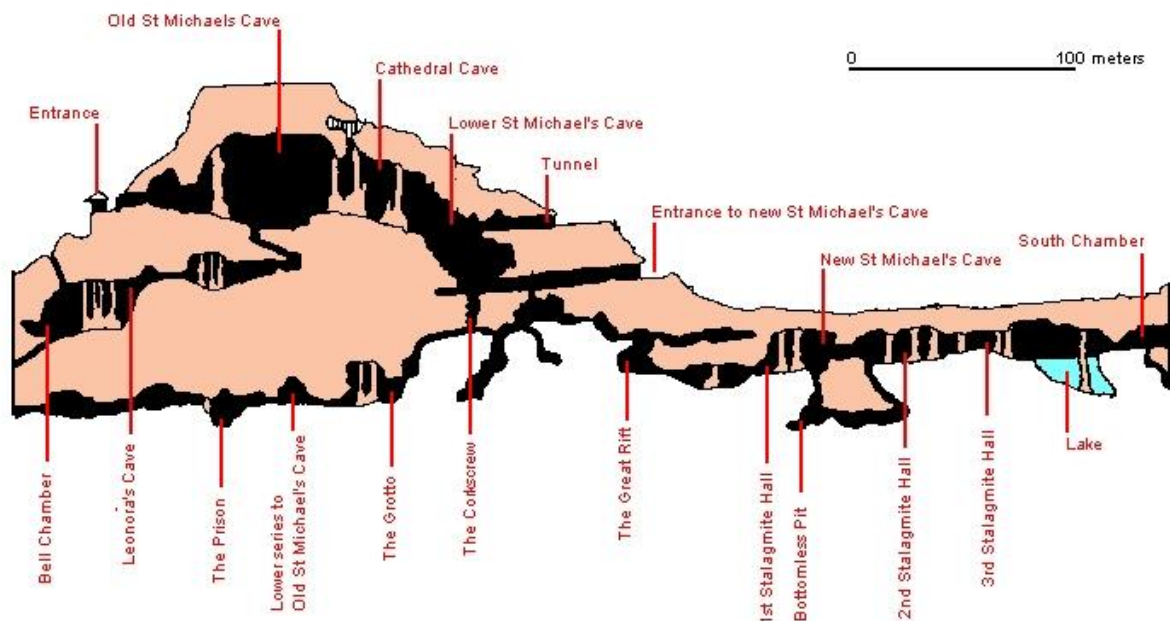


2005 YUCPC trip to Gibraltar

Introduction

In July 2005, YUCPC visited the beautiful rock of Gibraltar for part holiday and part caving. The trip wasn't strictly an expedition, but we thought it was worth adding to the list as there is a huge potential for new discoveries on the rock of Gibraltar to expand the total of 140 caves already known. Although Gibraltar has a spectacular show cave (St. Michael's Cave), we were very lucky to get a personal guide, Mark, from Gibraltar's only caving club - The Gibraltar Caving Group. Mark took us to many of the caves and man-made tunnels that go through the rock and are not normally accessible by the public. Much of the land is still owned and controlled by the MOD which can make access difficult.

St. Michael's Cave



St. Michael's Cave has interested visitors to Gibraltar ever since the Romans. The Cathedral Cave was long believed to be bottomless, probably giving birth to the story that Gibraltar was linked to Africa by a subterranean passage over 15 miles (24 Km) long under the Strait of Gibraltar. The cave consists of an Upper Hall with 5 connecting passages and rocks between 40ft (12.2m) and 150ft (45.7m) to a smaller hall. Beyond this, a series of narrow halls leads to a further succession of chambers, reaching depths of some 250ft (62.5m) below

the entrance. During World War II the cave was prepared as an emergency hospital, but was never used as such.

St. Michael's Cave now used as an entertainments venue. Whilst blasting an alternative entrance to the cave, a further series of deeply descending chambers ending in a mini lake were discovered and named Lower St. Michael's Cave. The Cathedral Cave is opened to visitors and makes a unique auditorium for concerts, ballets, drama and presentations. The unique beauty of crystallised nature can be appreciated through a centuries old stalagmite that was too heavy and fell on its side at the far end of the chamber.

In 1972 a slice 18" thick (45cm) was cut, revealing its interior structure. Its growth is clearly indicated during periods of excessive rain by light brown rings and patches, the dark area being formed during periods of less rain. Two thin lines of a crumbly white substance are thought to represent glacial periods. The stalagmite is also translucent in some areas.

During the Second World War the cave was converted into an emergency hospital, although its use was not necessary during the war.

Upper St. Michael's cave is one of the main show caves on Gibraltar which has some huge spectacular formations and boasts its own in-cave theatre which hosts full concerts! Its quite a long way from proper caving like we're used to but it offered a good insight into the cave systems on Gibraltar.

In contrast to the St. Michael's show cave, Lower St. Michael's isn't open to the public although is partly lit and has some basic rigging. This part of St. Michael's has some of the most amazing formations which are present all the way through the cave. About 30 minutes into the cave, a large underground lake is reached which has to be traversed around as it is several meters deep but crystal clear!

Stay Behind Cave

During the Second World War, the British Government planned and created a Top Secret system of chambers inside the Rock of Gibraltar. Were the Nazis ever to capture Gibraltar, six men would seal themselves in these chambers from where they would secretly monitor the movements of the Germans and report these back to London.

The chambers were never used and remained sealed for over fifty years until the Gibraltar Caving Group re-discovered them at the end of 1997. The chambers were in a well preserved state and included dormitory facilities, east- and west-

facing observation posts, and a fresh-water cistern. The Gibraltar Caving Group along with the Spanish team GIEX conducted a survey of the site under the supervision of the Gibraltar Museum.

In September 1998, Mr Dennis Woods who had been involved in the construction of this facility (known in his day as Braithwaite's Cave on account of the Commanding Officer's name) returned to Gibraltar for the first time in over fifty years and confirmed the authenticity of this unique site.

