

Caves, Caverns, and Underground Encounters



Follow Me, And Die!
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The underworld is the focus of so much adventure in fantasy roleplaying games. Heroes are challenged to face the underworld and death and return triumphant over the monsters below laden with treasure.

Game Masters are often at odds for ideas to make things a bit more interesting. As one who has done a minor bit of cave exploring when I was younger, the challenge of tight spaces, ups and downs, and bone chilling water combined with utter darkness is the challenge. Just overcoming the challenge of the cave environment should be something we keep in mind. It is not a simple thing to just go in a cave laden with armor and lots of gear. Narrow openings will provide means of attack on a party or means of escape by small and nimble foes.

I hope you find this short volume informative and thought provoking for your games of all genres, not just fantasy.

My prior publication, [Mountain & Hill Encounters](#), has many ideas that overlap or complement the subject matter here. My growing collection of terrain focused PDFs can assist a game master in all stages of game prep, including several tables that may be useful in game.

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CAVES vs. CAVERNS

A cave is any underground cavity of which some portion does not receive direct sunlight. A cavern is a type of cave formed naturally in soluble rock and is able to grow mineral deposited structures called speleothems

CAVE TYPES

Coral Caves - Formed by corals around an open area that is then upthrust above sea level or exposed when sea levels drop.

Eolian Caves - Formed by wind eroding the rock, such as sandstone. Commonly called Wind Caves.

Glacier Caves - Long tunnels that form along the leading edged of glaciers where melt water flows into crevasses and the water erodes an area between the ice and ground.

Ice Caves - This is of two types. The first is carved out of glaciers or snowfields by wind and/or water. The second type is another type of cave where the walls are covered with moisture that freezes.

Volcanic Caves - There are several types formed in lava by volcanic gases. Examples are lava tubes, pressure-ridge caves, spatter cone caves, and blister caves.

Sea Caves - Created by waves eroding the face of sea cliffs. They can vary in size from crevasses to large chambers.

Talus Caves - Boulders that are piled up that leave passages beneath and between them.

Tectonic Caves - When a movement of bedrock separates along joints or fractures. Usually a single small, narrow passage. Often the ceiling is a flat section of rock that did not move. Sandstone and granite are the most common type of rock, but basalt and limestone can also form this type of cave.

Solution Caves - This is the category classified as caverns. It is formed by the dissolution of solid rock by water. Limestone is the most common example. Examples also include dolomite, gypsum, and salt. These types of caves contain speleothems. The most common speleothems are stalactites, stalagmites, drapery, columns, flowstone, and straws.

Stalactites hang down from the ceiling. A mnemonic is they cling tight to the ceiling. Straws are a very narrow type of stalactite.

Stalagmites grow upwards. A mnemonic is they might reach the ceiling.

Flowstone is sheet like and can be found on floors and ceilings. Drapery is a type of flowstone.

Columns are usually formed by removal of material, but may be formed by the joining of stalactites and stalagmites.

CREATURES

Caves are often the lairs of various animals from worms and insects to bats and birds. Foxes, wolves, big cats, bears can make use of caves to lair year round or seasonally. Often multiple animal types may cohabit in the same cave, such as bats on the ceiling and bears on the floor.

If there are major swings in temperature between the seasons, some animals, like bats and bears may hibernate in them. The benefit of caves is that they tend to be a constant temperature, making them ideal homes in the extreme heat of summer and extreme cold in winter.

Caves that are openings for springs or rivers will have water flowing into or out of them. Such places often gain the attention of intelligent creatures, and may hold cultural or religious significance.

Sentient creatures, like humans take advantage of caves for their ready made roof and walls and easily defensible nature.

Monsters of myth, legend, fantasy, and fiction also dwell in caves.

Caves represent entrances to the underworld and are often expanded as places of worship or repositories of sacrifices.

WATER AND CAVES

Water can be a part of a cave in many different ways. The presence of water can allow the presence of fish, amphibians, and other water dwelling creatures.

Ground water can seep into a cave forming damp walls, drip from ceilings, or be a steady flow.

Springs can emerge from underground streams and rivers, or arise from fissures in the rock.

Rivers can flow into a cave and exit many miles away.

Water can be fresh, acidic, alkaline, or otherwise undrinkable, that is, deadly.

Caves can contain deep pools fed by groundwater or underground rivers.

Rains can affect water levels making portions of caves inaccessible, or totally flooded.

Seasonal rains may make caves only accessible during the dry season.

Caves may be totally submerged with or without air pockets. Such caves are well suited to water dwelling creatures, whether monstrous or sentient.

HAZARDS

Slippery. Ceiling Collapse/Cave-In. Floor gives way (thin crust of rock). Wet rocks are very slippery. Rock smoothed by rushing water is difficult to maintain footing. Fighting on slick rock will be much like fighting on ice. Crevasses.

FOOD

Mushrooms, insects, worms, snakes, fish.

BLIND CREATURES

Only creatures living in areas totally devoid of light will be blind, or lacking eyes. They will compensate for this with some other ability, like sharper hearing or smell. Some deep cave dwelling creatures are pure white, having no need for pigmentation.

GLOWING/LIGHT

There are several types of natural glowing that may be encountered.

- Bioluminescence - The glowing of organisms through biological processes. This is common with marine organisms. For example, angler fish with glowing lures.
- Fluorescence - The re-emitting of light at a lower wavelength. This requires the presence of light. Often this is bacteria, and could be mold on a cave wall. How awesome is a creature that converts light into an attack to kill its next meal. **NOTE:** Many minerals glow in the presence of ultraviolet light.
- Phosphorescence - In the real world, there are no known animals with this characteristic. This is a chemical process where light is emitted without the presence of light, such as with glow sticks.

GAPS

Underground cliffs, gullies, and canyons.

SPANS

Gaps may be spanned by natural or artificial means. Natural spans might be a stone arch, or large slab or rock fallen across a gap. Logs brought in by an underground river, or the bones of a large creature could also span gaps. Rope bridges. Rope and plank bridges, wood, and stone bridges can span gaps underground as well as the surface.

d6	STATUS OF SPANS
1	Ruins
2	Disrepair/Weak
3	Poor/Rough
4	Used but maintained
5	New
6	Dwarven or Magical Construction

ELEVATION CHANGES

Changes in elevation may present challenges to movement in the desired direction of travel. Gaps will be the most severe elevation changes and if there is no span, there are two choices: parallel the gap in either direction until a functional span is reached; or climb down one side to the bottom of the span and then climb up the opposite side.

Less drastic height differences may be overcome with a boost, hand up, rope, or ladder. Well traveled areas may have a well secured rope or other means of ascent or descent. Ropes and wood will rot or wear out. If not maintained or replaced, added danger in their use arises.

d8	SCALING ELEVATION (Higher than a push up or reaching down.)
1	Secured Rope
2	Rope Ladder
3	Wooden Ladder
4	Spikes for hand and foot holds.
5	Carved hand and foot holds.
6	Gentle slope of a natural or artificial ramp.
7	Natural or artificial steps.
8	Elevator or Beasts of Burden (Climbers, Jumpers, or Fliers - even Swimmers)

A pole of wood, metal or stone, worn smooth is a quick way of descent.

SIGNS

There may be signs of past or current habitation by creatures, monsters, or sentient beings.

Bones of meals, or fossils of creatures who once roamed this cave system.

Cave paintings or burials of past civilizations. If under a city the city disposal system or trash, detritus, and sewage may go here.

Empty egg shells or exoskeletons of smaller versions of creatures down here may be found. For example snakes, lizards, arachnids, or insects all shed their skin or exoskeleton when they have reached the next size of growth.

Tracks will be limited to areas where there is mud, dirt, or sand. These will usually be low areas where water has carried this material. Dirt may be seasonally dry but turn to mud in the rainy season. Mud may dry out if there is sufficient time between storms. Mud can stick to footwear and clothing and be smeared on the walls or other structure in caves above the water line. Once it dries, it may fall or be knocked loose leaving a sign that something came through the muddy passage.

When it comes to mud, keep in mind that particularly deep or sticky mud can cause footwear to come off. If you have ever walked through a muddy field or stream and had your shoe or boot come off, you know how difficult it is to keep that foot dry and avoid a shoe or boot full of mud. In cold weather, it can lead to hypothermia.

ENTRANCES & EXITS

Entrances to caves and caverns from the surface take many forms. They may be natural openings formed by geologic processes such as erosion, or shifting. Shifting may come from movement such as from tremors caused by earthquakes, volcanoes, mudslides or landslide, etc. Artificial openings may be due to burrowing creatures whether mundane or fantastic, or the efforts of intelligent creatures, such as digging a well, a quarry, or a mine.

A combination of natural and artificial is also possible. A mine may either start with a natural opening that is expanded, or a mine wall might collapse due to an earthquake and reveal an opening to a yet undiscovered cavern.

Sinkholes may occur in soft ground or where a cavern roof has collapsed, leading the the ground above to sink.

Gameable ideas that could reveal a cave system are:

- Burrowing monsters
- Meteorites
- Crashing spaceships
- Retreating or collapsing glaciers or other geologic processes
- A battle between enormous monsters.
- Dueling mages and their powerful magic.
- Weapons of enormous power, both magical and science fiction.
- Something that dwells beneath emerges.

Once one enters a cave or cavern, there is a chance that it connects to the larger underworld. Through all the passages and chambers one could even come to the center of the world where a whole new source of adventure awaits. The underworld is sandwiched between the two surface worlds. Not all inhabitants of the underworld would know of both surfaces. To those living under one surface, the opposite may only be a legend. Those in the middle of the underworld any surface may be a legend.

HAZARDS

d8	HAZARDS
1	None
2	Landslide/Avalanche
3	Rock-slide
4	Tree-fall
5	Boulder(s)
6	Sinkholes
7	Caves/Caverns
8	Unstable paths/footing

d6	MINE/CAVE HAZARDS
1	Unstable : Collapse or slump. 50% internal or external.
2	Water : Risk of flooding
3	Gas : Risk of asphyxiation, poisoning, or explosion
4	Monster : Powerful monster decides it has a new home.
5	Monster : Something was uncovered.
6	Dispute : Faction or enemy attempts take over.

d6	WHAT BLOCKS PASSAGE
1	Multiple Rocks - 50% cave in or intentional
2	One large rock - 50% natural placement or intentional
3	Wall or ceiling collapse.
4	Flooded or debris left by last flood.
5	Monster - d8 1-2 Traveling through 50% towards or away, 3-4 Eating latest meal, 5-6 lair, 7-8 fighting over territory or mate*
6	Poison Gas - Causes delirium or reduced intelligence and/or wisdom; or deadly (either instant or painful & slow) Could hint with an odd smell, if there is even an odor.**