

Underground Exploration - Novices

If you have never explored a disused mine before, remember that it can be EXCITING if done properly but LETHAL if you do not know what you are doing. Here are 12 basic rules for your survival.

1. JOIN A MINING HISTORY GROUP

There are many groups in the UK that cover the whole of the country. Unless you are attending a special course, consider joining one of these and they will teach you how to be safe underground.

2. GET THE BASIC GEAR

The basic things that you need are :-

- Warm clothing and a boilersuit
- Strong boots or wellingtons
- Helmet
- Lamp

For simple mines a torch is OK but the best is a miner's electric headlamp. ALWAYS carry spare lighting and REMEMBER a change of clothes.

3. ALWAYS GET PERMISSION

Always ask the mine owner for permission to enter. If you don't know the owner, ask the local mining history group. Never break in, or trespass, if permission is refused. Always leave mines safe by replacing gates or lids before you leave.

4. TELL SOMEONE WHERE YOU ARE GOING

If you have an accident, you want people to know where to locate you! Leave a message with a responsible person, giving the following details :-

- name and location of the mine
- anticipated time down the mine
- anticipated time out of the mine
- time due back to the person you have told
- details of how to get the rescue service, if needed.

5. NEVER GO UNDERGROUND ALONE OR INCAPABLE

FOUR is the minimum safe number underground so that, in the case of an accident, one can stay with the casualty and two can go for help. NEVER take alcohol or drugs before or during a trip as this will reduce concentration, with potentially lethal results.

6. DO NOT EXCEED YOUR CAPABILITY

Choose easy trips at first and leave the more difficult techniques until you are used to moving underground. Ladder climbing, for instance, can be very strenuous at times and it is always harder climbing back out! If in doubt, turning back is better than having to be rescued.

7. DO NOT GET LOST

Some mines are like mazes and it is very easy to get lost. If there is a plan of the mine (your local mining history group can advise you) take a copy with you. One good idea is to cut small arrows from a brightly coloured polythene bag and, whenever you come to a junction, leave one of them pointing towards the entrance. ALWAYS pick them up on the way out.

8. NEVER CLIMB ON OLD LADDERS OR MACHINERY

You may come across old ladders, timbers, etc which were used by the miners. NEVER use these as they are of uncertain age and probably rotten. Similarly, don't climb on old machinery as it is probably rusty and may collapse.

9. NEVER CLIMB ON STACKED ROCK OR WALLS

For their convenience, miners often left waste rock in the mine. It was stacked up and supported by timbers, which have long since rotted away, leaving the rock precariously balanced. DON'T TOUCH, or climb, on these features or you may bring down tons of rock onto yourself and others.

10. NEVER FOOL AROUND WHEN UNDERGROUND

People in groups sometimes do silly things but, with the dangers underground, practical jokes can have tragic endings. Be a steadying influence on your friends. They may laugh when you say "better safe than sorry" but this is a small price to pay for your life and theirs.

11. DO NOT RUIN THE MINE ENVIRONMENT

This is what you have come to see, so leave it in a good condition for others. Don't :-

- hammer minerals in an indiscriminate manner
- destroy or remove artefacts or other archaeological features
- interfere with plant or animal life
- leave litter (this can destroy mine life without your realising)
- leave graffiti.

TAKE only photographs. LEAVE only footprints.

12. KNOW WHAT TO DO IN AN EMERGENCY

Mines are dangerous places and accidents can happen to even the most experienced people. If, however, you don't panic then the casualty stands a good chance of surviving. Learn about simple First Aid so that you can make them comfortable. Exposure is one of the most dangerous things - learn about its symptoms and treatment. Always leave someone with the casualty and send at least two people for help. The area Cave Rescue Organisations are very efficient and can be called out by dialling 999 and asking for the Police. Tell them what has happened, the location of the mine and the nature of any injuries.

These 12 rules are the most basic knowledge that you need but it will take a few years before you are anything like experienced. THE BEST WAY TO GAIN THIS EXPERIENCE IS TO JOIN A RECOGNISED MINING HISTORY GROUP AND TO GO UNDERGROUND WITH EXPERIENCED PEOPLE. You can also write to the Secretary of NAMHO and ask which groups cover the area you are interested in.