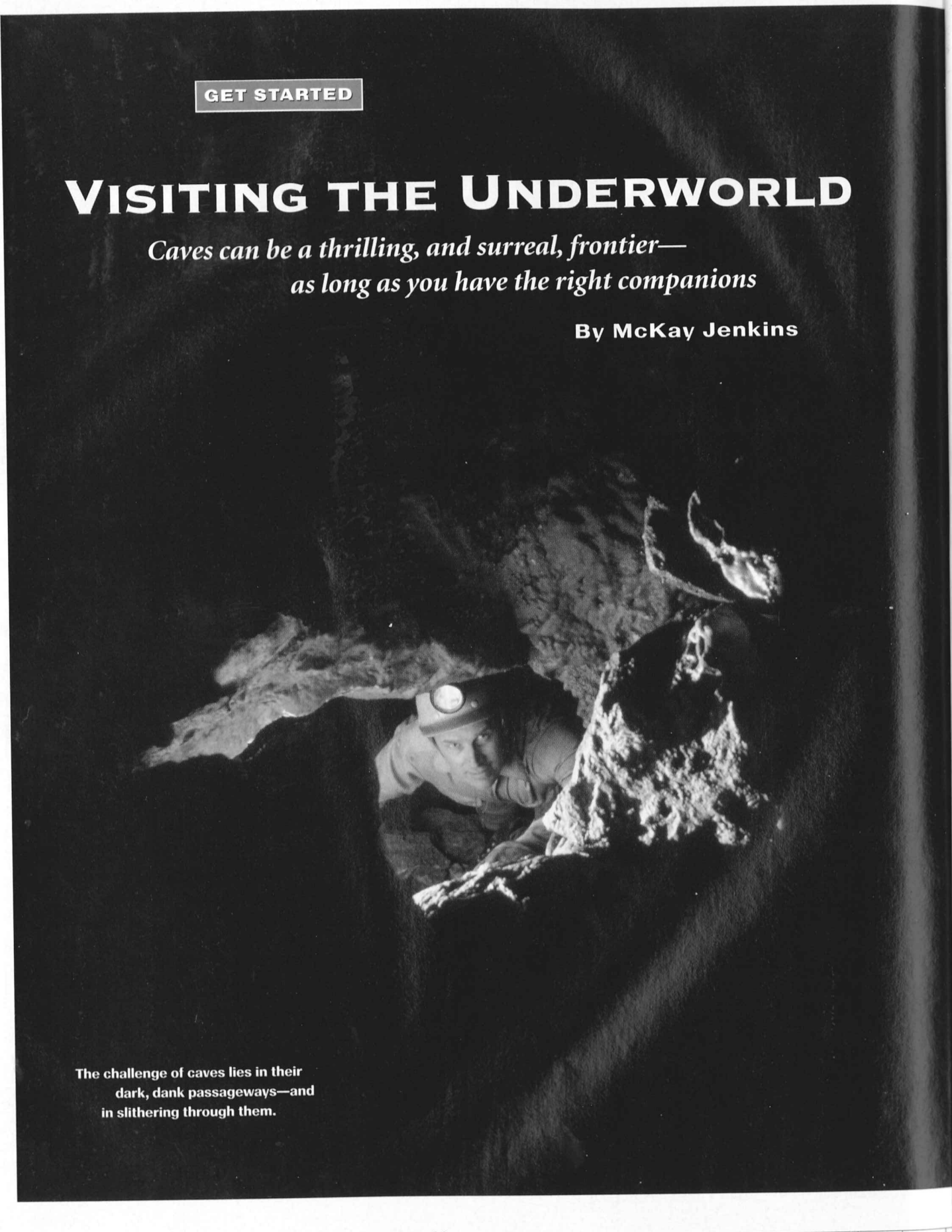


GET STARTED

VISITING THE UNDERWORLD

*Caves can be a thrilling, and surreal, frontier—
as long as you have the right companions*

By McKay Jenkins



The challenge of caves lies in their
dark, dank passageways—and
in slithering through them.

IN CAVING, AS IN LIFE, YOU HAVE TO crawl before you can walk. And it now seems to me that in caving, as in life, before you crawl you have to pass through a wet, slimy and entirely too small passage called the Birth Canal. Headfirst.

My rebirthing experience was aided by the Central New Jersey Grotto, a chapter of the National Speleological Society. One of its members, Paul Steward, an experienced and enthusiastic caver, invited me to come along one Thursday evening to New Jersey's largest known cave, near Flemington. (The cavers asked me not to reveal its name.) I've spent much of my life exploring the outdoors, I thought, so just how weird could this be?

Let's just say that after my first night of caving, I understood why newborns sometimes come out looking like coneheads. There's just not enough room in there.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM WILD CAVES

I had been in caves before, as many people have, but they were big, commercial affairs with enormous, electrically lit chambers big enough to hold a Bruce Springsteen concert. This one was what cavers call a "wild" cave, a network of underground passages unknown to anyone outside the rather secretive caving community.

Some wild caves have passageways that go on for miles and miles; explorers can wander around in there for days at a stretch, gleefully living in a world with no distinction between day and night. Caves

often have tight squeezes to negotiate; some deep ones require rappels, and others may have frigid, fast-moving underground rivers that must be waded. But many caves are not so taxing, and exploring even the humblest can be exhilarating.

Steward and three others led me and another beginner into the cave at 7 p.m. I had imagined myself wedged into a slot under 50 feet of rock, battling a bout of claustrophobia, but the squeezes we encountered, though occasionally uncomfortable, didn't bother me. Instead, I was lulled by the quiet and the unfathomable darkness. There is a gentleness about caves that is at odds with their reputation.

The utter stillness inside the cavern was unlike anything I had felt before. Even the spell of scuba diving, which provides a similar sense of sublime alienation from our everyday environment, is regularly broken by the sound of your own breathing. Not so in a cave, where the loudest sound may be the almost imperceptible plop of a water droplet somewhere off in the subterranean distance.

The only thing more complete than the silence is the darkness. The first time all six of us could sit together in a single underground room, we extinguished our headlamps. After a few moments, one of the experienced cavers asked the beginners to put our hands in front of our noses. "You may think you see your hands, because you're so used to seeing them," he said. "But you don't. You don't see anything."

He was right. The blackness was total.

When we scanned the cave with our lights, we saw no stalagmites and no towering formations smothered in 44,000-year-old bat guano, as there are in New Mexico's Carlsbad Caverns. This was, after all, New Jersey. Yet even here, the caving proved thrilling. Formed, as most caves are, by mildly acidic water that had worn tunnels into the soluble limestone, the cave's slender main passage seemed like the well-lubricated throat of a giant soprano.

Much of our three-hour expedition was spent hunched under low ceilings or contorting our hips and shoulders to squeeze from one small room to another. After sucking in our bellies and squirming through sphincterlike slits—like the Birth Canal and the Mail Slot—we arrived in the Dome Room. The 40-foot ceiling and overhanging balconies made us feel as if we were in Lucifer's own private opera house.

FINDING CAVES MEANS FINDING CAVERS

There's only one safe way to get into the sport: Contact a caving club, known as a grotto, and persuade its members to take you out. Caves have all kinds of dangers that might elude the eye of a newcomer—experienced cavers are the only ones who can teach you the ropes.

Members of grottoes, many of whom have been exploring the underworld for decades, have spent a great deal of time and energy cultivating relationships with landowners and are quite respectful of

THE GOOD RAP ON BATS

These fragile cave-dwellers give us insect-free skies and tasty salads

Like sharks and wolves, bats have accrued a sinister mythology that belies their place in the biological world. Bats are rarely aggressive. Only about one half of one percent of them contract rabies, and no rabies cases have been reported among cavers. Chances are you'll encounter bats if you pursue caving. Be careful when you do—for the sake of the bats.

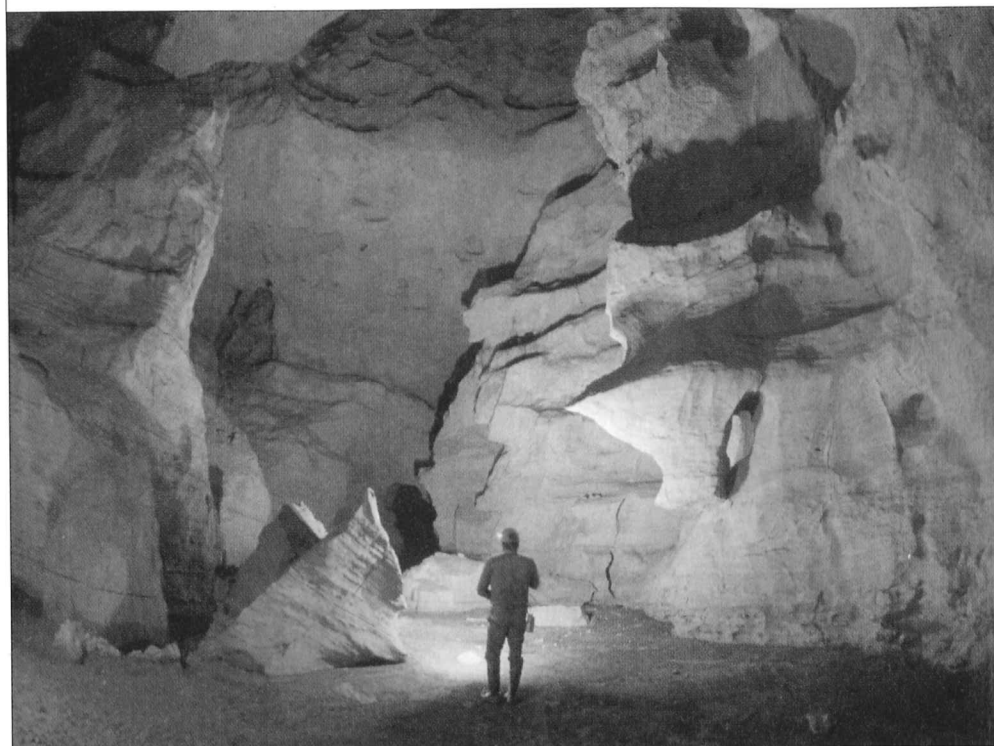
Just as scuba diving has inflicted vast damage on coral reefs, caving has taken a toll on bats. Some reports estimate that many millions have been killed

from the destruction of habitat and the disruption of caves used for hibernation. When humans enter a hibernation cave, bats frightened by light or voices may burn so much of their fat reserves that they starve to death before spring. So stay out of hibernation caves, and if you see bats, don't stress them out by shining your light at them.

Bats consume hundreds of thousands of tons of insects each year. The 20 million free-tailed bats in Bracken Cave near San Antonio, Texas, can consume 125 tons of bugs in a single night.



At the other end of things, farmers have removed some 100,000 pounds of bat guano from a single cave; among the many guano-fertilized crops are white and black pepper. Think about this the next time a waiter grinds away above your arugula salad. —M.J.



Part of the appeal of caving is coming upon vast underground chambers—and taking care to leave them intact.

private property. They know that accidents, particularly ones involving novices who haven't bothered to ask permission to use a cave on private land, are the quickest way to ensure that caves get padlocked or cemented shut. They also know that underground rescue can be a tricky business, and that greenhorns on their own are bound to learn about the dangers of caving the hard way. It's in the best interest of experienced cavers to help train newcomers in the sport, though they will often remain tight-lipped about their favorite spots.

Like magicians loath to reveal their secrets except to those certain to guard them well, cavers will commonly take you out only after you have attended at least one grotto meeting. This, it seems to me, is fair enough; better to weed out the impulsive in favor of those willing to commit to some basic training and education.

The cavers I traveled with were very respectful of the cave, and they made sure I showed it the same care they did. I came away impressed, not only by the delicacy of the sport but also by the skill, knowl-

edge and sense of responsibility of those who practice it.

One more thing to keep in mind: Beware of calling cavers "spelunkers." Speleology is the scientific study of the cave environment, but the word *spelunking*, which was apparently coined by a Massachusetts bookseller in the 1930s, has never caught on among cavers. As a member of the Philadelphia Grotto told me, "Spelunkers are an accident waiting to happen, people who go into a cave without training or proper equipment, usually dressed in a T-shirt, jeans and sneakers, carrying only one flashlight and possibly a six-pack of beer."

ESSENTIAL GEAR

You'll need full climbing gear for caves requiring rappels and a wet suit to keep you warm in river caverns, but caves suitable for first-timers can be navigated on foot or on all fours with basic equipment and provisions.

For our trip, we took only small packs filled with spare lights and batteries, food and water and extra polypropylene shirts. As for what to wear, seasoned cavers favor a stout pair of coveralls over a layer of long underwear. If you can't buy or borrow coveralls, sturdy windpants and a jacket

will do; be prepared for them to get permanently mud-stained. Hiking boots, gloves and knee and elbow pads will also make your experience more pleasant. A helmet, construction- or climbing-style, is a must.

But all the best gear won't do you a lick of good without reliable light sources, and headlamps are the best lights for caving. Trying to wiggle through a slot with flashlight in hand would be unnecessarily, and in some cases dangerously, complicating. Wise cavers always carry at least two spare sources of light, be they headlamps or flashlights.

Beyond burned-out batteries or injury, the biggest concern of a caver is hypothermia. Most caves are damp and quite cool. (They remain at a constant tem-

perature that's about the same as the average surface temperature, usually in the 50's.) Staying warm and dry is a priority, especially if you plan to be underground for any length of time.

Cavers always try to explore in groups of at least four; if someone gets hurt, two people can go for help and leave an able-bodied companion to assist the injured. And the more cavers you travel with, the more there are to spot you and offer advice while you maneuver up a slippery wall or past a hole in the floor that looks as if it goes straight to the ninth circle of hell.

GETTING IN TOUCH

The first step in learning caving is to contact the National Speleological Society (256-852-1300; caves.org), whose Web site has links to grottoes across the country. Then you can look forward to being born again. Just remember to take a towel. ☼

McKay Jenkins is the author of The White Death: Tragedy and Heroism in an Avalanche Zone.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE:

Learn the basics of **birdwatching**, including ways to identify birds from wrens to redknobs to raptors.

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