



CAVE ART
A GUIDE TO THE
DECORATED ICE AGE
CAVES OF EUROPE

Paul G. Bahn



The decorated Ice Age caves are some of mankind's greatest artistic achievements, and there is no substitute for seeing the caves themselves. There you can see the art – paintings, engravings, bas-reliefs, or drawings – in its original, natural setting, and stand where the artists did 30,000–10,000 years ago.

For speleologists and holidaymakers alike – indeed anyone who wants to add a visit to a cave to their itinerary – here is an essential handbook. The first guide to all the decorated Ice Age caves in Europe that are open to the public, *Cave Art* covers more than 50 caves in England, France, Spain, Portugal and Italy, as well as relevant museums and centres.



Paul G. Bahn has a PhD in archaeology from Cambridge University, and for decades has been an independent researcher, writing and editing a wide range of archaeological books, including several on Ice Age art. He also lectures on numerous tours to the decorated Ice Age caves.



The 'blue rhinoceros' in the Grotte Margot

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Inside front cover: Bison panel at Chauvet 2. © Patrick Aventurier – Grotte Chauvet 2.

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INTRODUCTION



There are many reasons for visiting the Ice Age decorated caves of Europe: it may be a pilgrimage, in homage to the region's artists of 40,000 - 12,000 years ago; or it may simply be curiosity. But while one's interest may have been triggered by books, television or lecture-slides, there is simply no substitute for seeing the sites themselves. You will see some of humankind's greatest artistic achievements in their unusual, evocative and original settings. In addition, many of the caves themselves are in regions of outstanding beauty and wonderful climates, famed for their wines and cuisines.

Whatever your motivation or interest, a visit to an Ice Age cave is a tremendous privilege. After more than a century of research, we still know only about 430 such sites in Eurasia, and only a small fraction of these are open to the public, because of difficulties of access or conservation concerns. Thus they constitute a very limited and finite resource, and yet visitors can approach these original masterpieces really closely, an experience unparalleled in

major art galleries. Unlike a visit to the Louvre or the Prado, in entering a cave you are seeing the images precisely where they were created, you are standing or crouching just where the artists did

In many cases, the journey to the cave entrance and the route through the chambers give your experience an immediacy, purity and vividness. Entering a world far removed from one of commerce, and of art-dealers and critics, enhances a feeling of connection with the artists. There is nothing like a stalactite dripping on your head to remind you that you are in a pristine and natural setting.

Although a number of decorated caves have had to be closed to the public in recent years (e.g. Santimamiñe, Maltravieso), others have been re-opened (e.g. Candamo). In addition some new discoveries have been opened for the first time - most notably El Pendo, Church Hole (Creswell Crags), and various open-air sites in Spain and Portugal. Moreover, such has been the

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enormous success of the facsimiles of the caves of Lascaux and Altamira that other such replicas have now been opened – including Ekain, Chauvet and Cosquer. All are to be found in this guide.

In view of the ever-growing popularity of Ice Age cave art, this book is intended to help you prepare for an enjoyable and meaningful visit. The excellent and knowledgeable guides at each site will further enhance your experience.

Strangely, there has been no English-language guidebook to the caves for over 60 years (Sieveking & Sieveking 1962). One French guidebook (Vialou 1976) featured only French caves and, somewhat perversely, also included caves which are not open to the public; a second French guide (Nougier 1990) also covered Spain and Italy, but with minimal information. Hence the need for an up-to-date, useful handbook which not only describes each of the sites, but also provides a maximum of practical and logistical information.

The most important thing to bear in mind when visiting the caves is: DO NOT TOUCH! These images are infinitely older and more fragile than pictures in galleries, and our paramount concern must be their preservation. In addition, equal care must be taken to avoid brushing against the cave walls or against stalagmites, except in those cases where narrowness makes this unavoidable.

What may surprise and disappoint you is that photography, including digital photography, is completely forbidden in almost all of the caves, and even in the

facsimiles. However, it is nevertheless well worth bringing your camera, since you may wish to take photos at the cave entrance, photograph your guide after the visit, or capture the sometimes spectacular scenery in the vicinity.

Food and drink are not allowed inside the caves, since they can introduce undesirable bacteria and organisms, in addition to the potential litter problem. Similarly, to keep the cave environment as pristine as possible, smoking is prohibited, and no animals are allowed inside – which is somewhat ironic since both Lascaux and Altamira were found by dogs!

Some caves have a minimum-age requirement for children, as noted in the relevant information-sections. Where there is no such requirement, it is nevertheless advisable not to take babies or infants inside, simply because many of them become frightened by the strange, cool, dark surroundings, and because negotiating the passages and stairs can be difficult enough for an adult, without needing to hold or carry a small child at the same time. It is preferable to take infants to the facsimiles instead.

Conditions inside the caves remain unchanged throughout the year – they are therefore cool in the summer, and mild in the winter (usually around 11 to 13° Celsius, about 55° Fahrenheit), with 98 or 99% humidity. The weather outside, on the other hand, is highly variable. The experienced traveller will bring several layers of casual clothing, and since feet can get wet in some caves, extra socks are advisable.

INTRODUCTION

Some sites contain stairs, and slippery or muddy areas, so comfortable shoes with a good grip are essential. A number of caves are electrically lit, while others have few lights or none at all. In those cases, flashlights are provided for visitors. It is nevertheless useful to carry a small torch with you, and use it in accordance with the guide's instructions.

Most caves are simply too arduous for visits by people with physical disabilities – those which are more easily accessed are noted throughout this guide. Walking sticks are also banned in some caves. The facsimiles are a wonderful alternative.

At least two caves – Font de Gaume and Les Combarelles – offer special visits for the blind, where they are shown texts, cave plans and reproductions of the principal figures, all in braille; and given statuettes of the main animal species to feel. They are also allowed to touch the rock outside the caves, and taken inside to feel the temperature and humidity, and to ascertain the volume of the spaces from the echoes. At the open-air site of Siega Verde, some of the motifs are also available in Braille.

Since only a few caves have facilities where valuables or cameras can be locked safely during your visit, and since bags and backpacks are not allowed inside, it is advisable to wear a money belt or something similar, or garments with plenty of pockets.

Not all the caves have toilet facilities nearby, so a supply of toilet paper,

sanitiser and handwipes for emergencies is a wise precaution. Similarly, bottled water, sunscreen and a sun hat may prove invaluable. You may also find useful a pen and paper for notes, and some local currency, in small denominations, for tips and souvenirs.

All of the caves and sites in this book are well signposted and easy to find on regional maps. It is remarkable to reflect that the Ice Age artists journeyed to these places on foot or by river, simply by means of their knowledge and memory of the landscapes.

The details given in this guide concerning days and opening-times, booking methods, and prices were all current at the time of going to press, but obviously they may be liable to change – especially the prices!

In some decorated caves open to the public, the art is not shown – e.g. Le Mas d'Azil (French Pyrenees), Cullalvera (Cantabria) or Nerja (southern Spain) – so they are not included here.

Nougier, L-R., 1990, *Les Grottes Préhistoriques Ornées de France, d'Espagne et d'Italie*, Editions Balland: Paris.

Sieveking, A. & Sieveking, G., 1962, *The Caves of France & Northern Spain*, Vista Books: London.

Vialou, D., 1976, *Guide des Grottes Ornées Paléolithiques ouvertes au public*, Masson: Paris.