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Spelunker, Caver, and Speleologist

I once used the terms *spelunker*, *caver*, and *speleologist* interchangeable, but I have learned as an experienced caver the differences in the terms. These words should be viewed as stages of cave exploration, just as the words *baby*, *child*, and *adult* are used to describe the stages of human life.

The word *spelunker* comes from the Middle English word *spelunk*, which literally means cave or grotto. Therefore, the word *spelunker* simply refers to a person who enters a cave, usually for the first time. The spelunker is commonly unprepared: entering without proper equipment, wearing cotton clothing, and lacking general caving knowledge.

I was considered a spelunker when I went on my first cave experience. I wore a pair of cotton blue jeans, a cotton sleeveless tank top, a bottle cap belt, and a pair of tennis shoes. For equipment, I carried only two handheld flashlights. I had no practical knowledge for underground safety or cave contents.

By the time I reached the opening of the dirty grotto, I was covered with mud from head to toe! My jeans were so saturated with mud and water that they must have weighed about twenty pounds and were falling off me. My blonde braided hair was reddish brown from the mud. My knees, elbows, hands, and head ached from all the little cuts and bruises the cave inflicted on me. Despite the fact that I was completely worn out and my body was numb with pain, I couldn't have been happier.

As I felt the pain in my hip from the narrow passageway affectionately called the “birth canal,” I remembered the inside of the cave. My mind was flooded with images from the cave: sparkling stalactites dangling delicately from the ceiling, wonderful curtain-like formations growing from the walls, stalagmites jutting up from the cave floor, and the meandering stream cutting its path to the underground lake room with the enchanting waterfall. At that moment, I decided to become a novice caver.

A few of the people in my group were considered cavers. The things which separate cavers from spelunkers were proper equipment, safety knowledge, and respect for the caves. The most important piece of equipment a caver can have is an LED headlamp mounted on a helmet. The helmet protects the cavers’ heads from stalactites and also from hitting their heads in the event of a fall. The headlamp allows the caver to have two hands available for maneuvering around in the cave. A caver will also carry a special dry bag designed for caving that contains at least two extra flashlights with backup batteries for each. Depending on the type of cave and how long the cavers intend to be in the cave, they may also carry food, water, pee bottles, plastic baggies for feces, caving harness, a specialized caving rope, an ascender, and some very basic first aid supplies.

Along with proper caving equipment, cavers also follow certain cave safety procedures that spelunkers do not. Cavers never enter a cave alone. If something were to happen to one of them, someone from the group could always go back to get help. If the cave was to collapse and trap all of the cavers, they have a backup rescue plan in place. Cavers typically notify someone before entering the cave and give him an estimate for the duration of time they intend to spend in the cave. If the cavers have not contacted the person on the outside within the specified amount of time, the search and rescue teams are called.

Cavers, unlike spelunkers, also possess a deep respect for their underground paradises. They follow the basic “leave no trace” principle and take special care to be sure that no trash or human contaminants, including feces and urine, are left in the cave. Cavers will also make every attempt not to disturb formations or cave life in one of Mother Nature’s greatest masterpieces. The main purpose for a caver’s exploration is for recreational enjoyment of these wonders.

What separates cavers from speleologists is the purpose for their caving. The main goal of speleologists is to gather scientific information when they enter a cave. For instance, my friend, Chuck Maze, is a speleologist in a caving society known as the Moles. He considers a trip into a cave from which nothing is learned a wasted trip. He uses Karst topography to map caves, and he documents cave life and formations through journal entries and photographs. He also buys land with known caves on it and restores them to their natural state by removing all traces of human contaminants and trash.

Chuck is a mature caver who has been through the stages of cave exploration and finally ended up as a speleologist. Not every caver makes it to the final stage of caving, only those select few with a highly scientific background and a deep love for caves. Just as some people never mentally make it to the adult stage of life, some spelunkers never become cavers, and most cavers never become speleologists. Definitely, just as although the words *baby*, *child*, and *adult* are all used to describe humans, they do not have the same meaning, the same is true with the words *spelunker*, *caver*, and *speleologist* when describing types of cave explorers.