

Medicine Lake June 1-2, 2002

A group of cavers led by Cindy Heazlit decided to make a trip up to Medicine Lake to explore some nice lava tube caves, some of which were filled with beautiful ice formations. There were 5 of us - Cindy, Matt Blum, Michael Cooper, Hillary, and her husband Todd. This was actually our second try for this trip - if we had gone in May as originally scheduled, the roads would have still been covered with many feet of snow!

We were on the road Friday afternoon by around 4 - we wanted to get up there at a reasonable hour, considering the 7 hour drive going up through the highlands east of Mt Shasta. We actually met some pretty unpredictable weather on our way - some nice summer thunderstorms rolled by on our drive up. Not to mention having to 4WD through some ice packs still sitting on the road in some places. We barely missed the storms when we set up camp - not 5 minutes after we zipped up our tents to go to sleep did we hear the pitter patter of rain on our tents and roars of thunder nearby.

Fortunately it cleared considerable the next morning - blue sky was on the way, as we headed to our first stop - "Three Level Ice". All of us except Todd climbed into Cindy's white Ford F-150, eager to do some caving (Todd was more into just enjoying the scenery with a good book) We reached the cave - a lava tube with passages on three levels famous for having some beautiful ice formations inside. We found the entrance just off the main road from Medicine Lake - it was a large sinkhole just off the road with two clearly visible entrances. We picked one of them - and scrambled down the breakdown into the hole. We knew one passage had to go down. We searched for a good while when fortunately the good eyes of Michael found the passage.

We made our way down the passage to hit ice almost immediately. A clear ice "flowstone" covered most of the rocks, and emptied out on a floor of solid ice several feet thick. Several clusters of ice columns stretched to the ceiling above our heads. We had to move carefully - the floor was quite slick, and one side of the floor had melted to create a canyon many feet deep that we could easily slide into out of control!

The ice was crystal clear, almost perfectly free of air bubbles. Shining our lights into the floor revealed some rocks below us completely frozen into the very pure ice. We slid very carefully on all fours into the canyon in the side of the floor where it was safe, and we saw a spectacular cross-section of the ice composing the floor. It was composed of hundreds of layers, probably formed over hundreds of years.

Further into the cave, the ice ended and we moved to another level of passage. We went through a nicely shaped tube, showing a channel on the floor where the lava flowed, as well as lavacicles on the ceiling and evidence of secondary lava flows in the tube. A couple icicles hung from the ceiling, but not as many as in the first passage. Finally, we descended to yet a lower level of passage, and looking up revealed to us the most spectacular crystals I had ever seen. Beautiful hexagonal shaped crystals up to 4 inches long hung from the ceiling. The flat, plate shaped crystals reflected our lights like mirrors. The only problem was that the crystals were so delicate that our warm breath started melting the crystals, making a couple of them fall. We took some quick pictures, but we had to move on. We reached the end of the passage just ahead - the passage stopped where the lava flow pinched off the passage.

After we finished Three Level Ice cave, we had lunch then proceeded on what ended up being a unsuccessful search for Hambone Ice - supposedly another really nice ice cave. We were supposed to go on some dirt roads, dodging trees and shrubs, then hike a little to find the entrance. However our attempts to find the entrance led us nowhere. Furthermore, some dark storm clouds were moving in, and we decided to take a "shortcut" back up to our camp. What looked like a shortcut on the map ended up being anything but a shortcut in real life! After four-wheeling around a tree a foot in diameter laying across the road, and then around some large mounds of dirt in the middle of the road in our Ford F-150, we finally made it back to the main road!

Fortunately the weather started to clear, and as a consolation, we decided to hit Jot Dean Cave near the main road. The entrance was a large trench caused by a collapse of a rather large lava tube. Ice formations were present even before we got into the entrance. Just inside was a beautiful ice wall that stretched from the floor to the 6 foot ceiling. The wall was again composed of hundreds of layers, varying from almost opaque white to crystal clear. Just behind us was a little room whose ceiling was covered with more hexagonal shaped crystals 3-4 inches long. The ice wall transmitted my light and gave an almost ethereal glow.

It was getting late, and we headed back to camp, enjoyed some pasta for dinner over our camp stove, and started swapping cave stories. The bright planets Jupiter and Venus hung low and side-by-side right over calm and serene Medicine Lake, like a bright set of eyes watching us during the night.

We woke up the next morning, had coffee and danish for breakfast, and we packed our lunch while trying to keep our little chipmunk friends away from the food - they had become pretty well adapted to campers! Again, Todd declined to do the caving - he wasn't inclined to go into holes underground and was happy sticking around camp.

Our stop for the day was called Gaping Holes - one of the largest lava tubes in CA. We followed the directions on our rough map, taking us to smaller and more remote dirt roads. We finally had to walk for 15 minutes with a compass bearing of 300 degrees to find the entrance (if only we had GPS!). We walked over the scarred landscape covered with aa and pahoehoe lava flows from thousands of years ago, searching for the entrance. Although the rock was quite barren and rough, it was covered with some brilliant red Indian paintbrush and some nice fuzzy pink flowers (what are they called?).

Then after searching for about half an hour, we stumbled across the largest sinkhole I had ever seen - it was a wide trench probably 100 feet long and 50 feet deep. We slowly negotiated the rough breakdown pile leading down to one of the entrances. Numerous piles of breakdown had fallen from the 40 foot ceiling, leaving domes hollowed out from the ceiling. Occasionally we spotted a lower level to the lava tube, which was in many places filled with ice formations - it was amazing with how hot it was outside, that ice still remained in the caves.

We proceeded for a while down the fairly straight passage, until we spotted a faint light in the distance - it was a skylight. Actually it was a pair of skylights opening to the clear blue sky above. Unfortunately the holes were much too high to reach without vertical gear. We proceeded down the tube, noticing the lavacicles, secondary lava flows, and changing shape of the passage. Finally we reached another breakdown entrance where the tube pinched off, but again, the entrance couldn't be safely climbed without vertical gear. It was getting late and Todd was waiting in the nearby town of Bartle to rendezvous with us on our way back.

We finally turned around and made our way back to the car. We met around 2:30, had lunch in Bartle in what was perhaps the only restaurant in the small town, and headed back. It was a fun and pretty relaxing weekend - but Medicine Lake will draw us back - it is beckoning us to look again for Hambone Ice as well as other tubes that may be buried in the earth below us.