

Media information

Eisriesenwelt Werfen

The Eisriesenwelt [ice-giant world], at an altitude of over 1,600m, high above the Salzach Valley, is the largest ice-cave in the world. The guided tour takes visitors just over a kilometre, with a difference in height of 134m. The temperature is always around 0°C. 1,400 steps lead through the huge caverns inside the Tennengebirge emerging into a wonderland of magical natural sculptures.

The only light comes from the visitors' carbide lamps and from magnesium strips occasionally lit by the guide to show the extraordinary ice formations. The cave was first explored and described by Anton Posselt in 1879. Now visitors number around 170,000 annually.

Open end of April – end of October
Guided tours in several languages

History

Up to the end of the 19th century, this cave was still completely unknown - not least because of its exposed location in the high mountains, but also because not many people were interested in cave exploration at the time. It was not until 1879 that the Salzburg naturalist Anton von Posselt-Czorich went about 200 metres into the darkness of this cave on his own, and then officially discovered the Eisriesenwelt. A year later, he published a detailed report of his discovery in the Alpenverein magazine. However, the cave was forgotten about again.

Alexander von Mörk, founder of Salzburg cave exploration, recognised the significance of Posselt's documentation and pursued this thirst for exploring in 1913 together with other pioneers of cave exploration, such as Angermayer and Riehl.

After the First World War, there were pioneering explorations of the kilometre-long labyrinths of this cave system by other explorers, such as Friedrich and Robert Oedl or Walter Czernig.

With increasing awareness of this unique natural wonder, its tourist value soon grew. As early as 1920, an "explorer's hut" and the first primitive climbing facilities to and in the cave were built in order to make it easier for visitors to visit the cave.

In 1924, the ice part of the cave was continuously accessible on simple wooden walkways. In 1925, next to the explorer's hut, a very spacious shelter was built, which was named in recognition of Friedrich Oedl's achievements and all his hard work connected with the Eisriesenwelt.

For about 35 years, going up to the cave was only possible on foot. Under rather adventurous conditions, it was possible from 1953 to travel on the initially single-track and unpaved "Eisriesenweltstrasse" and from 1955 onwards to change to the cable car, which climbed the steepest part of the former footpath (1084 m to 1586 m) in a few minutes.

The Austrian Federal Forests are the landowners of the Eisriesenwelt. The Salzburger Verein für Höhlenkunde (Salzburg Association for Speleology) initially agreed a provisional lease with them. Long-term contracts were concluded in 1928 after the establishment of a separate Eisriesenwelt company.

The Federal Forests receive a not inconsiderable annual percentage of the entrance fees.

Cave formation

The Eisriesenwelt is a cave labyrinth with a total length of over 40 kilometres. It was created over a very long period of time. The first crevices and fissures in the limestone rock were formed in the course of the mountain uprisings about 100 million years ago.

Through millennia of chemical dissolution and water erosion, the subterranean fissures widened and large cavities were formed.

The caves in the Alps are still in a development process today, although many cave systems, including large parts of the Eisriesenwelt, are no longer changing significantly due to dehydration.

Ice in the cave

Various systems cause cave ice. The Eisriesenwelt is a dynamic ice cave. This means that the cave passages and chasms form a connection from lower-lying entrances to higher-lying openings that allow airflow - for example like in a chimney.

Depending on the outside temperature, the temperature inside the mountain is either cooler or warmer, which occurs due to special thermal conditions. This means that in winter, when the air inside the mountain is warmer than outside, cold air flows into the mountain and cools the lower part of the cave below 0°C.

When meltwater seeps through the fissures in the rocks in spring and gets into the supercooled area of the cave, it freezes and forms the magnificent ice formations inside the mountain.

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