

Spelunking/Caving: Safety Activity Checkpoints



Spelunking” (speh-LUNK-ing) or caving, is an exciting, hands-on way to learn about speleology (spee-lee-AH-luh-gee), the study of caves, as well as paleontology (pay-lee-en-TAH-luh-gee), the study of life from past geologic periods by examining plant and animal fossils. As a sport, caving is similar to rock climbing, and often involves using ropes to crawl and climb through cavern nooks and crannies. These checkpoints do not apply to groups taking trips to tourist or commercial caves, which often include safety features such as paths, electric lights, and stairways. Caving is not permitted for Girl Scout Daisies and Brownies.

Never go into a cave alone. Never go caving with fewer than 4 in your group. Appoint a reliable, experienced caver, as the “trail guide” or “sweeper” whose job it is to keep the group together. When climbing in a cave, always use three points of contact, hands, feet, knees and possibly, the seat of your pants (the cave scoot).

Know where to go spelunking. Connect with your Girl Scout council for site suggestions. Also, the National Speleological Society provides an online search tool for [U.S. caving clubs](#), and the National Park Service provides information about National Park caves. www.nps.gov

Include girls with disabilities. Communicate with girls with disabilities and/or their caregivers to assess any needs and accommodations. Learn more about the resources and information that the [National Center on Health, Physical Activities and Disabilities](#) provides to people with disabilities.

Caving Gear

Required:

- Safety helmet; ensure that safety helmets fit properly, with a strong chin strap; for horizontal caves, bump helmets may be used; for vertical caves, use safety helmets carrying the Union of International Alpine Association (UIAA) seal, which is located on the inside of the helmet. It is recommended that a disposable liner, such as a shower cap or surgical cap, be worn underneath the helmet to protect against the spread of head lice.

Recommended Gear

- Sturdy boots with ankle protection (hiking boots for dry areas; rubber boots or wellies for wet caves)
- Warm, rubber gloves (to keep hands warm and protect against cuts and abrasions)
- Long Pants and long sleeved shirt
- Nonperishable, high-energy foods such as fruits and nuts
- Water
- Knee and elbow pads
- Water-resistant “wet socks” (for wet caves)
- Belt and harness
- Compass
- Three sources of light; the main light is electric and mounted on the safety helmet, while the other two light sources may be flashlights
- Spare bulbs and batteries
- Trash bag (use as a poncho or for covering dirty equipment after the caving activity; cavers keep an empty trash bag in their safety helmets)

Prepare for Caving

- Communicate with council and parents.** See the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints for information
- Girls plan the activity.** Keeping their grade-level abilities in mind, encourage girls to take proactive leadership roles in organizing details of the activity.
- Arrange for transportation and adult supervision.** Ensure that at least one adult is an experienced caver. *For the recommended adult-to-girl ratios see the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints.*
- Verify instructor knowledge and experience.** A guide with documented experience in cave exploration accompanies the group into the cave. A guide can also help decide which caves are suitable. Pre-trip instruction is given by an adult with documented experience according to your council’s guidelines.
- Select a safe site*.** Obtain guidance from a local chapter of the National Speleological Society to select a cave to explore. Never explore a cave without a guide and without written permission from the site owner/operator. Check with your Girl Scout council for approval if needed.
- Compile key contacts.** See the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints for information
- Girls learn about caving.** Girls learn about basic caving guidelines before planning a caving trip, and they must understand safety procedures and know how to handle equipment. Caves are fragile and sensitive environments. Recognize and use resistant surfaces for travel. If no latrine available, pack out ALL human waste, solids and fluids. The smallest food crumbs can effect cave environments and can have a significant effect on the local nutrient balance. Choose less crumbly foods such as nuts and chewy energy bars.
- Dress appropriately for the activity.** Make sure girls and adults avoid wearing dangling earrings, bracelets, and necklaces that may become entangled in equipment.

- **Prepare for emergencies.** Ensure the presence of a waterproof first-aid kit and a first-aider with a current certificate in First Aid, including Adult and Child CPR or CPR/AED, who is prepared to handle cases of soft tissue and bone injury, and hypothermia. If any part of the activity is located 30 minutes or more from Emergency Medical Services response time, ensure the presence of a first-aider with Wilderness First Aid. See *Volunteer Essentials* for information about first-aid standards and training.

On the Day of Caving

- **Get a weather report.** See the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints. Also, in wet weather, avoid caves with stream passages, as some caves can flood.
- **Use the buddy system.** See the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints.

Caving Links

- **American Cave Conservation Association:** www.caves.org
- National Caves Association: <http://cavern.com>
- National Speleological Society: www.caves.org
- Guide to Responsible Caving (published by NSS): <http://caves.org/brochure/NSS%20Guide%2062309.pdf>

Caving Know-How for Girls

- **Leave No Trace in caving.** Learn about threats to cave and karst systems, which are underground drainage systems, from the National Park Service. www.lnt.org and www.nps.gov
- **Get into archaeology.** Read up about the archaeological explorations in caving at www.archaeological.org
- **White-Nose Syndrome (WNS).** Learn about the threat of white-nose syndrome to bat populations at <https://www.whitenosesyndrome.org/>

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*This checkpoint must be reviewed with the vendor and/or facility where appropriate.