

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LISA BALLARD

Caving in BARBADOS

TAKE YOUR ADVENTURE UNDERGROUND!

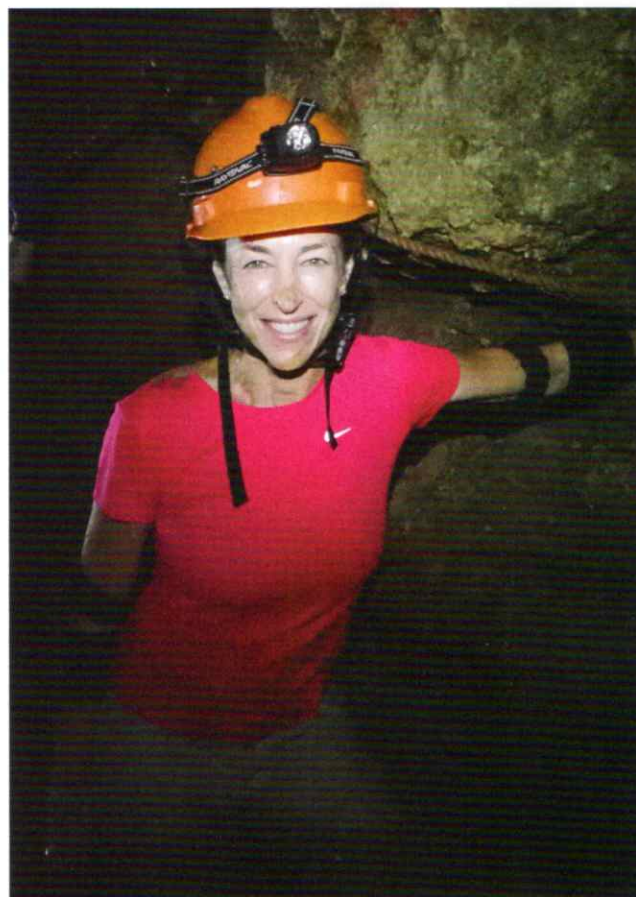
Stalactites inside Harrison's Cave look like mud icicles hanging from the ceiling. The real mud is on the ground inside the wet cave.

Opposite right: Inside the cave, the author wades through thigh-deep water.



We've all got our hang-ups. I'm afraid of the dark. I blame the gorilla that lived outside my bedroom window when I was a kid. Though King Kong's brother turned into a cedar shrub in daylight and eventually got taken out at the feet by my father in a fit of hedge trimming, I never quite recovered from my childhood nyctophobia.

I've managed my condition throughout adulthood by clinging to flashlights, full moons, lanterns, and other methods of nighttime illumination, so the idea of caving—crawling through natural tunnels under the earth—didn't intimidate me. On the contrary! It appealed to my sense of adventure—until the guide told me to turn off my headlamp.

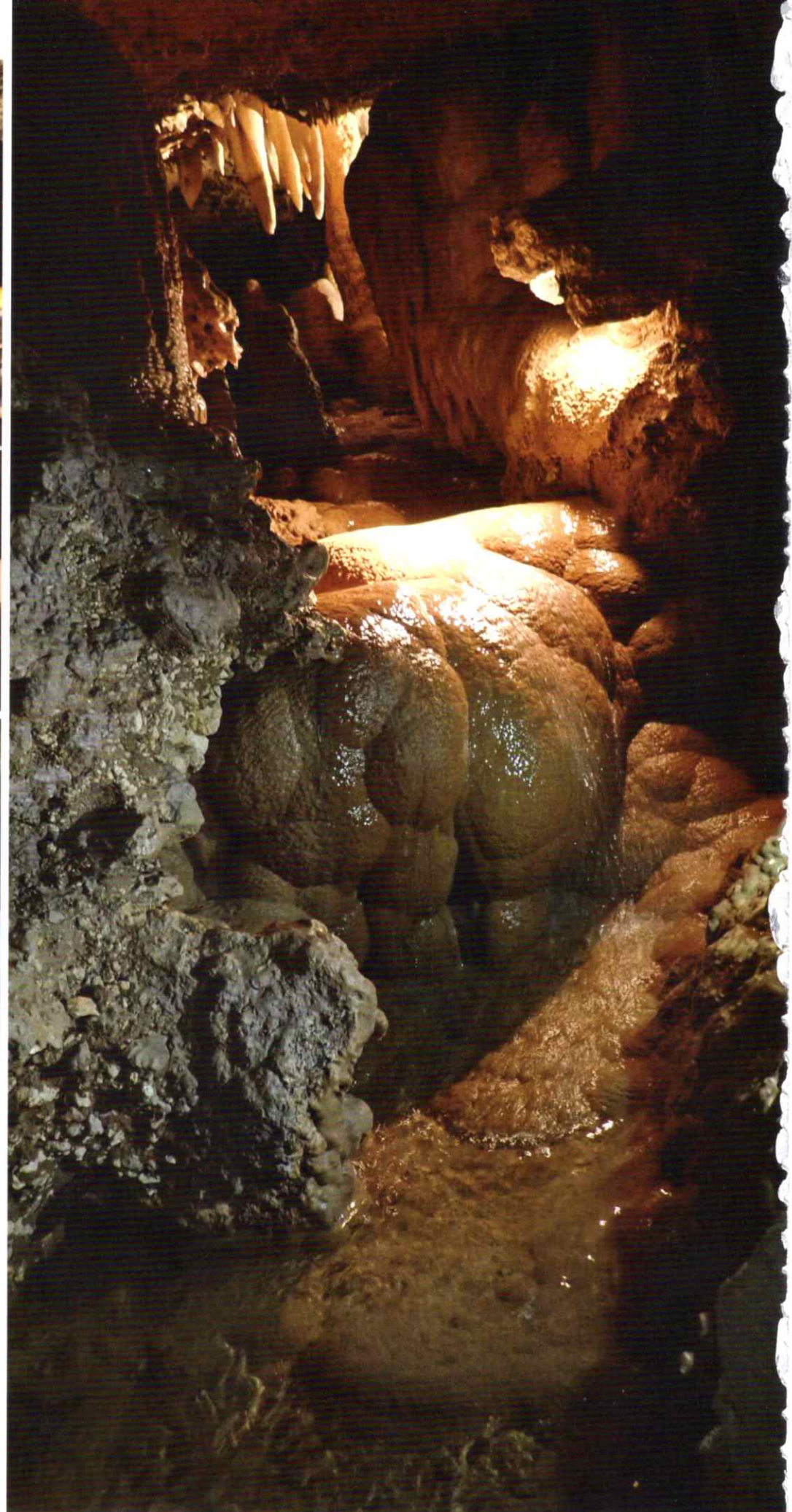




Top left: Cavers traverse a limestone room partially filled with water that took a year to reach the cave.

Bottom left: A dead end. Cavers rest before turning around.

Right: Water flows down a subterranean stream.





A pool inside the cave with interesting limestone "steps" under the water.

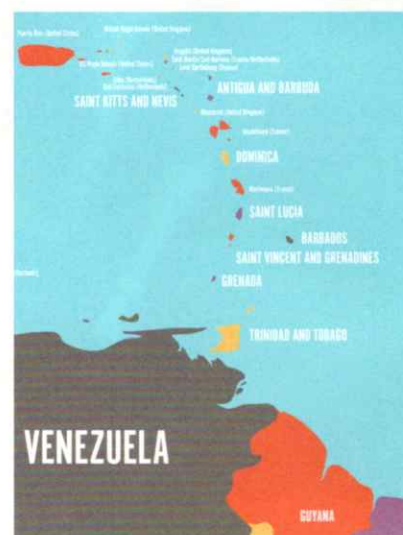
A LIMESTONE LABYRINTH

"Really?" I asked, trying to keep my voice from trembling as I peered at a manhole-size opening in the rock. I was in Barbados, about a mile underground inside Harrison's Cave. Named for Thomas Harrison, a local landowner on the island in the early 1700s, this extensive system of subterranean domes, passageways, streams, and pools is a limestone labyrinth. Though the cave system was discovered over 300 years ago, it wasn't until the 1970s that it was more fully explored. It opened to the public in 1981.

Unlike most islands in the Caribbean that are volcanic in origin, Barbados sits atop a mass of limestone rock formed by ancient coral reefs. Our headlamps caught fossilized coral heads here and there inside this geologic wonder, which served as a hideout for escapees during the slave-trade era. It would have been a dank place to take shelter.

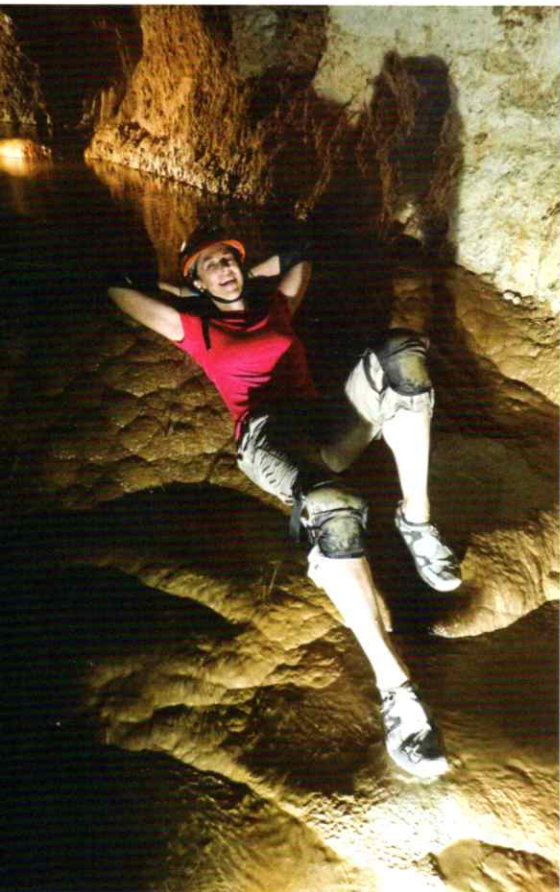
"If you don't get wet and muddy, you're not having fun!" exclaimed Jason, one of our guides, as a dozen of us donned knee and elbow pads and hard hats.

Harrison's Cave is part of the island's natural water-purification system. When it rains, which is almost every afternoon in this island paradise, the water that's absorbed into the earth works its way deeper and deeper. After about 300 days, it reaches the cave. In other words, the water saturating us from the moment we waded through the first



FOR MORE INFO

For more information on traveling to Barbados, go to barbados.org.



Clockwise from top left: Head lamps illuminate the way across a deep pool. Fixed ropes aid a traverse across a slippery shallow slope. A caver emerges from a "room" using a ladder. Impressive limestone formations revealed by the cavers' head lamps. The author takes a break in a warm, shallow stream.

waist-deep pool hit the ground almost a year ago.

We entered the caves via a paved path, making way periodically for trams that carried more sedentary tourists on a 1.5-mile underground sightseeing tour. We saw most of the gravity-defying stalactites and pillar-like stalagmite formations that the tram passengers did. They had names like "The Altar," which looked like a man proposing to a woman; "The Great Hall," an enormous room with a ceiling over 50 feet high; and "The Village," where lumpy limestone columns joined the ceiling and floor.

CONQUERING THE MANHOLE

Our group of cavers eventually detoured off the tram track, heading much deeper into the maze. Fixed ropes and ladders helped us navigate the pools and short climbs into and out of yawning holes. We walked, crawled on our hands and knees, belly crawled, then came to a dead end. I figured we were done, but we had only just begun. "You passed the test," said Jason. "Now you get to see the good part."

After swimming back across one of the pools, we headed down a narrow crack, even deeper underground. Despite being completely soaked, I wasn't cold. Unlike earthen caves, which are insulated from the sun, this one echoed the temperature on the surface, in the warm mid-80s. It was almost steamy. The entire adventure intrigued and delighted me; then we came to the manhole. It looked long and skinny. When Jason instructed us to turn off our headlamps, a large, suffocating lump formed in my throat.

"Between the crystalline structure surrounding you and the droplets of water, the reflection off your light will blind you," he explained. "Be careful of the rock halfway through. There's a crack there. Don't fall into it."

Since staying behind was not an option, I dutifully followed

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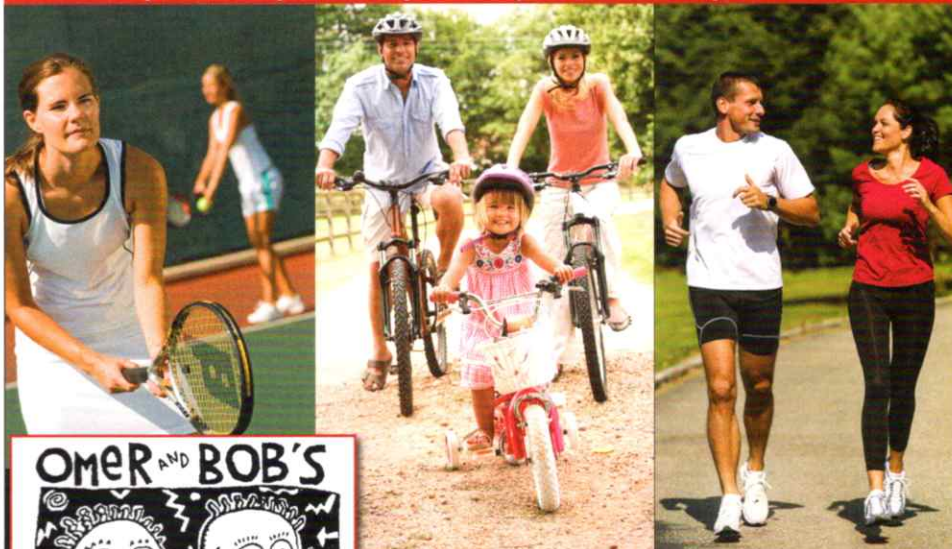
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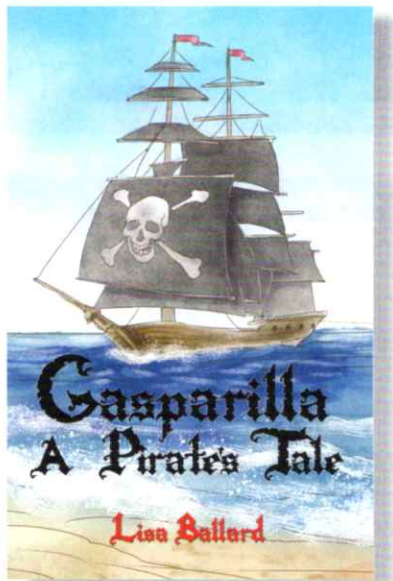
the others, who started down the inky black tunnel one at a time. I had never experienced such total darkness. My old phobia nagged at me. I was scared, on the verge of panicking. As I crept forward on my hands and knees, my back an inch from the jagged, coral ceiling, I periodically touched the foot of the cover ahead of me, a woman named Mandy, who was as nervous as me, judging by her constant narrative.

"It's sure dark in here," she babbled. "I'm not crazy about this. There's the rock. That wasn't so bad. I'm so wet, there's even mud in my ears . . ." And so went the monologue. I welcomed it. The touch of her shoe and the sound of her voice distracted me from my anxiety.

The tunnel felt like a mile, though it was less than 100 feet long. Then I chuckled. There was, literally, a light at the end of the tunnel, actually a half-dozen lights, as the headlamps of my cavern-mates who had already emerged into the next limestone room came into view.

Sometime later, we emerged from Harrison's Cave. I welcomed the sunshine and lush tropical vines that spilled into the gully near the mouth of the cave. After cleaning up, we gathered under a tent to enjoy a rum punch and recap the day. (Mount Gay rum comes from this Caribbean island.)

People are drawn to Barbados for many reasons—beaches, scuba diving, sailing, sun, and drinks featuring rum. It's the only foreign soil that George Washington set foot on. It's rock-star Rhianna's childhood home. It's also a place where someone with an explorer's spirit can inject a little underground adventure into her vacation. ❶



Contributor Lisa Ballard base-camped in the Upper Valley for 20+ years. To read more about her adventures around the world and to order her new children's book, *Gasparilla, A Pirate's Tale*, visit her website, www.LisaBallardOutdoors.com.

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