

## Welcome to the site of Choranche :

Please respect the following rules:

### On the site



Dogs must be kept on a leash



Do not pick any of the plants growing here



No picnics allowed  
(except on the bar terrace)



No two-wheeled vehicles allowed

### Inside the cave



It is strictly forbidden  
to touch the stalactites



No flash photography or camera stands allowed,  
and please keep pace with your guided visit



Please stay on the indicated pathways,  
avoid wearing high-heeled shoes



Warm clothing recommended  
(Temperature: always + 10°C in the cave)

# Hello and welcome to the Choranche Caves!

You have just bought your ticket at the reception area of our site. Now you need to go and join your guide at the entrance to the Caves. On the path which leads you there, you will be able to see grandiose views of the Cirque of Choranche.

The Caves themselves were discovered in 1871 by the inhabitants of the village of Choranche, who cleared the entrance and gained access into the principal cave. They were only able to penetrate inside the cave network for a few dozen metres, but brought back news of an exceptional cavity, because of the concretions (or stalactites and stalagmites) observed there.

It was at that time that the cave was baptized with the name of Coufin (associating "cou" or "neck", and "fin" meaning "thin"). And, in fact, the narrow passage does remind you of a neck; and the cavern itself, of a head. Given that this narrow entrance is often submerged, the cave is only very rarely accessible.

Oscar Decombaz, a pioneer in local caving, who lived in Pont-en-Royans, first managed to enter into it on the 8th of September, 1897. It was on this occasion that he led the first exploration of the cave and provided its initial topography. He then published an account of his exploration in the specialist magazine *Spelunca* in 1899.

It was thanks to his initiative that the first efforts to develop the site for tourists were organized at the very end of the 19th century.

The visit you are about to start lasts approximately one hour.

The temperature inside the cave is a constant 10°C all year round.

The water reaches a temperature of 9°C maximum.

It is not forbidden to take photos inside, but you must keep up with your guide, and it is forbidden to use stands or flash photography.

It is also asked of you, given the fragility of the site, not to touch anything inside the cave.

Finally, please do not hesitate to ask your guide questions during the visit.

**1** Reception, Ticket Office

**2** Shop

**3** Bar

**4** Toilets

**5** Restaurant

**6** Access path

**7** The Coufin stream

**8** Entrance to the Caves

**9** Exit from the Caves

**10** Guides' chalet

**11** Exhibitions

**12** Toilets (summer only)



# Visit of the Cave

## 1 The Entrance Cavern

We have just passed through a tunnel which was built in 1985. It conveys for a more comfortable visit and facilitates the entry to the cave even when the level of water is higher.

The Choranche Caves are active ones, as two underground rivers run through the site. The Coufin and the Chevaline rivers meet in the entrance cavern, and form a lake.

The water which runs through here is the result of infiltration from the Coulmes plateau, situated 300 metres above. The caves act as a collector of rainwater and melting snow.

It is situated in a limestone massif. A characteristic of this rock is that it is highly fractured, so water can circulate through it, pulled downwards by gravity. Thus it is water which created the caves by the dissolution of the limestone rock. In fact, rainfall - on the Coulmes plateau above - directly infiltrates the soil which is rich in carbon dioxide. These carbon dioxide charged waters, are then able to dissolve the limestone by widening the fissures which are already present in the rock.

Thus, it was the enlarging of certain cracks over thousands of years that created the Choranche Caves site, and the different galleries which make up its network.

## 4 The Proteus

In the aquariums, a few specimens may be seen of a species close to the salamander: the proteus anguinus, or olm.

This amphibian is totally depigmented and has undeveloped eyes. In fact, over millions of years, this species has adapted itself to cave life. The proteus gave up certain senses in order to develop others instead, for example, touch and smell. It is the largest cave-dwelling animal in the world. It must be said however that the proteus is not naturally present in Choranche. They can be found principally in the wild in the Slovenian karst plateau region. About twenty specimens were put here for scientific purposes by French researchers. They come from the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research) laboratory in Moulis, department of Ariège. The proteus normally feeds on Niphargus (a sort of tiny prawn-like crustacean). Here, we feed them two times a month with bloodworms, but they can go for months without eating. They have a life expectancy similar to man, around 90 years. This longevity is mainly due to their very slow metabolism and to their activity being limited to a few minutes per day. It represents a strong symbol of life underground. The name comes from a figure in Greek mythology, son of Poseidon, and secondary divinity of the sea: Proteus was a herdsman and every day he took a nap inside a cave. Like him, the proteus spends most of its time sleeping! In the 17th century, during periods of major flooding, Slovenian peasants found them in the fields, carried by the waters. They used to call them "Baby dragons", and held them responsible for the devastating floods.

## 5 Serpentine Gallery

As you go along the Serpentine Gallery (galerie Serpentine), the scene is quite different from the first part of the visit, and consists of lots of natural pools (called gours) and more massive concretions.

## 2 Soda straw stalactites

Mineralized water hollows out the caves, but it is also responsible for the concretions: the stalactites and stalagmites.

A feature of the Choranche Caves is what is called fistulous stalactites, veritable "soda straws" of calcium carbonate. Water percolates downward from the roof of the cave, travels down inside the hollow tube of calcite, and when it reaches the end, deposits the thinnest ring of calcite, which is crystallized calcium. Ring after ring, the structure slowly gets longer.

During the last 100 years, they have lengthened by about five centimetres (or two inches).

The quality of these fistulous stalactites is quite exceptional, and makes Choranche a remarkable site among European caves.

The presence of such stalactites is due to a constant flow of water, not too fast, not too slow, an unusual regularity in the underground world and dating back thousands of years.

## 3 The Siphon Gallery

We have reached the end of the part which is open to the general public, now begins the domain of underground exploration, reserved for speleologists. To enter, they must pass through this siphon which you can just see at the bottom. Every year they explore a little more of the network, mapping out their discoveries metre after metre, with a total of 33 kilometres of galleries explored so far. This makes it one of the biggest networks in the Vercors.

## 7 The End of the Visit

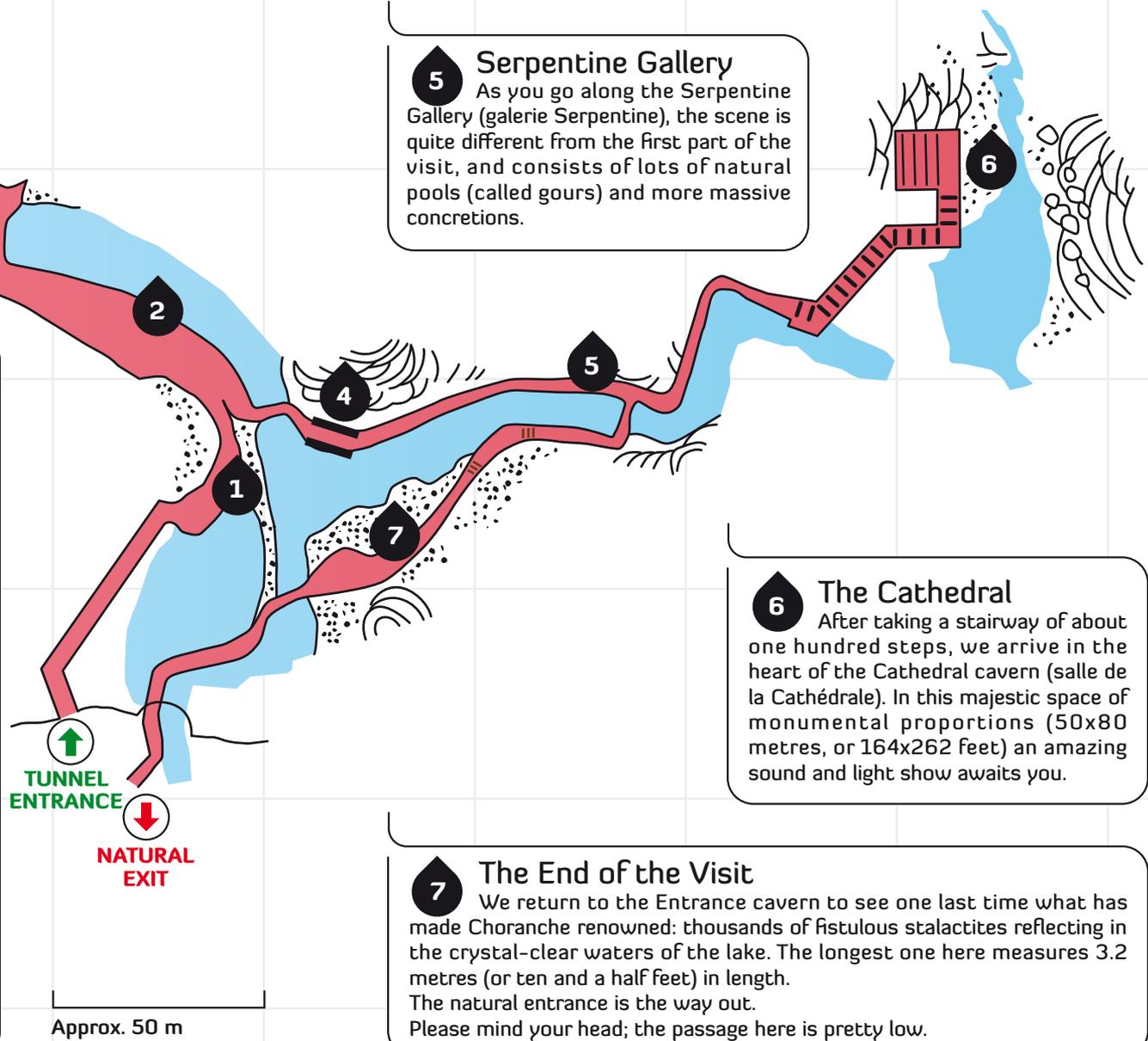
We return to the Entrance cavern to see one last time what has made Choranche renowned: thousands of fistulous stalactites reflecting in the crystal-clear waters of the lake. The longest one here measures 3.2 metres (or ten and a half feet) in length.

The natural entrance is the way out.

Please mind your head; the passage here is pretty low.

## 6 The Cathedral

After taking a stairway of about one hundred steps, we arrive in the heart of the Cathedral cavern (salle de la Cathédrale). In this majestic space of monumental proportions (50x80 metres, or 164x262 feet) an amazing sound and light show awaits you.



We hope you will retain fond memories of this underground visit.

We wish you a pleasant stay in our region, discovering the Vercors.

Your guide thanks you for following the visit. We hope that this translation has helped you to enjoy your visit to the caves.



Thank you  
for your visit!



You Tube

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