



INTERNATIONAL SHOW CAVES ASSOCIATION

How to visit a show cave: an instruction manual



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1. Introduction

Most of the visitors of the thousands of show caves around the world spend around an hour enjoying a visit to a series of exceptional places, with a unique natural and cultural heritage. Most likely, this visit is the first time they come in contact with the underworld; and, in many cases, it may also be the only time they do it in their lives. Surprisingly, almost all underground tourists are satisfied with their visit to a show cave, although they are not aware that this satisfaction can go far beyond the limited time dedicated to their tour if they prepare properly for it.



Figure 1. Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, EEUU: Tourist in a footbridge (www.margaretriver.com)

This "manual" is precisely an attempt to offer underground tourists a range of ideas that allow them to achieve basic three objectives:

- To enjoy in a more long-term way the experience of visiting a show cave.
- To expand this experience, experiencing it more intensively, learning to understand better the caves and their content, valuing all aspects of the underground heritage, both natural and cultural.
- To transform the visit into a unique and unforgettable experience, worth sharing with your family and friends.

2. How to plan your visit to a show cave?

Visiting a show cave is not something that is done every day. Therefore, it is best to plan it properly. To make the most of an excursion to the exciting underground world, it is worth considering a series of activities distributed over three different periods: before the visit, during the visit and after the visit. Thus, the opportunity to visit a show cave will become more than just a simple way to spend a pleasant time, transforming it into one of the most exciting experiences you can carry out.

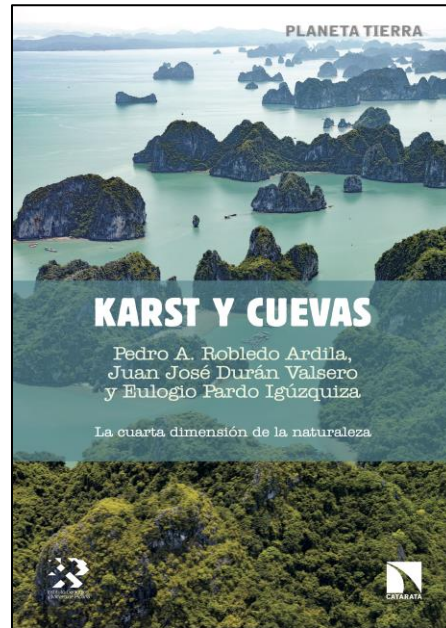


Figure 2. Cover of the divulgation science book entitled "Karst and Caves", edited in 2020 by Catarata Editions and Geological Survey of Spain (IGME)

3. What to do before the visit?

"Before the visit" may be a period too long and vague, although in the case of some caves, this stage can cover a really long time. For example, a European tourist who is thinking of spending their next year's vacation in New Zealand, can surely start enjoying them imagining the fabulous spectacle that can be seen visiting the famous Waitomo Glowworm Cave, located on North Island, with thousands of fireflies illuminating the dense darkness of the cave from the ceiling of a gigantic underground room.

But without having to go back so far in time to plan the visit to the chosen show cave, you can carry out a series of highly recommended activities just a few days before the visit:

- Read (or reread for those who have previously done it) an informative book on karst, caves or cave exploration.

- Visit a web page on these matters, including those corresponding to associations of show caves, national or international International Association of Show caves, ISCA (isca.org).

Consult the website of the show cave itself, as well as some other complementary information regarding it, such as informative articles or routes.

- Consult aspects of the natural environment of the cave surroundings. For example, it is convenient to visit websites, to observe in detail the topographic mapping of the area, as well as the situation of the cave and the interaction with the surrounding territory. This can also help you to know how to easily access the cave, choose the means of transport or design your journey. Another interesting information may be related to the geology of the environment, try accessing the geological maps of the area, if they are available, as they show some valuable information about the cave and its surrounding landscape.
- Access the website of the town hall or region where the cave is located to obtain information about the gastronomy and customs or local festivals.
- Finally, it is a good idea to write down in a notebook or a travel notebook everything you consider necessary for the visit, based on the collected information and the recommendations of the management organization of the cave (warm clothing, footwear, bags or backpacks of the appropriate size and shape), as well as those doubts that may have been raised or those comments of interest that you may have discovered in your previous investigations, to be able to clear or corroborate them during the visit.

Now we are ready. With these activities we will already have a good background to satisfactorily visit the cave. Presumably, some expectations may have been created and some specific objectives may have caught our attention. We know what to expect from our visit to the chosen cave and we are possibly already looking forward to starting our exciting adventure into the underworld as soon as possible.

4. During the visit

The time for the visit of a show cave can be divided into three consecutive periods. A first period, immediately before entering the cave, once we have reached the reception hall of the cave; a second period, coinciding with the actual visit of the cave, from the time we enter until we come outside again; and a third period, which covers the moments immediately after leaving, generally until we start another activity or return to our starting point.

4.1. Immediately before entering the cave

Just before entering a cave, you have to think that things are not exactly the same underground as on the surface. Caves are unique spaces, which must be preserved in the best possible way. Therefore, despite the fact that show caves have fantastic infrastructures to make them accessible to all audiences (there are even some that are accessible to people with reduced mobility), they do not have all the comforts that we have on the surface. Therefore, it is advisable to take into account the following recommendations:

- It is advisable to go to the bathroom, since inside the cave you will not be able to do so.

- If you need to use any means of communication on your mobile phone, do so before entering the cave, since there will be no phone signal inside.
- Make sure you have charged your camera or mobile batteries, as well as spare batteries and memory cards. It is important not to lose the best photograph of your life for a simple oversight. Of course, it is absolutely necessary to ask and make sure whether or not you are allowed to take photographs or videos inside the cavity. On many occasions, flashes are strictly prohibited. Rules in this regard must be scrupulously followed.



Figure 3. Batu Cave entrance (Malaysia) and some of the complementary infrastructures (www.ttnotes.com)

- Check or ask about the conditions of the cave, in particular, the temperature, the length of the route, the presence of wet or muddy areas and the existence of stairs. Sometimes, you will have to wear some warm clothes, since there are caves at a certain altitude that even in summer maintain a very low temperature inside, while, on other occasions, there are caves that even in winter they maintain relatively high temperatures and it will be necessary to lighten our clothing. In any case, it is advisable to wear appropriate clothes and footwear when entering a show cave: caves are neither beaches nor discos.
- Prepare everything you need in a suitable backpack or bag, disregarding those things that you will not need inside the cave, to avoid unnecessary weight and to be able to have your hands free. Backpacks are not allowed in some caves, you may want to ask if there are lockers to store personal items available.
- Regarding the route and the presence of stairs, sometimes visits to some caves have long routes, exceeding one hour, and relatively uneven terrain, which involves numerous steps. We must assess whether the physical condition of everyone in the group is appropriate for

these cases, especially young children and the elderly. Visiting a show cave should in no case become an unpleasant activity, nor should it give rise to any type of risk.

- In general, it is not allowed to introduce food or drink in show caves. For this reason, it is convenient to hydrate adequately in advance and assess the possibility of eating a some food or drink, if you are at a time of day when you need it. In any case, never forget the first recommendation in this section (the one regarding going to the bathroom).
- A good idea is to bring a cap or hat for the visit. Caves are humid places, where water drops are frequent, and it would not be strange if a drop ended up hitting your head. Some caves, and especially the show mines, offer hard hats for your visit; In that case they will provide you with a disposable protective cap.
- It is already imminent. We are perfectly prepared to start a unique adventure: direct observation of the underground world. Something that millions of people from all ages, from the dawn of humanity have been doing over and over again. Now it's up to you.

4.2. During the visit, inside the cave

The time has come. The line that separates the planet's surface from the fabulous underworld has just been crossed, you have entered a cave. The most important thing during this visiting period is to focus on the visit. Forget the outside world, things are very different underground. Remember that there is no natural light, only the electric lights selectively placed to allow your visit. The shapes you are going to see are unique to the underworld and the mostly microscopic fauna that exists, although you will not possibly see, is perfectly adapted to living in these harsh extreme conditions.

These are some of the recommendations for a safe visit, one that offers you one of the most pleasant experiences that a people being can enjoy.



Figure 4. Guide giving an explanation to a group of visitors in the Wind Cave, South Dakota, EEUU (www.nps.com)

- Always follow the instructions of the guide. In some caves there is no guide, either because they have an audio-guide or simply because the visit is free. In these cases, surely, a few recommendations or instructions have been provided outside the cave, either in a video or verbally, or there may be posters with these instructions, that tell you what to do and what not to do. Never skip any of the recommendations.

- There are a series of good general practices, which can be used in practically all show caves. Among them are the following:
 - Always stay with the group you entered.
 - Stay on the marked trails.
 - The natural formations that decorate the cave are very fragile, please do not touch or take them, even if they are broken or on the ground.
 - Keep silent or in a respectful tone with the guide and the rest of the group.
 - Be careful with low ceiling sections (be careful with your head!), Wet areas, slippery rocks, mud and stairs, especially those excavated in the rock.
 - Occasionally, you may see an animal somewhere in the cave, flying (for example, a bat), on the walls, ceilings, or floor. Most of the time, they will be very small organisms, almost imperceptible to the naked eye, unless the guide indicates it. As insignificant or minuscule as it may seem, the small beings that live in the caves are of exceptional ecological value, do not touch or step on them under any circumstances.
 - Everything that enters the cave must leave, without exceptions. Please do not throw anything at all inside the cave. Even if there are bins, it is better not to deposit anything in them, unless it is absolutely essential.
 - As indicated above, in some caves it is allowed to take photographs, while in others, for various reasons, it is not possible to do so. Before trying, please consult the guide or person responsible. If they give you permission, ask whether you can use flash, and if so, try not to disturb the other visitors with your flash, or the possible fauna of the cave, especially bats.

- Enjoy the cave in its entirety, do not limit yourself to only looking at the route marked by the guide or indicated on the ground. Look up and admire the volumes excavated by the groundwater, enjoy the formations, their shapes and colors, feel the high humidity characteristic of the underground atmosphere, "see" the absolute darkness of the unlit corners of the cave and "Hear" if possible, the absolute silence of the underworld. You will begin to understand why caves have been irreplaceable companions of humanity for millions of years and you will understand why they constitute a first-rate natural and cultural heritage.



Figure 5. Detail of a drop about to fall from the end of a stalactite

- Try to use 100% of the time with your guide. Pay attention to their explanations. Since the time of the visit is limited, if you have not been able to understand some important aspects, ask them, they are willing to tell you everything you want to know. Specifically, about the cave's conservation systems, human's past and present relationship with it, the presence of living beings adapted to environmental conditions and places of greatest geological interest. Also, they may be able to solve those doubts that you wrote down when investigating about the cave before the visit and those outstanding comments that caught your attention.
- Lastly, in addition to soaking up the underground atmosphere and the pleasant sensation of being under the Earth's surface, look at the details. There will be countless details that will powerfully attract your attention. Those hundreds or thousands of details make each cave a different experience. The variety of the underground world is one of its most surprising characteristics, which will make you want to visit all the caves you find in your path.

Surely the cave has not left you indifferent. It is very likely that you have enjoyed some pleasant unexpected “surprises” and that direct observation of the cave has made you feel much more satisfied than you expected. But it's not over yet...

4.3. Immediately after the visit

Once you come back to the surface, you will most likely realize that time has passed very quickly. Your visit to the interior of the cave will have seemed very short. Do not worry, you still have many ways to expand your experience and, in addition, you still have many show caves in your country and outside of it, to enjoy. For now, as soon as you go outside, you can do all or some of the following activities:

- Do not leave the cave immediately. Most show caves have a number of attractions outside and in their surroundings. If you did not see the interpretation centre before entering, do so now, you will better understand what you have seen inside the cave. There may also be a small museum, do not hesitate, visit it. In some cases there is also a store, where you may be able to find informative material about the cave, books, brochures, or even items related

to the cave, such as T-shirts and other souvenirs, which can be a pleasant memory of your visit.

- Sometimes the caves have workshops or other complementary activities of great interest, especially for the little ones, ask about them. You may even want to come back another day.
- Many caves sites have viewpoints to enjoy the landscape and scenery of their surroundings. A visit to them may help you better understand the relationship of the cave with the outside. Now the consultations made on the topographic and geological map can be very useful. Sometimes, there are also marked routes, generally of low difficulty and short distance in the surroundings of some show caves.



Figure 6. Path and viewpoint in the Mua Cave, Ninh Binh, Vietnam (www.viator.com)

- In some caves, there are suggestion and guest books. If you consider it appropriate to make a suggestion or claim, feel free to do so. If the cave has a guestbook, they will allow you to sign on it.
- Re-read the informative brochure or the entrance ticket that has been given to you, generally they have some useful information, which you will understand better when you exit the cave and will help you fix some concepts or information of interest. Keep it, don't throw it away, at least it can serve as a souvenir.
- If possible, consult the topographic map of the cave. Sometimes it is exposed outside, in an informative panel. It will be a useful tool to observe in detail the route made through the interior of the cave, identifying the different rooms, tunnels and points of interest.
- Discuss with your friends, family or colleagues the impressions of your visit, it is possible that together you will extract some useful information or some detail that has gone unnoticed and that is worth sharing.

- It is possible that, despite all the aforementioned, you still have questions or comments that you consider appropriate to resolve later. Write them down in your notebook or travel notebook so you can do it with ease on your return. Do not forget to also take photos of the exterior of the cave, they may be very useful in the future, as sometimes it's not easy to distinguish the photos of different caves, in addition to the value as a complementary memory of the unique experience lived in the cave.
- Let the cave staff advise you regarding the local attractions, gastronomic, touristic and cultural aspects of the surroundings. Be sure to ask if there are any other nearby show caves that might be of interest to you.
- Before leaving the cave, check that you are carrying all your belongings and that you have not lost anything; if so, this is the time to recover it.
- This is the time to relax. There are many sensations that must be packed inside you. The experience of entering a cave always brings many sensations, which gradually flow with the passage of time. Try to enjoy them all, without missing a single one.

5. After the visit

"After the visit" is also a concept that may be very lengthy. In general, the to enjoy visit to the cave, extending it as much as possible, is once back home, days or weeks later. During this period, you can do some of these activities:

- Make a photo album of the visit to the cave, completing it with clippings from the brochures, or other graphic information that we have been able to obtain, as well as with personal comments.
- Conduct some commented photo showing with family and friends, particularly with those who were unable to attend the cave, to make them part of their experience and encourage them to visit this or another show cave in the future. The same can be done together.
 - Publish your experience on social networks and interact with the ones of the cave, they will most likely appreciate your comments and photos.
- Finish solving those doubts that were still pending, either by consulting books, web pages or by consulting an expert (you can connect with caving clubs, national geological services, show cave associations or others).
- Start preparing your next visit to another cave, surely you can no longer stop visiting them!
Welcome to the Friends of the Show Caves Club!

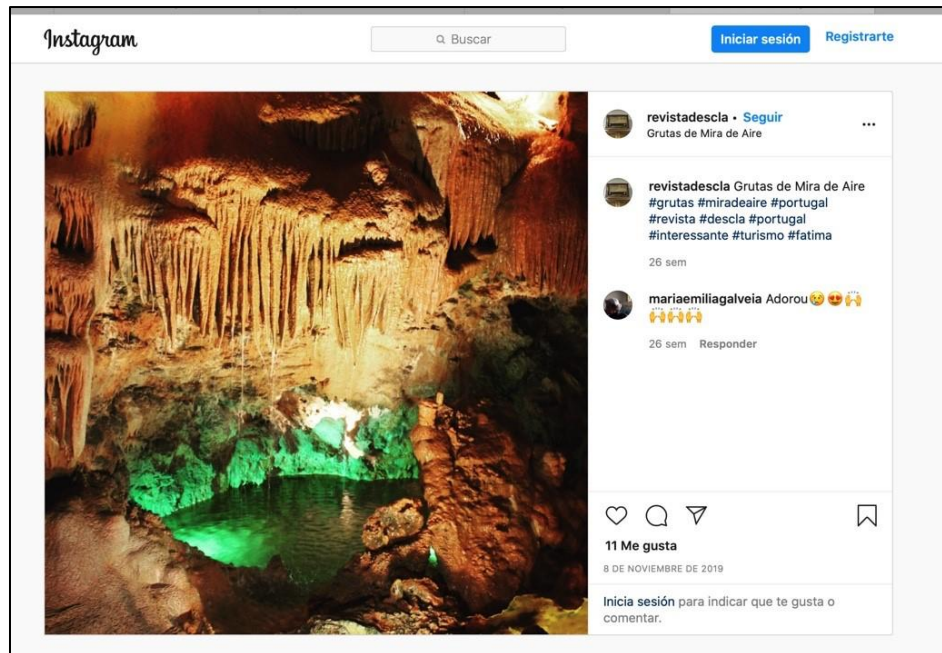


Figure 7. Instagram page of the Mira de Aire Cave, Portugal.

Our trip, in three periods, is coming to an end, although the end of one trip is only the beginning of another. You have known some of the beauties that the underground world contains. Some of its fascinating mysteries may have unfolded before your eyes. You possibly have some answers and many questions, which may be answered on other future visits to some other show cave. The geological, biological, archaeological and cultural diversity present in the show caves is waiting for you again. You already know why the caves have been companions of humanity since their beginning, shelter, living space and place of meeting and worship. Today, millions of people around the world come to them simply to enjoy their contemplation and feel that existing communion between the underground world and humanity, between you and the show caves.

6. Epilogue

If you have reached this point, you have already read a “manual” that will allow you to plan and enjoy your visit to any show cave on the planet. It has a clear and simple orientation to ensure that your visit does not remain a mere anecdote and that your contact with the underground world can become a unique experience.

We invite you to create your own adventure for an unforgettable trip to the insides of the Earth. This manual will be your faithful travel companion on all occasions when you decide to approach a show cave, thus gradually expanding your knowledge of the great variety that exists underground.

You will also discover the tireless work that speleologists and scientists, from different fields of knowledge, carry out throughout the planet, making surprising discoveries continuously. You will also learn to love caves and their content, recognizing the important work that show caves play in their conservation and dissemination, together with the associations in which they are grouped.



Figure 8. Logo of ISCA, the association that group the show caves in the world and logos of ACTE and actiba, Spanish and Iberoamerican association of show caves

And you know that your journey to the amazing underground world will start long before you reach your next cave and will end long after you leave it. And in the middle of that tour, when you are inside the cave, you will know how to make your visit fruitful, safe and comfortable. With this manual, design your trip, make it yours, create your memory and repeat the experience as many times as you want, because each one will be different and on each visit to a show cave you will see one of your best dreams come true.

7. Acknowledgments

For a cave to be visited comfortably, many people must work for you. Speleologists at some point explored and mapped their rooms and galleries. Scientists studied its origin and content, revealing its heritage values of all kinds. The administrations protected their values and made possible, along with individuals and companies, in some cases, their tourist authorization, building infrastructure and installing electric lighting. All the people who work in them, managers, conservators, maintenance, cleaning personnel and, especially, the guides, make possible this small miracle of enabling every day a small group of people to experience the unique sensation to enter the interior of the Earth for a few moments.

And finally, we also thank you, friend of the show caves, for your interest. Without you, show caves would not be what we lovers of the underground world usually say: living caves.