

Twin Treasures

Researchers have been exploring the Cave of the Twins since 1873, as have hikers, who visit it by the thousands each year. However, none of them ever imagined that a hard-to-reach burrow at the back of the cave leads to additional chambers, where a handful of rebels hid their treasures during the Bar Kokhba Revolt. by Boaz Zissu, Roi Porat, Boaz Langford, Hanan Eshel, Guy D. Stiebel, and Amos Frumkin

Hikers and tour books tell countless tales about the karstic cave known in Arabic as Me'arat Umm et-Tawamin (Cave of the Mother of the Twins). In Hebrew, the cave's name was shortened to Me'arat Ha'teomim (Cave of the Twins). Located in the lower part of the Nahal Hame'ara riverbed, its main attraction, like many of the caves in the Judean Mountains, has long been its formidable stalagmites. The cave also has a small spring at the bottom of a large hall. The spring plays a key role in the many tales about the cave.

Many of the tales about the Cave of the Twins can be traced back to C. R. Conder and H. H. Kitchener's report on their visit to it in 1873 as part of the survey of the western part of the Land of Israel. The tales were popularized by Zev

Vilnay, who recorded local legends in his canonic books about various aspects of the Land of Israel that were published in the 1950s and 1960s. Vilnay wrote that a barren woman not only became pregnant after drinking the water her husband brought her from the spring in this cave, but also gave birth to twins.

When Turkish soldiers showed up at the woman's village to draft the men into the army, she fled to the cave and hid in its depths, where the water sustained her and her sons. In the many years that have passed since Vilnay recorded these legends, they have been transformed, taking on all

kinds of interesting twists in the stories travelers tell and post on websites for hikers.

The first to report on the cave and its supernatural powers were Conder and Kitchener, who surveyed the western part of the Land of Israel for the British Palestine Exploration Fund. They reached the cave in October 1873. The British officers and their staff ventured into the cave, lighting their way with torches. In its northern reaches, they found a very deep shaft. Due to lack of means, or perhaps lack of interest, they didn't descend into the shaft and explore further, missing out on discovering the cave's northern extension.

However, the explorers did record some of the traditions and stories the locals told about the cave in their official report. "The water is supposed to have certain medicinal qualities," they wrote of the water from the spring in the cave. They also noted that the shaft "is used by the neighbouring peasantry for the execution of women charged with immorality, who are thrown down it," but for some reason, that detail did not find its way into the contemporary folklore about the site.

In the late twenties of the previous century, the French consul in Jerusalem, René Neuville, explored the floor of the cave's main chamber, discovering pottery, bone, and stone vessels from as early as the Neolithic Age to as late as the Byzantine Period.

The cave was explored again from 1970 to 1974, this time by Gideon Mann on behalf of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel. Mann focused on mapping the area under the large pile of rocks in the main chamber, as well as investigating the





shaft. In the side of the shaft, he discovered openings that were barely discernable from above. They led to additional chambers, which Mann mapped as well. He collected a few findings from them, such as pottery and glass vessels, which were dated to the Roman and Byzantine period.

The Cave

The Cave of the Twins is a karstic cave located on the northern bank of Nahal Hame'ara, on the western margins of the Jerusalem Mountains, about 1.5 kilometers from the spot where Nahal Hame'ara meets the Nahal Zanoah river. It is in the area that is known as the Telem Valley or the Marzeva, where Nahal Hame'ara forms a natural border between the slopes of the Judean Mountains and the Judean Shephelah.

The cave's entrance is about four meters above the riverbed. The opening was widened by quarrying in order to create an entrance hall, from which

one descends into the cave's main chamber. This large chamber (some 50 by 70 meters and as much as 10 meters high in some parts) was formed by karstic processes during the Cenomanian Age, when the Ramallah anticline folded westward. A large pile of rocks topped with earth, pigeon and bat droppings, and stalagmites fills much of this chamber; this appears to be the result of the cave's ceiling collapsing long ago. Here and there, passages lead downward through the rocks.

Similar caves exist north of the Cave of the Twins in the lower reaches of the Nahal Sorek riverbed, such as the Sorek and Samson caves.

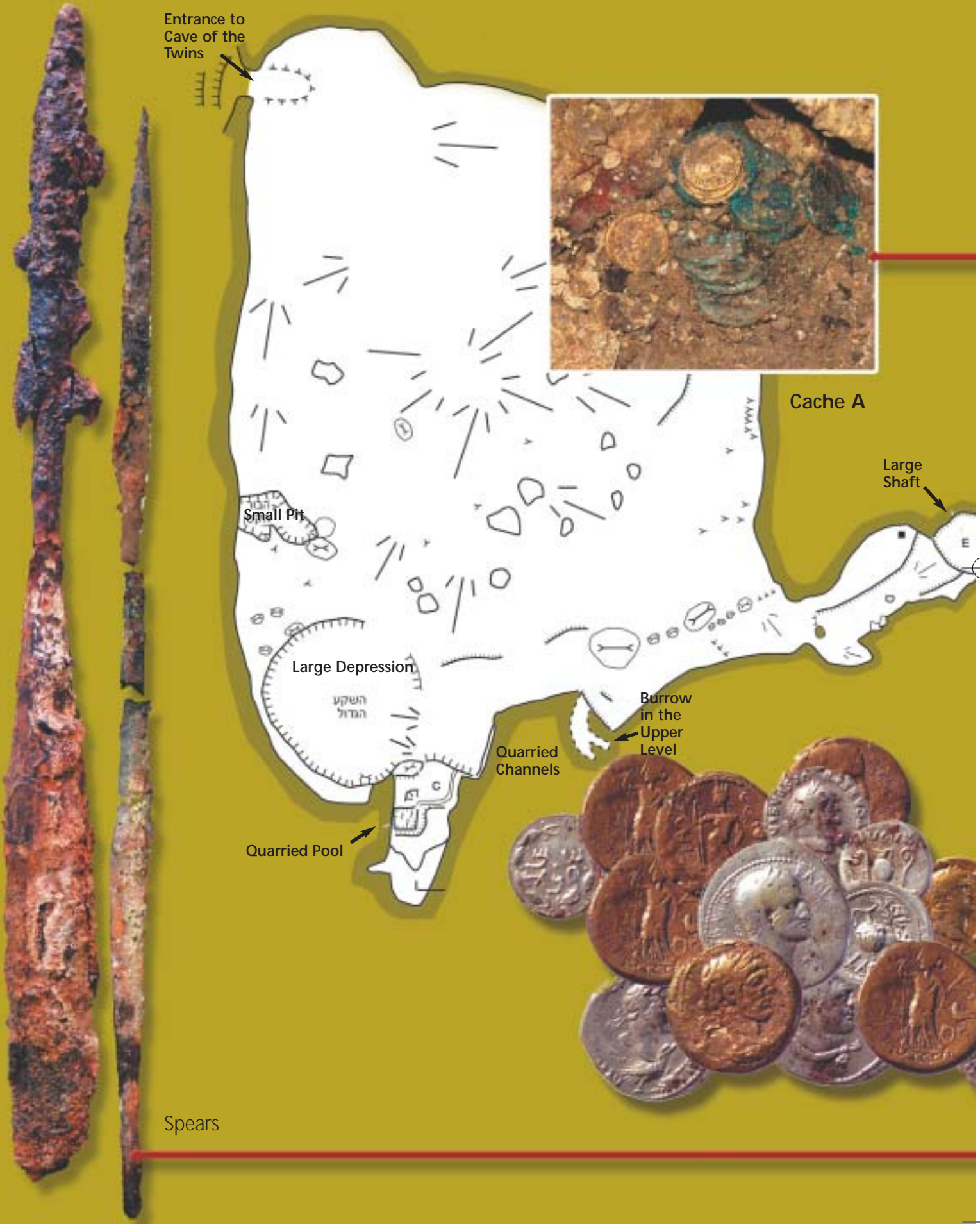
The cave's smooth walls and ceiling indicate that it was formed in isolation (with no opening to the outside) below the groundwater level. Aggressive water rose, apparently from a great depth, through the large shaft and gradually dissolved the dolomite limestone to create the cave's chambers. The fallen rocks also have the smooth surfaces that result

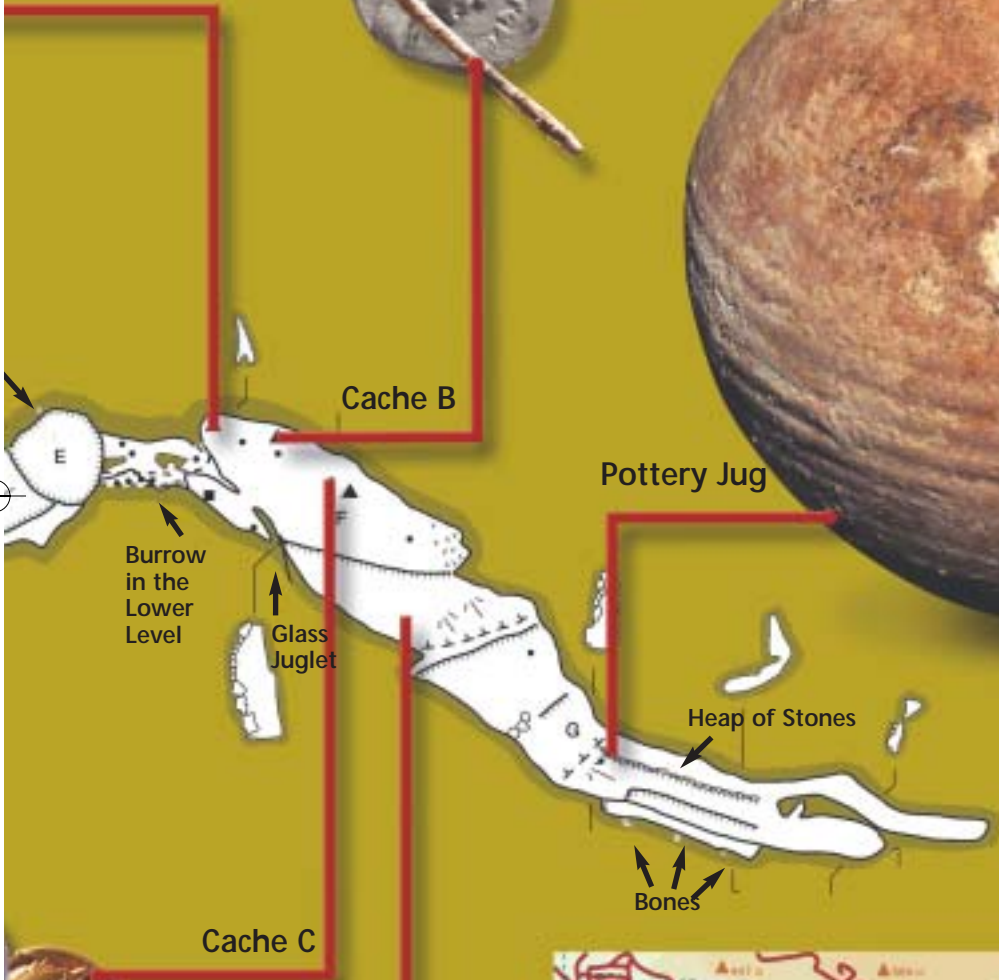
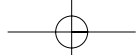
Above:

The first of the two internal chambers of the cave as seen from the south. (Boaz Zissu)

Facing page:

Some of the coins hidden in the cave during the Bar Kokhba Revolt. (Boaz Zissu)





Key

- Jug
- ▲ Coin
- Lamp

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Map: Boaz Langford and Mika Ulman



from water erosion, an indication that the ceiling collapsed when the cave was still full of groundwater. (The large stalagmites that formed on top of the fallen rocks are further evidence of how much time has passed since the ceiling collapsed.) When the Judean Mountains rose, the groundwater drained out of the cave and stalagmites began to form, mostly in the main chamber.

The cave was exposed to the outside world when the waters of Nahal Hame'ara cut through the walls of the main chamber, creating an opening in the southwestern end. Since the earliest archaeological finds are from the Neolithic Age, it is likely that the opening was formed in the end of the Pleistocene Age or that the entrance was originally vertical and hominids could not make their way through it.

In the southeast corner of the main chamber is a small karstic chamber that was enlarged by quarrying. The level of its floor is higher than that of the main chamber currently is. Stalagmites are developing in it and a pool that is about two meters square and half a meter deep was hewn in its floor to collect the water dripping from the cave's ceiling. The water flows from the pool to outside the cave via a hewn channel that gradually descends westward. Today, the water simply disappears into the ground, but in the past, it flowed into a pool built inside the cave.

From the pool north, the cave's eastern wall was straightened by quarrying. A channel was hewn in this wall to feed water into the pool, but it became blocked as time passed. Additional channels, some several meters long and five to 10 centimeters wide and deep, were hewn at various points in the entrance hall in order to direct all the dripping water into pools or collection vessels.

In the main chamber's northern side, a pathway leads between the stalagmites to a broad, high burrow that extends northward. A lamp, coins, and other items from the Late Roman period have been found along the path and near it. About 20 meters further north, the large shaft interrupts the pathway. It descends to a depth of about 15 meters below the floor of the burrow and rises upward about three meters above the ceiling of the burrow, making its total height about 23 meters. Its diameter ranges from four meters at the upper part to about six meters at the bottom.

On the shaft's northern wall, slightly below floor level of the burrow, there are three narrow, hard-to-reach openings. All three openings lead northward

into a narrow, winding natural burrow that leads to the internal section of the cave, which consists of two karstic chambers. Pottery vessels dated to the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt were discovered in the burrow.

The Treasure

The first chamber contains active stalagmites and dripping water, providing an easily accessible source of water to inhabitants of the cave. The southern edge of this chamber, near the burrow that leads to it, is slightly higher than the center and dry. This helped preserve the ancient items that were found in this area: a number of large jugs; two clay lamps; and three remarkable caches of coins. All of these items are from the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

The first cache was discovered in a depression in the rock in the chamber's southern edge. It consists of 83 silver coins that the Bar Kokhba administration restruck and issued, as well as a silver earring. There

minted during the reign of the Roman Emperor Trajan, and three drachms from Trajan's reign that were minted in the Province of Arabia, probably in the city of Bostra. It also contains several Judean coins: a bronze perutah from the days of John Hyrcanus I; a shekel from the second year of the Jewish War (67 CE); and two Bar Kokhba denarii. A bronze needle was found along with them.

Further exploration revealed a third group of 24 coins between two clumps of rock. It includes five gold coins, 15 silver coins, four bronze coins, and a bronze needle. The gold coins are an aureus minted during the reign of Roman Emperor Tiberius, two aureii from the time of Nero, one aureus from the time of Vitellius, and one aureus from the time of Vespasian. The silver coins include eight imperial denarii (all from the time of Hadrian), five provincial tetradrachms that were minted in Antioch, and two Bar Kokhba denarii. The bronze coins are



are 20 selaim (tetradrachms) and 63 zuzzim (denarii) from all three of the years that the Bar Kokhba administration minted coins. The coins were stuck together, apparently because they had been hidden inside a case made of organic material that did not survive.

A bronze coin minted by the city of Ashkelon was discovered nearby. About two meters north of it, an additional group of coins was found in a karstic fissure. The second cache of 10 coins includes two Roman imperial denarii, a tetradrachm

from the city of Ashkelon. Since a gold aureus is worth 24 silver denarii, the third cache is worth more than the first, even though it contains fewer coins.

Next to this chamber's eastern wall, in a narrow gap between the fallen stones and the wall, two iron pole weapons were found. One is a typical Roman pilum – a heavy spear that probably was part of the booty captured by the rebels. The other, which is more rare, is a spear that the rebels manufactured. It is very similar to the one found in the Cave of the Spear in

Above:

Three coins and a spear that were found in the cave. (Marina Rassovsky)

Facing page:

The remains of a jug found in a niche by one of the burrows leading to the internal chambers of the cave. (Boaz Zissu)

ARCHAEOLOGY



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the Judean Desert. Both weapons were stored so that they were hidden from the eye, but were easily accessible. It appears that this chamber was the final, difficult-to-reach refuge for a group of people who came to know the cave well during a time of great distress.

The second chamber contains barely any stalagmites or archaeological finds, other than a small juglet, found whole in a fissure between two blocks of rock in the chamber's western wall and the bottom of a bag-shaped storage jar. However, five groups of severely decomposed human bones were found in this chamber. The bones had been placed in a natural fissure that had opened in the northeastern edge of the chamber.

It appears that the geological state of these two chambers has not changed significantly since the days of the Bar Kokhba Revolt since the findings were discovered more or less intact on the floor and between rocks, and not under fallen rocks or stalagmites. That said, the high humidity and the dripping water, combined with slight physical move-

ment and the activities of animals apparently prevented the preservation of organic materials and even caused a certain degree of damage to the inorganic materials found here.

Refuge Cave

The excavation of the internal chambers of the Cave of the Twins reveals that it was a refuge cave in which armed rebels, perhaps from one of the nearby Jewish communities, hid toward the end of the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

Evidence had been found previously of natural caves in the cliffs of the Judean Desert that were used for refuge as well as of complex networks of interconnected chambers quarried underneath residential areas for use as hiding complexes. The Cave of the Twins, however, is one of the first proven cases of a natural cave located in the heart of Judea being used as a refuge. That said, research conducted in recent years indicates that this is not an isolated phenomenon.

The first cache of coins discovered in the cave is





the only hoard of silver Bar Kokhba coins ever discovered in a licensed archaeological excavation and not by antiquity thieves.

The second cache of coins is significant because it is the first time Bar Kokhba coins were discovered alongside older coins that were minted in Judea during the Second Temple period. It is likely that the family that hid this cache in the cave saved the coin from the second year of the Jewish War due to its financial value since shekels were made from almost pure silver then, while during the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt the silver coins contained about 30% bronze. On the other hand, that theory does not explain the discovery of a bronze perutah from the time of John Hyrcanus I since it was not worth very much. That raises the possibility that these coins were saved for nationalistic reasons.

The cache that includes five gold coins, all minted at different points in the first century CE, may have been passed down from generation to generation, as the family that they belonged accumulated valuables for use in a time of need. In the end, however, these valuable coins remained hidden in the Cave of the Twins, where at least some of the rebels met their death. ■

Useful Information

The Cave of the Twins is located in the Nahal Hame'ara and Me'arat Ha'teomim Nature Reserve.

How to Get There: Take the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv Highway (Route 1) to the Sha'ar Hagai junction. Turn onto Route 38, following the signs to Beit Shemesh. After crossing the railroad tracks, turn left at the first traffic light onto Route 3855. Drive through the Beit Shemesh Industrial Zone and past the Mahseya and Zanoah junctions. About 500 meters after the Zanoah junction, turn left on the red-marked road that leads to the Cave of the Twins. (The road is navigable by all cars in dry weather, but is recommended only for jeeps in winter.) Follow the path for several hundred meters to the parking lot.

The Cave of the Twins is about a 20-minute (one-kilometer) hike from the parking lot. A marked trail leads to the cave as well as through the cave. **Do not deviate from the trail.**

When to Visit: The cave is open to the public from April until November from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (The cave is closed in winter to protect the bats that hibernate in it.)

What to Bring: Flashlights. Candles are not permitted in the cave.

Above:

Crossing the large shaft, as seen from the north. (Boaz Zissu)

Facing page:

Cache A in situ. (Boaz Langford)