

Return to Painted Cave

text & photos by Dave Bunnell

A visit to Painted Cave on Santa Cruz Island will impress even the most jaded of cavers, and forever change your impression of what a sea cave can be. Its prominent 130-foot-high entrance engulfs three-fourths the height of the basaltic cliff-face in which it lies. Above, a small streambed follows a straight-arrow course along the fault that guided the cave's development. In wetter months, a waterfall from it sometimes tumbles over the roof of the cave.

I had first visited Painted Cave in 1980, just after moving to California, and the experience fueled the fires that led me to investigate hundreds of sea caves throughout the Channel Islands and along the mainland coast. Along the way my friends and I found many impressive sea caves, many more complex and some equally beautiful, but none as lengthy or that imparted the same sense of grandeur that Painted Cave does.

Painted was one of the first caves we surveyed as part of the newborn California Sea Cave Survey in 1982, and at 1215 feet currently ranks as the longest, though perhaps not the largest volume, sea cave in the world. Our map was published in an article in a 1983 *NSS News*, and is also visible on cartographer Bob Richards' web site (www.cavegraphics.com/PaintedCave.html). Over the course of the next few years as we surveyed caves on the island, I would make return visits to try and photograph its large inner chamber with only moderate

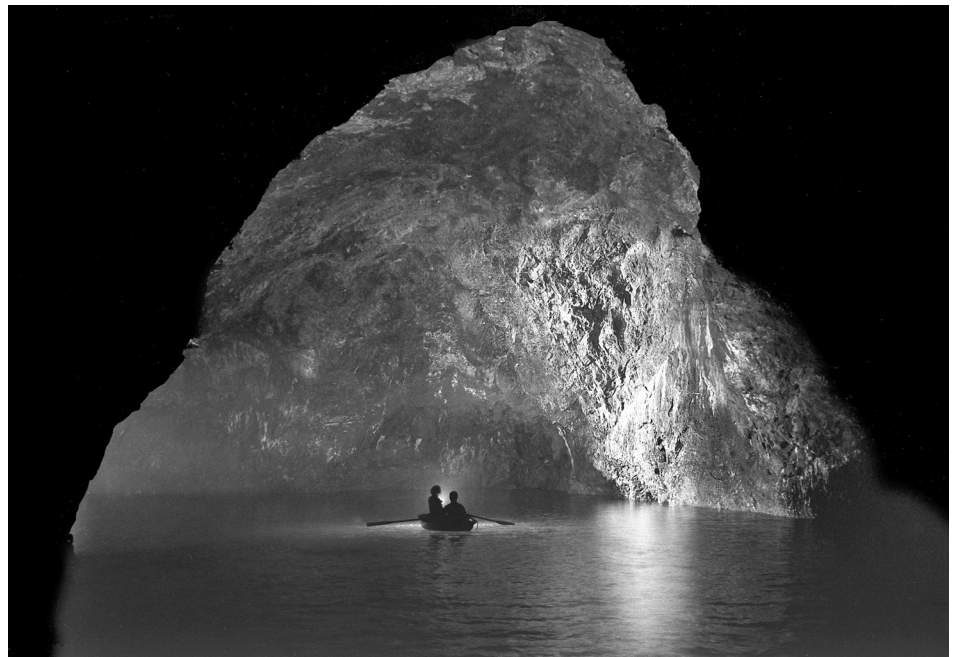


success, despite using flashbulbs.

A visit to Painted Cave first requires crossing the 25 nautical miles of the Santa Barbara Channel to Santa Cruz Island. It lies on the rugged west end, a section of the island with miles of volcanic cliffs up to 200 feet high, and few safe anchorages that protect against the typical west swell that can kick up in this area. To visit, we often anchor in what we call the Seal's Cove, a small cove several hundred feet west of the cave, itself home to three large and unusual caves. In calm weather one might anchor directly in

front of Painted, but it is fairly deep (over 80 feet) and has little room to lay out much anchor line in sloppy conditions.

The cave's impressive 130-foot-high x 100-foot-wide entrance lies at the back of a small cove. There is plenty of light as you traverse the first 650 feet, the ceiling soaring far overhead. The walls are splashed with deposits of green, orange, white, and purple, which gave the cave its name. The ceiling height gradually stairsteps down in height, but the width remains 50 to 75 feet. At 650 feet in, the ceiling lowers to about



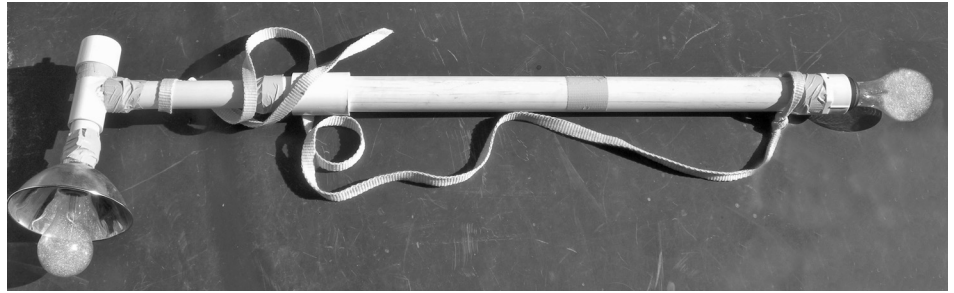
View out the 130-foot high entrance (left) and above, perhaps the best of my previous attempts to illuminate the inner chamber, back in the early 1980s, using 400 ASA black and white film and a single M3 flashbulb shot from the rowboat.

15 feet high (depending on the tide level) and the passage narrows to about 25 feet. Beyond lies the Inner Chamber, a room measuring 120 x 170 feet, and almost 50 feet high at its maximum. But aside from a small patch of sunlight hitting the left wall, it is one of the darkest places I've ever been underground. This is due both to the dark, volcanic walls and to the fact that the floor is wall to wall water, which as any cave photographer knows, can suck up light like a black hole. With strong lights, you can follow two passages that extend from the Inner Chamber to cobble beaches on either side.

In May of 2006, I was on the island to renew exploration and do photography for a revision of my long out-of-print book on the island caves (see references). With me were Dan Clardy, Martin Haye, and Dan Snyder. As part of the itinerary I returned to Painted Cave for the first time in almost 20 years with the intention of finally bagging a good photo of that ever-so-dark and hard-to-photograph interior. I had hordes of antique screwbase flashbulbs, a tripod, and a good digital DSLR tucked inside the hatches of my sea kayak. There was a fair swell running, and as we approached the entrance of the cave we could see that the conditions looked a bit sloppy. The conditions seemed manageable as we paddled in, but once we reached the inner chamber we were greeted by ominous thundering crashes of waves in the dark interior. Worse yet, the swells were being compressed and amplified as they went through the constricted entrance to the Inner Chamber. At several points I felt I would be picked up and hurled into the dark recesses of the cave. I quickly realized that conditions were far too extreme for my photo concepts, which involved landing on ledges to mount



A group of California sea lions on a ledge in the Inner Chamber



Two-in-one flash unit constructed by the author to allow firing simultaneous bulbs above and below the water. Switch is on the end opposite the reflector. Length is about 3.5 feet.

the camera on a tripod. So we opted for a speedy exit...

It was over a year before I returned, in October of 2007, this time with Dan Clardy, John Lovaas, and Nancy Pistole. Fall is generally the calmest time in the islands, but there was a bit of uncertainty as the area had recently had small craft advisories in the wake of the strong Santa Ana winds that had stoked the widespread fires in southern California. The forecast was for conditions to get better over our four-day visit, so I kept my fingers crossed.

This trip proved very productive with several large new sea caves mapped, and on our third morning we anchored in the Seal's Cove for a new shot at a Painted Cave photo safari. This time I had a new tool, a one-of-a-kind flashgun I'd built that could fire large flashbulbs above and below water at the same time. This seemed the easiest way for someone in a kayak to manage this feat. As you can probably tell by the accompanying photos, this time conditions in the cave were extremely mellow. John and I were able to land on ledges on the right side of the room and haul out our kayaks. A couple of California sea lions were at the far end of this ledge but decided to vacate after a few loud, protesting barks at us. The population of sea lions was considerably smaller than one might encounter in the spring, another reason I'd chosen this time of year. Fortunately, one of the seals on the far side of the room stood its ground and added a nice touch to the panorama photo reproduced on the adjacent page.

Most of the photos relied on a combination of clear screwbase #40 and M5 flashbulbs, with the camera open for about 2 seconds. This captured a bit of the natural light as well. We used a combination of flash fired from the ledges and in some cases from each of two kayaks out in the water. As hoped, the underwater flash gave a nice blue-green glow to the water akin to what we've observed in sea caves that have small underwater openings that admit light into otherwise dark interiors. Because it was calm, we were able to do unsynched multiple-flash of the kayaks with very little fuzziness from the boats' movement. Even with the big

flashbulbs, I needed to use an ISO of 640 on my camera to get more punch out of them, and here was the beauty of a good DSLR. For the most part the custom flash worked well except that the bulbs underwater would fracture and make reloading them difficult, so Nancy would have to paddle to shore where we could remove the base of the bulb with a Leatherman tool. And as with all old bulbs we had a few misfires. But overall I was quite pleased with the results, owing in no small part to the competence of my assistants, and we wrapped up the shoot in about an hour.

Back in the Seal's Cove, I decided that a good way to expend a few more bulbs would be to land in Hidden Room Cave at the rear of the cove. This unusual sea cave has a large dry chamber in it with a steep cobble beach, and even more unusual for a sea cave, it has flowstone and stalactites, in various hues of red, orange and yellow. Although also popular with seals, only one was hanging out near the entrance as we made an easy landing and dragged our boats up inside. It continued to watch us from the entrance as we proceeded to fire off a series of bulbs to illuminate this large room as well. Sadly, a lion's tail formation I had noted in the cave some 20 years previous appeared to be gone. Too high for a visitor to snap off, I suspect that it was either a victim of some fierce storms or simply collapsed under its own weight.

As far as I've been able to determine, aside from my earlier shots, these are the first published images showing the dark interior of the world's longest sea cave.

REFERENCES

- Bunnell, D. and Vesely, C. The Amazing Sea Caves of Santa Cruz Island, *NSS News*, February 1983
- Bunnell, D. Sea Caving in the Channel Islands-A Decade of Intertidal Adventure. *NSS News*, June 1993
- Bunnell, D. *Sea Caves of Santa Cruz Island*, McNally-Loftin, Santa Barbara, CA 1988.



Two shots were stitched to make this panorama of Painted Cave's inner Chamber. Some daylight is visible to the left of the far kayak, and a patch of wall lit by it between the two kayaks. Five flashbulbs were used in total. Note the California sea lion sitting upright on the rocks at right.

Below, three bulbs were used in this shot, one from shore and one from each kayak. The underwater bulb didn't fire on this one. To the right of the red kayak is a sharp edge formed where the two faults forming the chamber intersect..

