

ILLINOIS CAVERNS GUIDE

Illinois Caverns is a State Natural Area. It is a very special place that we are very lucky to be able to visit. Because it is so extraordinary, it is worth some slightly extra effort to attain this unique experience.

The cave is open between 8:30 and 2:30 at this time of the year and we are supposed to be done changing and out of the parking area before 3 pm. These hours dictate the shape of our day. We need to be at the cave and ready to go in when it opens. That way we will be done exploring when it is time to leave. And since it is about a two hour drive back to our camp, we will be back just before sunset.

Near the entrance to the cave, which is reached by walking down a short trail, then a series of very steep steps, is a small parking lot, a changing area, and a covered picnic area. Each group entering the cave must consist of at least 4 people, and there must be a ratio of 1 "adult" to every 5 scouts. Since we will be at the cave during the lunch hour people can follow one these eating strategies. 1) Eat a nice lunch in the cave making sure that no waste is left behind. 2) Don't eat (or perhaps just have a snack) in the cave and figure on eating lunch in the picnic area when one's caving activities are complete. 3) Go in the cave for a while, then come out and eat, then go back in the cave.

Illinois Caverns consists of a long main passage approximately three or four kilometers long, with the entrance being located only approximately one-half kilometer from one end. The cave is almost totally wild, meaning that there are only a few manmade ladders and steps, otherwise the cave is natural with no lighting or other improvements of any kind. Through the main passage a person can walk in an upright position except for few places where he may have to duck a bit, or walk sideways for a few paces. There are a number of interesting and beautiful side passages that eventually require crawling, first on hands and knees and eventually in a totally prone position.

Cave temperature is closely related to the average temperature of the particular region where the cave is located. This cave's temperature is 58 degrees and has nearly 100 percent humidity. At first the cave seems dry, but within a short time one discovers that this cave has lots of running water, the level of which fluctuates depending on recent precipitation. This cave contains many spectacular cave formations, including stalactites, stalagmites, rimstone dams, flowstone, draperies, and soda straws. In one's headlamp these various features are revealed, while all around there is mostly darkness except for the dim light emanating from the flashlights or headlamps of your companions. The cave is very quiet except for small waterfalls that produce a constant sound amplified by the rock surfaces. The cave is home to two bat species and a cave salamander.

Each caver is required to have lugged sole (like vibram) good supporting boots. Hiking boots work well because they are non-skid on bare irregular rock surfaces and they grip the slippery clay-like goo that often coats the rock. It is often necessary to walk in water, sometimes only a few inches deep, but sometimes it will be 12 or 15 inches deep. You should plan on water over your ankles. In some places it will be up to your knees and if you approach waterfalls (say, going up the rimstone river) the water may be waist or chest deep! You will soon get used to the water temperature, it is not all that cold. Your boots will be fine if they are allowed to dry naturally.

Each caver is required to have 3 independent sources of light in the cave. Headlamps are definitely the best basic source of light. The brighter the light source that you can bring, the more you will be able to see of the beauty of this place. Make sure that all of your batteries are fresh, and plan on carrying extras as well as spare bulbs.

You must wear a helmet. The ranger may have a few extra hardhats. And hardhats, the kind that construction workers use (which are fairly cheap with many uses) work great. Biking or inline skating helmets, especially the heavy duty ones, also work. You will be surprised how often you end up hitting the rock with your helmet.

Most first time cavers make a mistake and wear clothing designed for the middle of winter. The cave temperature and humidity would be considered a pleasant spring or fall day and a balmy spring or fall

night. Most cavers find jeans or light weight overalls to work the best. I prefer to wear jeans with a lightweight Gore-Tex jacket over a T-shirt. I roll up the sleeves when I'm walking, climbing, crawling, and pull them down and zip up when I stop to take a break. Some people like one-piece lightweight overalls, or jeans or overall pants with long underwear tops, or sweaters. Just don't show up wearing a pair of insulated overalls or coveralls, you will be most uncomfortable. If in question, wear layers that can easily be shed and tied around your waist or neck.

Be sure to wear gloves. Leather work gloves seem to work the best. If you do any crawling, these are essential. But even just walking they are helpful because things you touch are often cold, wet and sometimes covered with that clay-like goo. When we keep our heads warm with helmets, our hands warm with gloves, we will be very comfortable at 58 degrees without a lot of extra clothing. If it is cold out the day we visit the cave, I recommend that the extra outerwear be left in the vehicles. In the cave it will be a burden and it will get dirty.

If you intend to do any crawling (and remember in this cave that is not necessary) you should bring kneepads. In my opinion the softer type (like for volleyball) work better, but the hard kind (like for inline skating) work well enough. These are absolutely essential for any adult who wants to follow his scouts if they go crawling. And there are some great crawls in this cave if you are inclined.

Each person who goes in the cave will need a change of clothes and shoes in order to be transported back to our camp. Without a doubt your boots and socks will be soaked. Your clothes will be streaked with goo and your pants will be wet. If you went crawling you will be a mess. Please wring your clothes out and put them with your boots in the garbage bag you have brought for the purpose. Then our vehicles will stay nice and clean and dry. We have had no problems washing the clothes in the past, although sometimes they need to be washed twice.

Should you bring a fanny pack or knapsack into the cave with you? Yes, if it's small. We have found especially larger size knapsacks to be constantly in the way. A fanny pack works better, but it still gets in the way when going through irregularly shaped places of which there are many. I try to carry all of my stuff in my pockets, especially my jacket pockets. (I have even carried my lunch and a can of pop in my jacket.)

People who like to take photos may want to bring their cameras. Obviously, one would want to have fresh batteries in the flash. There are many opportunities to take really great pictures but make sure that you have a secure way to handle your camera when it is not in use.

There are a few other minor health and safety items. Because of the nature of this cave, it is real hard to get seriously lost. But people can become confused and separated. Please follow our normal BSA training and always have a buddy and never travel in groups of less than four. If you wear glasses, you can use them in the cave. But because of the moisture they have a tendency to fog up. This can be avoided by using various anti-fog formulas on the glasses. If you have asthma and normally carry an inhaler, be sure to bring it with you in a secure pocket. Most people with cloister phobia do not seem to be seriously affected in this cave because of its size. While the water in the cave looks clear, before your boots mix mud into it, remember that this water has percolated through the ground above and may have picked up bacteria from septic systems. So treat the water as you would treat the Fox River or Kankakee River on a canoe outing.

This cave is special place. We must be careful to leave nothing more than our footprints in the goo. We must not take anything from the cave other than our impressions and some photos. We must be as gentle as we can be with everything we come in contact with in this cave. When we see bats or salamanders we must not disturb them. Have more questions? Call me. ASM Larry Christian, 355-7863.