

AN EXPEDITION UNDERGROUND

by Suzanne Phillips

Beneath the gently rolling foothills of California's Gold Country is a surprising opportunity for some high adventure "caving." Also known as "spelunking," the sport of exploring wild caves is relatively unknown but provides plenty of challenge and excitement. It combines a variety of physical activities which take on a fresh appeal in the mysterious and often beautiful subterranean environment. Crawling, slithering and sliding, climbing, hiking, rappelling, rafting, wading and swimming are all possible components of a caving trip. Getting into the sport is not a simple matter. Specialized equipment and knowledge are required, including how to prevent damaging the fragile environment and how to stay safe. That's why novices must always go with experienced cavers.

So how to get started? Fortunately, here in California we have several show caves offering guided expeditions that are a great introduction to the sport while providing all necessary equipment and expertise. One of these is California Cavern near San Andreas and some weeks ago, along with a few friends, I signed up for the 4-hour Middle Earth Expedition.

We tumbled up, as instructed, in "grubby clothes we didn't care about," good, strong hiking boots and brought a complete change of clothes and shower supplies for after the trip. After signing waivers that released the cave owners from liability, we were lead into a "suiting up" area by our guide, Tommie. She described our route on a map of the cave and provided us with the needed equipment. We pulled on our knee pads and chose some coveralls to provide a little protection from the mud. Duct tape was applied to tighten loose hiking boots; we donned protective gloves, helmets with lights and were off!

Tommie led us to a rocky outcropping away from the walking tour entrance where we turned on our helmet lights, climbed in feet first, then turned and crawled on our knees into the darkness. It was the beginning of quite an adventure. We slid down smooth rocks on our backsides and tummies, crawled, and squirmed through tight spaces and emerged into large, decorated chambers. All was fun and carefree, but pretty soon we arrived at the part of the trip that I wasn't sure I would enjoy.

If you go to California Cavern to do the Trail of Lights walking tour, the "Womb Room" entrance will be pointed out to you. Your guide will tell you that on the Mammoth Cave and Middle Earth Expeditions, participants enter this small hole into a chamber the size of a "VW Bug." The hole is just large enough to take an adult body head first in a dive position and it is also the only way out. If you don't know whether or not you are claustrophobic, this optional experience will let you know for sure one way or the other.

I decided to watch the others do it first, carefully monitoring their responses. They seemed relaxed enough, so I took my turn. It was the first of many wonderfully unique experiences on the trip. The rock entrance had been smoothed by hundreds of previous spelunkers into a practically frictionless marble, making for a fast dive which you could slow by opening your legs to grip the sides. I dived into the room, entering it in a handstand, then gently lowered myself all the way in. Once inside, I was glad to discover no sense of claustrophobia. I had some slight anxiety about the difficulty of exiting via the same entrance, but with help from my friends, I had no trouble. The part of the trip I had dreaded turned out to be one of the things I most enjoyed!

So far, our expedition had been in the drier Mammoth Cave section of the cave, but beyond the highly decorated "Jungle Room" we were off to wetter, muddier, altogether wilder regions.

There was much wading through thick, goopy mud which made loud slurping, burping noises. At one point we came to an underground ravine containing water. At first the walls were close enough that we could stay above the water by walking on the sides of the walls. Eventually there was no other option but to wade through waist deep water, fully clothed, which is a very strange sensation. From here on, the trip was very muddy and squelchy, reawakening in me the childhood joy of getting really dirty. I knew for sure I hadn't been this muddy since my brother and I had thrown mud pies at each other when

we were five years old. In all this time it hadn't lost any of its appeal!

Adding to the significant enjoyment of this trip was the amazing beauty of the cave, which is decorated with sparkling, crystalline formations. Tommie made sure to direct our attention away from our physical exertions many times to look up in awe at pristine white stalactites, flowstones and helictites. She explained the incredible process of their formation which takes thousands of years. At one point

we located a fairly camouflaged, mud-covered ladder which led up to a small hole in the ceiling. We took turns climbing it, being careful to avoid damaging the fragile stalactites surrounding the entrance. Peeking through, we saw a spectacular hidden room with beautiful white columns and numerous crystalline formations. I couldn't help wondering what other secrets this cave might hold.

We crossed a small underground lake in a raft - another unique experience I will never forget. Our cave helmet lights criss-crossed the chamber and flashed into the depths of the water made brilliant blue by naturally occurring calcium bicarbonate. At the end of the trip we climbed a series of mud-covered ladders that took us by spectacular flowstones much of the way to the top, until we reached a final twisting, vertical passageway culminating in a heavy door to the outside world. We blinked our troglobyte eyes in the afternoon sun and pulled our weary bodies free of the hole. Constantly invigorated by interesting sights and experiences inside the cave, we had not realized how tired we were until we reached the end. And now, just walking the trail back to the showers seemed like work in our sluggishly moving, mud-soaked coveralls. A warm shower was a delight and clean clothes gave a temporary feeling of luxury after all the dirt and cold. But the feeling that we had been privileged to experience something wonderful and rare continued for many days, developing into a magical memory.

The Middle Earth Expedition costs \$99. It is usually available at least May through November, depending on the cave's water level. No experience is necessary, just average health and fitness and an adventurous spirit. A description and pictures can be seen on the Caverns of California web site at www.cavernstours.com. California Cavern also offers an introductory spelunking trip called the Mammoth Cave Expedition, which takes about two hours. It costs \$65.25.

California Cavern is operated by Sierra Nevada Recreation, which also manages three other caves. Moaning Cavern near Vallecito, which is open year-round, offers a \$99 caving expedition called the Adventure Trip. It takes about three hours and begins with an optional 165-foot rope rappel. The same trip can be taken without the rappel for \$58.50.

Black Chasm Cavern, National Natural Landmark, near Volcano opened to the public last year. Walking tours are offered in this remarkably beautiful cave. One further cave, Boyden Cavern in Kings Canyon, Sequoia National Monument also offers walking tours.

For more information, including age requirements for the caving trips, or to make reservations, call 209-736-2708.



Middle Earth Expedition