

# The Coral Cavern of the Meteorite

Hidden within the coral mounds, sand and silt hills, and gas-escape sea-floor craters in the most substantial, near-mid-part, of the Peak Coral area, lies this Cavern, home to a particularly strong, tough, intelligent, long-lived and unusually acquisitive giant octopus. The Meteorite Cavern is about 425 miles (685 kilometres) off the nearest coast of Errynor in northwest Alarius, below roughly 2,500 feet (760 metres) of ocean, at around 55.5 degrees north latitude. Consequently, the sea-bed here is in perpetual darkness, far below the *circa* 660 ft (200 m) depth to which sunlight can ordinarily penetrate.

Despite this, cold-water corals thrive here, as they commonly occur in deep, dark, cool, high latitude seas. The corals form reefs on the seabed, averaging 50 ft high by 150 ft wide (15 by 50 m), though in places, they can grow to be tens of miles (kilometres) long and a couple of miles/kilometres wide. Sometimes, such corals can form separate mounds scattered over areas around 40 square miles in extent (100 square km), each mound about 330 ft in diameter (100 m) and 15 ft tall (5 m), with a “tail” of sand extending for 1,000 ft or more down-current (several hundred metres), looking somewhat like a sand volcano. About 60% of all such reefs and mound-clusters occur beside or within seafloor pockmark craters caused by natural gas-escapes. They are found in water depths from around 660 to 9,800 ft or so (200 to 3,000 m). Individual giant corals within these structures can be equally impressive. Rare branching ivory corals, resembling great white, leafless trees can be up to 100 ft or so tall (several tens of metres), for instance, and in tangled thickets can be more formidable as obstacles than any land-based vegetation that may seem superficially similar. They can be home to many creatures, including humanoids. The Peak Corals run in a series of north-south trending bands up to 12-13 miles in overall width (20 km) for approximately 40 miles (65 km).

The cave walls shown on the map, and the Cavern’s ceilings, are not quite so solid as they may appear, given that large parts are made up from dead coral, surrounding former gaps between individual smaller reefs, mixed in with cemented debris and silt, including from collapses, and modifications by the more mobile living denizens that inhabit the coral reefs here, aside from the corals themselves. As the mapped Cavern descends steadily from south to north (note that north is towards the right-hand edge of the map as viewed), its lower areas have increasingly compacted, thus more solid, walls and ceilings, with ever-fewer gaps leading to the outside, or into gaps within the solidified dead corals beyond the cavern that underlie the still-living outer reefs, notably in the long section marked by the variant floor texture labelled as the “Fossil Swamp Cave”.

Several possible entry routes are illustrated in the southern wall of the Dead Coral Entrance Cave, where it abuts with the region labelled “Exterior Corals”. Some of these openings are very small, though the octopus will use any or all as lookout points if required. It can also use any that are at least five feet wide as an entry-exit, given its lack of a skeleton. None of even the larger entry points are at all obvious from outside the Cave, thanks to the abundant living corals, some of which extend into the openings of the Entrance Cave itself (not shown on the map for clarity). The floor to ceiling separation throughout most of the mapped Cavern area is somewhat variable, but averages between 15-20 ft (4.5 to 6 m).

Of the other reef creatures present locally - fish, molluscs and arthropods primarily - by far the most abundant within the mapped Cavern are quite large (roughly one to two feet across, 30-60 centimetres), blind, white crabs. Anyone with good natural history knowledge can tell these are of a kind more typically seen in tropical latitudes, and moreover that they appear to be very similar to some types of land crab, not the usual deep-sea forms expected at this depth.

Further inside beyond the Entrance Cave, the floor changes from compressed silt and coral set on the ordinary sea-floor black basalt, to that of a fossilised swamp in form, with many roots, plant fragments and even a few fossil insects. This texture extends irregularly up the walls to about two feet (60 cm) above the floor, in a distinctly more solid mass than the usual wall structure here. The most striking floor features are a number of often large tree stumps, all of which have had their rising stems broken-off irregularly at a similar, *circa* two-foot/60 cm height above the floor. A well-informed explorer might be able to tell the swamp flora and fauna seem typical of a geologically-ancient tropical type. It appears impossible this part of the sea-bed can ever have been land, so how such fossils have ended up here, apparently as they once were in life, cannot be established, unless magic was involved.

Beyond the very sharp corner where this Swamp Cave turns north, a faint green glow can be seen ahead by anyone with normal colour vision. This brightens when moving north, and by the limit of the glow-affected area of the map, where the cave turns northwest, the source of this steady light can be identified, a large meteorite embedded in the northwestern part of the long Swamp Cave. The glow is sufficient to make out details clearly within the marked illuminated area. The meteorite is obviously still more ancient than the fossil swamp, as features near it indicate it must have fallen into the swamp long before the area became fossilised. It is about two feet (60 cm) across, of an irregular shape, with an outer surface smoothed and streaked with features normally expected on a larger stony meteorite whose outer surface has been made briefly partly molten during its atmospheric flight. It is solidly fixed into the floor to an indeterminable depth, and radiates a magical aura along with its green glow.

As the map label suggests, this more northwesterly part of the Cave is the preferred resting-spot for the octopus, gazing contemplatively at the meteorite, when not out hunting. A substantial pile of treasure - chiefly gemstones, gold coins, a few magical hand weapons, a magical staff, and at least one elaborate scroll-tube with a carved-ivory skull stopper - lies in the more northerly alcove. At need the octopus can and will make use of the magical weapons and staff in a fight, thanks to the extraordinary powers imbued by the meteorite. The meteorite would eventually like to leave the Cavern to continue its inimical plots elsewhere, although having many millennia in which to act, it is in no particular hurry, and the octopus is a useful tool for now, like the many others of its kind that have built up the treasure mound during past ages. The octopus is always aware of anything happening anywhere in the Cavern system, or immediately outside it, while it is inside, from vibrations in the solid structures, motion and scent of the water. When in its lair, it can instantly move to any part of the Swamp Cave affected by the green glow on the map, should it so choose, and within this area it has an effective reach twice what it normally would do thanks to this effect.