Maquoketa Caves State Park

Cave Explorer's Guide

Access Routes • Accessibility Ratings • Exploration Difficulty

Rating Key

Accessibility ★	How easy it is to reach the cave entrance	Difficulty ★	How hard it is to explore the cave
★★★★★	Paved path / boardwalk; fully accessible	★★★★★	Expert only – extreme crawling, wet, tight
★★★★☆	Easy trail, minimal obstacles	★★★★☆	Advanced – significant crawling, challenging
★★★☆☆	Moderate – some climbing or steps involved	★★★☆☆	Intermediate – belly crawling, some obstacles
★★☆☆☆	Difficult – steep slopes, slippery terrain	★★☆☆☆	Beginner-friendly – limited crawling
★☆☆☆☆	Very difficult access	★☆☆☆☆	No real exploration / shelter only

#1 Wide Mouth Cave

A large, dry cave that functions more as an open rain shelter than a deep cavern. Its wide entrance and remote location make it a peaceful wildlife-watching spot. Once filled with brilliant white speleothems before souvenir hunters stripped it bare.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★★☆	*Boardwalk trail*	Follow the main trail northward. A dedicated boardwalk trail branches off the valley floor and ascends the hillside directly to the entrance. The wide opening is easy to spot from below due to its impressive size.	★☆☆☆☆	*No crawling needed*

Tip: *Best for a quiet rest; no real exploration inside.*

#2 Dug Out Cave

A shallow open shelter with no real passages. Material was removed under a rock ledge long ago, leaving a simple overhang. More of a geological curiosity than a caving destination.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★★★	*Directly on trail*	Sits right alongside the main valley trail — nearly impossible to miss	★☆☆☆☆	*No exploration possible*

		while walking northward. No separate trail required.		

Tip: *Quick stop only. Nothing to explore beyond the overhang.*

#3 Twin Arch Cave

A dry, open room with an attractive domed roof about twenty feet in diameter. Twin arches flood the interior with generous natural light. Fossils — including shell indentations — are visible in the ceiling.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★★☆	*Boardwalk trail*	Reached via the boardwalk trail that hugs the northern cliff face, just south of Dug Out Cave. Well-maintained path leads directly to the entrance.	★★☆☆☆	*Open room, no crawling*

Tip: *Large boulders inside make comfortable seats while studying the fossils overhead.*

#4 Hernando's Hideaway Cave

Once inside, explorers are rewarded with extended slithering and belly-crawling through to the back. An extra slot in the cliff to the left of the entrance casts a dramatic shaft of light along the route.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★☆☆	*Boardwalk + steep climb*	Take the boardwalk trail along the northern cliff face. Look for the stout tree at the base of the bluff marking the entrance — it requires a fair scramble up the hillside from the boardwalk to reach it.	★★★☆☆	*Belly crawling required*

Tip: *The climb to the entrance is worth it. Extra light slot makes for dramatic photos.*

#5 Up-N-Down Cave

Similar in character to Hernando's Hideaway and equally entertaining. The entry requires a "wheelbarrow" move since the opening sits well above ground level — part of what makes this cave a lively challenge.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★☆☆	*Boardwalk + raised entrance*	Continue along the same boardwalk trail past Hernando's Hideaway. The gnarled entrance, a couple of feet off the ground, is easy to identify.	★★★☆☆	*Raised entry, fun traverse*

Tip: *A partner helps enormously when negotiating the raised entrance.*

#6 Window Cave

Despite a jagged, visually striking entrance, Window Cave is essentially a short crevice in the limestone bluff. It goes nowhere, but the entrance itself is worth a look.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★★★	*Valley floor, easy to reach*	Found at the valley floor near the base of the boardwalk descending from the Natural Bridge. One of the	★☆☆☆☆	*Dead end, no passage*

		first features visible on entering the valley from the north end.		

Tip: *Worth a glance, but don't expect to spend more than a minute here.*

#7 Match Cave

Features two passages, the larger running about thirty feet deep. A solid choice for beginners — it is dry and not far from the surface, though some concerted belly crawling is required to reach the far end.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★★☆	*Boardwalk spur trail*	A dedicated boardwalk spur trail branches up the hillside from the main valley trail and leads directly to the small oval entrance. Visible from the valley floor below.	★★☆☆☆	*Good for beginners, some crawling*

Tip: *A good first cave for newcomers. Bring kneepads for the crawl section.*

#8 Barbell Cave

Two openings greet visitors but only the right one is passable — and it requires a boost to enter. The tight going eventually opens into a neat chamber with good speleothems where two people can rest prone. Spider webs are abundant throughout.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★☆☆☆	*Steep, slippery slope*	High above the valley on the eastern wall. Access involves crossing Raccoon Creek then ascending a steep, narrow slope that can be extremely slippery after wet weather. Use caution.	★★★☆☆	*Tight entry, then opens up*

Tip: *Not for claustrophobics. A rock staircase nearby leads to the clifftop picnic shelters.*

#9 Shinbone Cave

Large-faced cave with the actual entrance tucked behind boulders and rubble, requiring a curve inward and to the right. A deeper belly-crawling passage is hidden at the back. The cave sits high enough to offer panoramic views of the southern valley. House wrens and eastern phoebes nest in the nooks and crannies.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★☆☆	*Long boardwalk steps or steep trail*	Two approaches: (1) Follow the wide valley-floor trail southward — the easier route — then ascend a long set of boardwalk steps. (2) Cross Raccoon Creek and climb a steeper, narrower trail from the opposite bank. Both routes involve significant elevation gain.	★★★☆☆	*Rough passage, hard on knees*

Tip: *The name is not metaphorical — watch your shins in the rough interior passage.*

#10 Wye Cave

Begins in the rubble of an enormous sinkhole. The route descends steeply and forks — left being the main passage. Cooler air and hollow echoes hint at a surprisingly extensive system. A low, tight connection deep inside is a real challenge for broad-shouldered explorers.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★☆☆☆	*Railroad-tie stairs + sinkhole drop*	The highest cave in the park. Easiest approach: take the railroad-tie staircase from the stone shelter up to the hilltop picnic area, then follow the trail directly behind the shelter. Entry requires dropping approximately six feet into a sinkhole opening.	★★★★☆	*Advanced; not for claustrophobics*

Tip: *One of the most interesting caves in the park — worth multiple visits. Beginners should tackle easier caves first.*

#12, #13, #14 Dancehall Cave 💧 Wet Cave

The crown jewel of Maquoketa Caves — the largest cave in the park, consisting of two connected segments. High ceilings, a through-route with sidewalks, and electric lighting make it ideal for casual visitors. A stream runs through the cave; white trousers are not recommended. Historically used for community dances on hot summer nights.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★★★	*Paved path, electrically lit*	The most accessible cave in the park. Descend the concrete steps from the main parking area to reach the Upper Entrance (#12). Electrically lit (roughly 9 a.m. to dusk in warmer months) with paved sidewalks throughout. Middle (#13) and Lower (#14) entrances are encountered along the through-route.	★★☆☆☆	*Easy walk-through; stream present*

Tip: *Bring a flashlight even when lights are on, for viewing speleothems. Bats hibernate here in fall and winter — lights are turned off seasonally.*

Landmark Balanced Rock

A 17-ton limestone boulder teetering on a remarkably tiny pedestal — one of the most striking geological features in the park. Up close, daylight is visible shining through parts of the contact point between the monolith and its base, making the precarious balance even more dramatic. Formed over thousands of years as the surrounding rock eroded away beneath it.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★☆☆	*Boardwalk steps required*	After exiting Dancehall Cave at the Lower Entrance, look up and to the right — Balanced Rock is visible on the cliff above. A large set of boardwalk steps on the valley floor leads upward directly past it. Follow the steps and the rock comes into close view. The trail continues upward back toward the stone shelter and main parking area.	★☆☆☆☆	*Viewpoint only — no entry*

Tip: *Best appreciated from the boardwalk steps below first, then up close as you pass by. The view down into the Lower Entrance of Dancehall Cave from this height is excellent.*

#15 Rainy Day Cave 💧 Wet Cave

A wet cave with two rooms, the first large and oval-shaped with plenty to explore. Follow the stream deeper through the mud and you'll find a second, smaller room tucked further back in the darkness.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★★☆	*Boardwalk trail*	Follow the boardwalk trail south after crossing Raccoon Creek from the Dancehall Cave exit. The cave sits directly on the trail along the great rock wall.	★★☆☆☆	*Wet but accessible rooms*

Tip: *Wear waterproof boots. The oval first chamber is impressive on its own.*

Mechanical Fat Man's Misery

A mechanical cave — formed not by water dissolving limestone, but by a cataclysmic splitting and sliding of rock from the cliff face. The result is a dramatic lean-to gap in the bluff. Slim visitors can squeeze straight through; others may need to find their way around. Despite the intimidating name, it really isn't that hard to negotiate.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★☆☆	*Narrowing hillside trail*	Follow the boardwalk trail south from Rainy Day Cave, hugging the great rock wall. The path gradually rises in elevation and narrows. Fat Man's Misery is encountered as the trail climbs — a large ledge that split from the cliff face and slid down long ago, forming a lean-to gap. It sits just before the staircase leading up to Ice Cave.	★★☆☆☆	*Tight squeeze; most can pass*

Tip: *Take a deep breath before entering — it's tighter than it looks, but most visitors make it through without trouble. Note Tall Man's Misery just a short distance further along the same trail.*

#16 Ice Cave

Two rooms, the first being the larger. Feels noticeably cooler than any other cave in the park — a genuine chill on even warm days. Initials dated May 6, 1878 are carved in the nearby stone wall, a reminder of the long human history here.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★☆☆	*Steps + hillside climb*	Located on the hillside at the southern end of the park. After passing Fat Man's Misery and Tall Man's Misery, ascend a set of steps to find the entrance roughly twenty feet above the stream. Several large boulders mark its location.	★★☆☆☆	*Two accessible rooms*

Tip: *A great cool-down on a hot day. The temperature difference from outside is immediately noticeable.*

Special Bat Passage 💧 Wet Cave

A short but tricky wet passage branching off Dancehall Cave. The floor features a distinctive erosion channel about a foot wide and a foot deep — walkable with the right-sized boots. Ends at a large puddle overlooking the Dancehall sidewalk below, requiring you to retrace your steps.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★☆☆	*Inside Dancehall; scramble to enter*	Located inside Dancehall Cave, closest to the Upper Entrance (#12). The access hole is several feet off the ground inside the cave — look for it on the right side of the passage just after the 'jag'. Requires a boost or scramble to enter.	★★★★☆	*Tight, wet; not for claustrophobics*

Tip: *Allow about 15 minutes. Make sure lights are working before entering — no daylight inside.*

Special **Steel Gate Passage** 💧 Wet Cave

The most thrilling and demanding cave in the park — over 500 feet of twisted, corkscrew crawling. Wet, sloppy, tight, and long. Rewards those who persevere with spectacular flowstones and speleothems in remarkable condition, preserved by the rarity of visitors. Plan for at least an hour.

ACCESS	RATING	HOW TO ACCESS	DIFFICULTY	RATING
★★★☆☆	*Inside Dancehall sinkhole; raised entry*	Accessible from the middle sinkhole area between Dancehall Cave's two segments. The entrance is several feet above the ground, marked by a distinctive rust-red iron deposit stain around the opening.	★★★★★	*Expert only; 500+ ft of crawling*

Tip: *Never enter alone — a partner is essential. Bring multiple backup flashlights. You will emerge dirty and exhausted, but it is worth every scrape.*

Always cave with a partner, carry multiple light sources, and leave no trace. Source: Maquoketa Caves State Park History Guide.