

Safety for Sea Cave Paddling

by Joanne Schwartz

Whether you dream of the Oregon Coast, the Big Sur Coast, Channel Islands National Park, or sea caves around the world, paddling there might be your most rewarding kayaking experiences ever. We don't want to scare anyone off from enjoying the sights and sounds of magnificent sea caves, but they can be pretty wild places, requiring special equipment and care. Of course, some caves are giant caverns and might even offer a quiet refuge from the rough ocean. But those which offer the most excitement and thrills, in addition to very raw and powerful beauty, are often quite challenging for even the most experienced paddlers.

The Dangers and Cares

- Swells surging especially high and low during a big set can push you up against the ceiling or leave you stranded on bare rocks.
- Surf breaking in the back of caves can be especially dangerous because everything is dark, the spaces are confined, and the "beach" is usually very rocky.
- Waves or surges can enter your cave or tunnel from a side opening and push an unsuspecting paddler against a wall or onto rocks. Rock walls and moving water act like a cheese grater on an errant kayaker and kayak.
- Being caught way back in a dark and winding cave without a light (it slipped off your deck or the batteries just died) can leave you stranded with little sense of direction and ability to negotiate the channel.
- Rocks falling from the ceiling (guess how many caves were formed?).

Necessary Gear

- Helmet - paddling anywhere near rocks, much less inside rocks, requires secure head protection.
- Wet suit - to protect your shoulders, arms and legs from abrasion on the rocks PFD - to protect your ribs from rocks and other kayakers, as well as to provide flotation if you should swim.
- Strong underwater light - dive lights are necessary to explore the inner reaches safely - little flashlights are like a candle flickers in the cave's darkness.
- Thigh Straps - to give open top kayak paddlers more control over their boats and keep their boats with them should they capsize in turbulent cave water. Tow line for a kayak or paddler who needs assistance getting out of the cave or away from the rocks

Necessary Skills

- High and low brace strokes to help keep you from capsizing
- Ability to reenter your kayak very quickly in case of capsize
- Rough water swimming ability to explore the depths of caves, just in case you flip
- Surf skills are valuable and allow you to explore the more exposed caves where the water is especially turbulent
- The Eskimo roll is valuable sometimes of limited use if you capsize in a tight channel
- Most important is the common sense and judgment to match your skills and equipment to the conditions of any particular cave in a particular swell on a particular tide. Paddle softly and watch each cave carefully before entering to learn what happens there in the largest swell of the largest set.

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