

CAVES

Spelunkers plumb the depths of Grey Whale Ranch's caves

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SANTA CRUZ — "There's 'Hell Hole,'" David Houghton said, pointing to an opening that appeared to be the size of a rabbit warren in a hillside somewhere on Grey Whale Ranch.

"Hell Hole" is officially referred to as "IXL" in spelunking circles because those letters roughly approximate the shape of the 1,993-foot-long and 112-foot-deep cave on the privately-owned ranch.

It is one of at least 10 known caves in the Cave Gulch area of the ranch.

"Hell Hole" is a legend among local spelunkers and UC Santa Cruz students, but little known to the rest of the county. It gained some public notoriety in January.

That's when the county Sheriff's Office reported two Scotts Valley men had ventured into the "Hell Hole" at 2 p.m. on a Saturday.

They became disoriented, lost their way and didn't emerge until a local expert found them 12 hours later.

Houghton, 22, a UC Santa Cruz fireman and preceptor at Crown College, is intimately familiar with the cave. He has been exploring the "Hell Hole" and

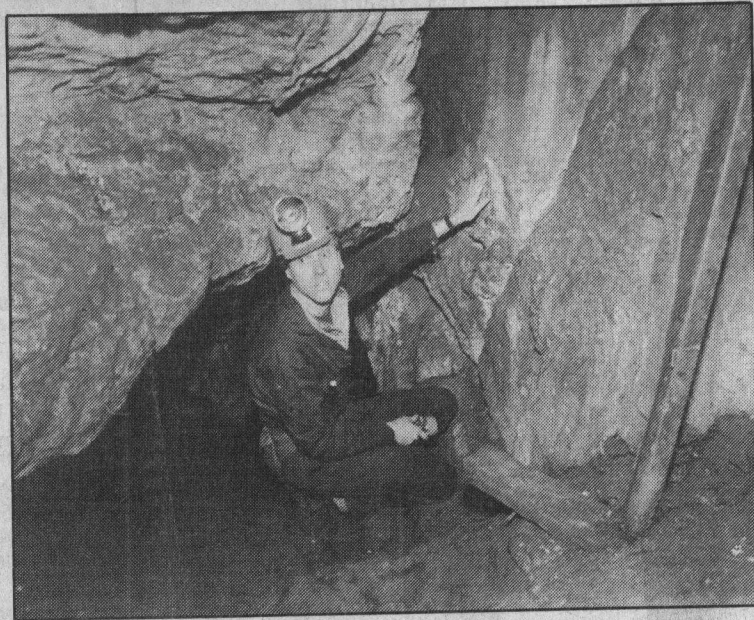
various other caves in the county since he was 12. For UC Santa Cruz students, he said, taking a trip down the "Hell Hole" is considered a rite of passage.

He agreed to take a reporter on a tour of the cave, providing its exact location on the ranch not be divulged.

The cave, according to a Jan. 24, 1954 Sentinel account, was discovered by a group of young Santa Cruz men and women the year before.

The group, which gathered at the home of Harold Johnson at 115 Seaside Avenue, was spurred on by rumors of a big cave "of

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

David Houghton has been exploring caves since he was 12.

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the Tom Sawyer "variety" somewhere in the county.

They systematically combed Cave Gulch for weeks from Eagle Rock to the coast, carefully examining every rock pile, until a man named Bill Miles spotted a four-inch hole in the side of a hill.

After moving away some rocks, they moved inside to find a direct 15-foot drop that led to a nearly-solid wall.

It took them ten hours of work with a crowbar and hammer to drive through to a second passageway, 38 inches wide, that opened up to a network of tunnels and larger caves that was dubbed "IXL" by spelunkers, but is now called simply "Hell Hole."

And I was going in for the sake of this story.

"Now the first part of this is pretty narrow. You want to go head first and make sure you keep your hands over your head," Houghton said, making a motion similar to what a springboard diver does before leaping into a swimming pool.

He explained that the first part of the expedition would entail a sharp drop.

"The thing to remember is keep two good handholds — always at least one hand and one foot. If you fall you could really get hurt," he said, before disappearing into the darkness.

Indeed, the first spelunkers reported one of their number became stuck exploring a side passageway and another member of the group had to chisel away several inches of rock to free him.

Inching my way through an elbow at a time, I was not eager to repeat the experience. However, I controlled my tendencies towards claustrophobia by reminding myself that Houghton, who was ahead of me, was much larger and thus, would get stuck before I would.

Spelunkers always advise carrying at least three different sources of light on even the most routine journeys.

Houghton was well-equipped. He wore a carbide lamp atop his helmet and had four flashlights, including a tiny medical pen

light with rechargeable batteries.

In the event the carbide lamp and flashlight batteries quit, he also had several fluorescent night sticks which would give off a greenish glow if activated by bending.

Houghton led the way, slithering along the dank cave floor like a long-toed salamander. After about 10 minutes, the narrow passageway had enlarged to a cavern about 25 feet wide by 20 feet tall.

Half-burned candles littered the floor.

"Candles are not a good, third source of light," he said. "It's too easy for them to go out."

In addition to the candles, the well-traveled floor of this particular segment of the cave was littered with cigarette butts, a beer can, bits of broken glass and pop bottle tops.

We also passed over a backpack and small pile of clothing, indicating we were not the first to venture into "Hell Hole" on this particular day.

The flashlight beams dancing on the cave walls revealed other signs that the cave was no stranger to humans — graffiti spray-painted at regular intervals and countless stalactites broken by overzealous souvenir collectors.

In fact, all throughout the two-hour trip through "Hell Hole" it was possible to see where previous visitors had taken bits and pieces of it with them.

The damage caused by such souvenir seeking would take a long time for nature to repair, Houghton said.

Cramped quarters and thoughtless previous visitors aside, it was not an unpleasant environment. Despite its name, "Hell Hole" was somewhat cool. Houghton's breath fogged the air as he spoke, indicating the temperature was about 55 to 60 degrees.

"Actually, it's kind of warm," he said. "It's like this all year round. This can be downright nice in the summertime."

The next portions of "Hell Hole," Houghton explained, were called "Chimney" and "Corkscrew."

It was easy to see why. At no point was it ever any

wider than the area above a fireplace, only this fireplace required twisting and contorting my body a full 360 degrees in order to pass through.

"Go ahead and use your body to move, sort of like a snake," Houghton said. "Keep your two hands to the wall. You might not want to use your flashlight. You can hand it to me if you like."

Suddenly, there was a clanking sound and Houghton swore softly.

"I dropped my penlight," he said.

Houghton said he had a good idea where it went.

"It fell down a little sinkhole, an offshoot of the main cavern," he said. "It's kind of narrow, but that's my favorite light. I'm going in after it."

As we emerged from "Corkscrew" into a larger cavern, the smell of burning marijuana began wafting through the dank cave air.

"So that's who the clothing belongs to," he said, referring to the backpack and clothes seen closer to the entrance. "C'mon, we're almost to the bottom where the main cavern is, then I can find my flashlight."

Three UC Santa Cruz students were already there, sitting in the darkness.

One student, who did not want to be identified, said he had been into "Hell Hole" about 40 times.

"We've even taken some garbage bags in with us sometimes and cleaned it up a little bit," he said. "A lot of students do."

Houghton returned with his flashlight.

His guess was correct. "It was at the bottom of a little hole," he said. "I've never actually been down there before, sure was a tight squeeze. Ready to head out?"

Since we had been in for the better part of an hour, I mumbled something about having "done the 'Hell Hole'" and answered affirmatively.

I had just one other question: "Does it take longer to get in, or get out?"

"It takes a lot longer to get in," he said. "For some reason, you don't spend as much time looking around on the way back."

Caves work of nature's steady hand

SANTA CRUZ — Up until its access was limited by security guards in January, "Hell Hole" and other caves on Grey Whale Ranch were used by UC Santa Cruz professors teaching courses such as watershed systems management and soils geology.

The land owners, Ron and Linda Yanke, have proposed donating the environmentally sensitive Cave Gulch area to UC Santa Cruz so that such research and teaching can continue.

The cave itself was formed, as most limestone caves are, by water, according to experts.

Geologists say pure limestone is calcium carbonate, which over time, is dissolved by water, creating tunnels and pockets. Their shapes and forms depend upon where the limestone and water is most concentrated.

Stalactites — deposits which hang from the ceiling — and stalagmites — which grow from the ground — are created by a

similar process.

Gravity causes mineral-laden groundwater (in this case lime) to slowly drip and flow over the rocks, leaving deposits behind.

Houghton said it takes 100 years to create one centimeter's worth of stalactite.

"It's a shame people can't just look at them, and appreciate them," he said, before continuing onward. "They have to take a piece of it with them."

— Steve Perez