

# Horseshoe Bay Caving Trip

Door County, WI

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An annual tradition of the Wisconsin Speleological Society is the winter trip to Horseshoe Bay Cave in Door County. Horseshoe Bay Cave, with slightly over 1/2 mile of passage, is one of the largest caves in the state. Typical passages are 2-4 feet high, with water level that depends on the season. During the winter, the only time that it is possible to visit the cave, the water is generally 1-2 feet deep. Even in the driest of winters, however, there are points in the cave where the water comes within a inches of the ceiling. To make matters worse, the water temperature is around 45 degF.



In spite of all of this, 66 cavers from 17 cities showed up on January 4 to see Horseshoe Bay Cave. We were divided into several groups, depending on how much we wanted to get wet. It is possible to tour the cave back to the "Big Room" without getting wet much above your knees and elbows, and about half the people did this route. Beyond this point, trips are long and uncomfortable and require a full wetsuit to be comfortable. About half the remaining cavers went back to the Elephant Room. Beyond the elephant room, the cave gets very low, to the point where it is nearly impassable in wet years. Going beyond this point requires full body immersion at times, so a wetsuit hood is very helpful. About 10-15 cavers continued beyond this point in several small groups. Our group went to the Waterfall Room, an enormous chamber nearly 50 feet high. We turned at this point and came out on a beautiful winter day after seven hours in the cave.

Our group: Isaac Gomez (L), Dan Pertzborn, and Stephanie Kaufman (Ethan is not pictured)

This was my second trip into Horseshoe Bay, and, as I did after my first trip (two years earlier), I promised myself on the drive home it would be my last. This time, it took only a week to break that promise. We discussed the low water levels near the back of the cave with Gary Soule and he suggested that the sump that had limited exploration in the past might be open. Dave Wysocki, a caver friend who could not make the January 4 trip proposed returning the following weekend to push the sump.

To avoid a really long day, we headed up to Door County the evening before and stayed with friends. The group this time consisted of Dave Wysocki, Dan Pertzborn, myself, and Scott Keil. This time, we took along full survey gear. We planned to bring along a hand pump and several hundred feet of hose, but could not secure these items on such short notice. I also took along a disposable camera, carried in an Otter-brand waterproof box.



We went back to the sump and discovered that the water level was not low enough to allow passage. We crossed one short sumped section (short enough to maintain physical contact to the previous room), but could go no further. On the way out I took some pictures, until sand compromised the seal in my Otter Box. I opened the box to discover a tiny bit of water sloshing around. When I tried to take the next picture, the flash did not fire, and when I pushed the "flash charge" button, the camera went pfffft and smoked a bit. Fortunately, I had already exposed most of the roll, and the pictures were not damaged.

We exited after eleven hours in the cave, by far my longest caving trip ever. Still, it was short by Horseshoe Bay standards. Surveying trips often last eighteen hours or more. Unfortunately, the wonderful weather that had graced us the weekend before had passed, and we exited the cave into the night, facing 7 degF temperatures and a 15 mph wind (I looked it up, just to be sure).



Dave Wysocki comes through one of the low spots in the Mississippi River section of the cave. The Mississippi River section consists of a long low section with standing water, broken occasionally by small "islands" of breakdown that allow you to get out of the water and regroup. Though all of my pictures show such "dry spots", this is just because they were the only convenient spot to take out the camera - the wet crawls are often in excess of one hundred feet.



Dan Pertzborn accidentally "staged" his neoprene hood with some food and bottled water just before the Elephant Room, so he was especially uncomfortable in the wet passages. Fortunately, the water level was lower than usual - these sections often need to be passed on your back, with your mouth and nose barely above water.



Dan on his way back into the Waterfall Room (on the way out of the cave). The Waterfall Room is the end of the Mississippi River section. After this squeeze, there is a short crawl through the "Sand Dunes" (very wet and muddy) and then you can climb up to a higher level into an entirely different sort of cave.



The Nile River is mostly crawling on breakdown, but it is dry!

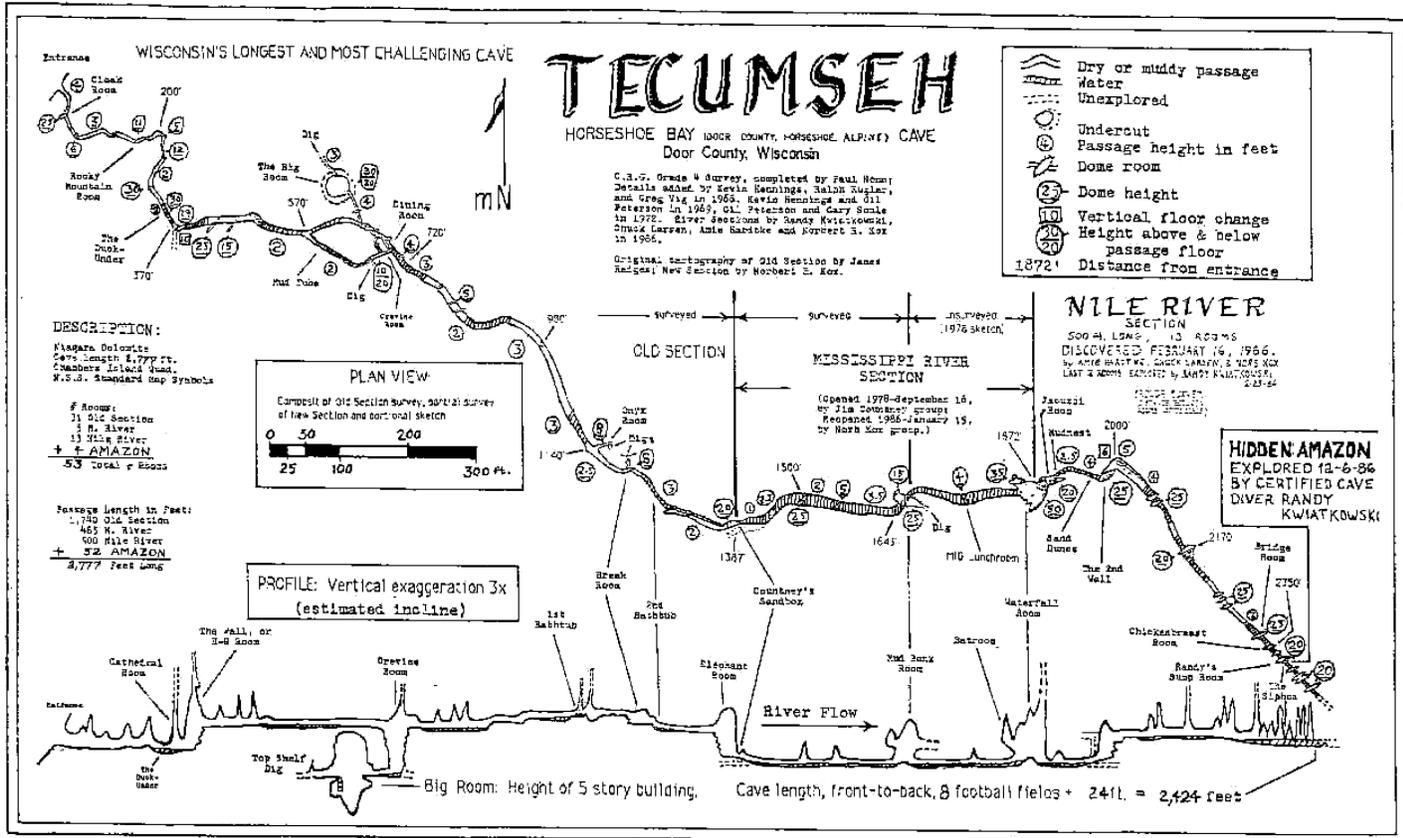


There is even walking cave!



After several hundred feet of dry cave, the floor drops a bit and we are again immersed. This water is separate from the Mississippi River water - its depth never seems to vary. There is a series of progressively lower duck-unders, until finally the sumps are reached. There was some exploration into the Hidden Amazon (past the sumps) in the 1980s by a cave-diver, but as far as we know, nobody has been there since. It is likely that any exploration beyond this point will involve the use of SCUBA equipment.

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[Dan Fountain's Horseshoe Bay Cave \(Jan 2004\) Trip Report](#)