

Shark Bridge West Caverns

One of two sets of partly natural caverns set into the near-vertical cliffs descending into one of the great “Clawmark” fissure lines in the sea-bed around 350 miles (560 kilometres) off the nearest coast of Errynor in northwestern Alarius. Like the East Caverns on the cliffs of the opposite wall of the fissure (detailed separately in the Community Atlas), the West Caverns are set a little below the base of the vast arch that supports Shark Bridge, which runs west-east across the chasm high above. The Caverns are around 1,500 feet (460 metres) below the surface of the sea-bed at Bridge-top level, which also means they are about 3,150 ft (960 m) below sea level, far below the maximum depth to which sunlight can penetrate (*circa* 660 ft, 200 m), so are in permanent darkness.

Along with the structures built on top of the Bridge, the two groups of Caverns form a stronghold for the Kachaya of Ellenge Province. While many folks of the Province think of the Shark Bridge communities as a single place, the reality is the Caverns are more like a pair of neighbouring villages (their horizontal separation is approximately 3,000 ft, 920 m), with the Bridge forming a loose “road” between the pair. The various parts of the stronghold are run on nominally military lines, under the overall command of a Baron, who is based at West Caverns, the larger and longer-occupied of the two Cavern-villages.

As the communities here have grown, they have become increasingly self-sufficient, seeding and harvesting deep-water corals and other sedentary animal foods, as well as hunting for suitable free-swimming creatures. Some spare food is even exported now, primarily to the Province’s capital Ellenge, around 20 miles (30 km) to the south-southwest, along and beyond the line of the fissure from here. In addition, significant gemstone deposits have been mined from West Caverns for some years, while more have been very recently uncovered for the first time in the East Caverns. These are an important resource for the Province, and a source of income for the Shark Bridge communities. The gems are all of corundum type, including rubies and sapphires. Their main use is an abrasive for tasks such as cutting and shaping stone (only diamond is harder), given metals like iron, which might be used for these tasks on land, do not survive long in usable forms under the sea. While better-quality cut gemstones are used as jewellery and as an exchange medium at times, together with gold, those stones recovered from the Shark Bridge mines in this class are rare indeed; most are much smaller and of less perfect forms, though ideal for tool use.

One unusual feature about both West and East Caverns is that parts already existed when the Kachaya first discovered them many years ago, including the single and double stone doors which form the main access routes into both complexes. These doors can be physically sealed shut with strong, still-functional, stone bolts from inside only. From the outside, the doors are essentially invisible, so closely do they resemble the normal basaltic rocks of the fissure cliff faces. Such work might be attributed ordinarily to Dwarven craftsmen, although there are no known ocean-dwelling Dwarfs in Errynor’s seas now. There is no indication as to who made these doors, or first used the Caverns. Nor is it clear whether those original owners/occupiers may have had any connection with whatever the Unknown Something may be, which the Kachaya believe lies somewhere nearby in the depths of the fissure. This seems to be held in-check presently by an unidentified force, and while nothing of it has ever been definitely detected from either

Cavern within the fissure, it is the chief reason the three Watch Towers have been built along the top of the Bridge high above.

The map provides a plan view of the Caverns, the immediately adjacent stretch of fissure and its cliffs, along with an indication of where the 40 ft (12 m) wide Bridge lies in relation to the Caverns. Features labelled with numbers are detailed in that order below, after some further notes on the Kachaya.

The Kachaya

The Kachaya are of a generally humanoid form and Human-like size, thus have a body with four limbs and head, all of which are scaled, with hands and feet also similar to those of Humans, but rather larger, with sharp claws instead of nails, and webbing between their fingers and toes. Roughly 1 in 200 is born with four usable arms instead of two; typically, they grow to be taller than the average. Males and females are physically similar, though females are more commonly magically proficient. All have small control fins on their arms, legs and back. Their heads are ruggedly square by Human norms, their faces flattened, with large, dark, forward-facing, fish-like eyes, a mouth full of robust, sharply pointed teeth, and spines around the edges of their faces which can look like horns, partly hence their common name of "Sea Devils". They are all able to breathe freely above or below the water, though they can breathe air for only quite short periods. They prefer to live in deep, quiet waters, which is where they are more liable to be encountered, and hence their own name for themselves of "The Quiet-Water Folk". Their communication is largely telepathic when undersea, within eye-to-eye range (they have a normal vision range even in the darkness of the deepest oceans, albeit seeing only in black-and-white unless some light is present), or vocal speech in air, though they can use either at any time. They have a bioluminescent patch above each eye that they can show or hide at will too, which can be used to communicate over greater distances in the dark. They are also able to use a sonic attack when in water from time to time, over typical hand-to-hand combat distances. Kachaya leaders tend to be physically and/or magically strong individuals, and although they have an aristocracy of sorts, their leaders do not necessarily come from it. Such leaders usually survive only as long as their strength and success lasts. They pair-bond and maintain loose family structures, giving birth to live young that mature to adult forms in 8-10 months, young that are able to feed and look after themselves independently from birth. While social standing can be determined by heredity, aptitude and forcefulness are more important, because although adults can live to be 50 or so, most die younger, often by violence or accidents. (The Kachaya are loosely similar to the Sahuagin of D&D.)

There are normally between 150-200 Kachaya here at any given time, including the leader for the whole Shark Bridge community (comprising West & East Caverns, and the Shark Bridge Towers), the Baron, with appropriate numbers of attendant elite guards, administrators and assistants, along with the High Priestess for the combined settlement, her assistants and acolytes. Around one-third of the personnel are gem miners, most of the rest being in the military, although there is also an increasing number of food-producing farmers here most of the time now as well. The variation in numbers is chiefly due to military personnel changing stations either with those serving among the Bridge Towers or at East Caverns, or when transport convoys are sent with escorts similarly, or to and from other places in the Province.

Most Kachaya are usually armed with at least a simple dagger or short-sword-sized bladed weapon - often used as a tool additionally - while the military troops commonly

have one or more extra weapons to-hand, such as spears (with multiple, generally barbed, tips quite often), nets and crossbows. The blades and tips are normally of sharpened bone or stone, including obsidian, with hafts predominantly of wood or bone. Nets are made from reused rope, or woven from preserved skins and cartilage, and softened bone.

Features of the West Caverns

1. Main Entrance: A series of three double and two single stone doors, each of which pivots into or out of the Caverns, as shown, allow access to the Cavern complex. The doors are always set at floor level for the interior part of the Caverns into which they open. The double doors are each around 12 ft tall (3.7 m), the single ones roughly 8 ft high (2.4 m). Despite being deep underwater, their design allows them to be operated easily by just a single, normal-Human-sized humanoid creature. The double doors open and close together even if only one is moved. As noted above, they can be firmly closed and bolted from inside, while their handles and hinges are only accessible from the interior too. From outside, when shut, it is extremely difficult for those unfamiliar to even notice there are doors here at all. The coral growths on the adjoining cliffs are however a clear indication there is something unusual here, as few corals are found elsewhere on the fissure's steep sides.

2. Sharks, Guards & Transport: This large, long cave is home to the sharks used for riding and towing cargoes by the Kachaya, as well as the guards on duty covering the various doors of the Main Entrance. At least two such guards are present near every door or pair of doors at all times. Transport sleds - wood and bone frameworks strung with nets and ties to hold cargo - are kept here too, commonly stacked up to half-a-dozen deep. Three such sled-groups are illustrated on the map as a guide. Each sled can be towed by 4-6 Kachaya or one to two sharks when laden, and can then move at a comparable pace to a laden, towed wagon on land. Empty sleds can be easily moved without needing towing, since they are designed to be lightweight, yet very sturdy. Sharks and laden sleds are able to pass through only the double-door entryways. The sharks swim freely here, and are kept well-fed to avoid "accidents". There are usually 15-20 present at any given time; more if a large convoy or expedition is planned. This extensive cavern is of variable height, with a number of raised, irregular platforms in places. The ceiling is never less than 15 ft high anywhere here (4.6 m), while each of the more or less sheer, shaded, mapped drop-lines represents a sudden 10-foot (3 m) lowering of the floor level, giving a ceiling height over such areas of around 25 ft (7.6 m). Vertical stone-bar portcullises prevent the sharks from getting into the tunnels to Areas 3 and 5, while a close-woven, strong, net does a similar job in keeping them out of the Live Food Store (Area 4). The portcullises slide easily up into the ceilings by hand, and a small opening can be made between the cave wall and the net into Area 4 by humanoids readily enough.

3. Spiral Tunnel to Surface: A winding, spiralling passageway, around 10-12 ft high (3-3.7 m), rises steadily to the sea-bed surface a short way southwest of the end of the Bridge, some 1,500 ft (460 m) above. Two or three guards are usually located in its lower half, in case of an incursion from above, though the tunnel's primary function is as an emergency escape route. A stone-bar portcullis, easily raised by-hand into the ceiling, blocks the lower entryway against any inquisitive sharks.

4. Live Food Store: A substantial cavern, with the greatest height of any here, this has two close-netted entranceways from Area 2 to the east and Area 6 to the west. At these entrances, its floor is already 10 ft (3 m) below the level of the adjoining caves, while its floor descends further, if more gradually, towards the darker shaded regions away from its walls, again by up to 10 ft, while its ceiling rises similarly over those same places. Thus towards its centre, it is up to 45 ft or so high (nearly 14 m). Living creatures used as food are maintained here, of a variety of types. Some may be kept in netted containers at times, but most are either left on the floors somewhere if sedentary, or allowed to swim free within the confines of the netted cave. The nets can be opened from either side by the Kachaya, and are sometimes removed entirely - or moved to block-off the northerly limb of the cave, shepherding the swimming food animals into there - when the route is needed to move non-food items from the Storage cave (6) and Gem Store (8) in or out of the Caverns, or when a major food collection or replenishment is underway.

5. Saddlery: Various large wood and bone containers set on the floor, some with netting doors, hold shark and Kachaya harnesses for towing sleds, and for use when riding the sharks. Materials are here too for making and repairing these and the sleds. When in use, the cave is often partly lit with bioluminescent-liquid lanterns or creatures held in netted containers, particularly to aid with any fine work. A stone-bar portcullis, easily raised by-hand into the ceiling, closes the winding entrance tunnel from Area 2, while a further, open, winding tunnel leads off to Areas 6 & 14. Cave 5's two lobes have relatively level floors, and are each between 12 to 15 ft high (3.7 to 4.6 m), while the connecting cave and the passages leading to and from it, while not consistently at the same level as one another, are roughly circular in cross-section, so should be considered as having the same height as their mapped width.

6. Storage: A range of non-food materials and tools are stored across parts of this multi-lobed chamber's floor, in its more level places. The main cave's maximum height over its longer, central, north-northwest to south-southeast trending line is roughly 18 ft (5.5 m), while the narrower areas and linking passageways can be thought of as about circular in cross-section. The western exit towards Area 7 slopes down noticeably, though the small northwestern lobe in this cave north of the exit rises steeply, in two 10-foot-high (3 m) "steps" to its dead end. Different kinds of retrieved shipwrecked containers - chests, barrels, tubs and boxes - sit alongside others built from different materials, such as pieces of driftwood, bone and netting, to hold whatever items are being kept here at any point in time. A wide, close-netted passageway leads southeast to Area 4, with a narrower, winding, open passage leading-off northeast to Areas 5 & 14. A couple of guards are usually stationed near the entrance-net to Area 4 to make sure it remains shut, but the cave is often otherwise unoccupied.

7. Shrine: A winding, multi-level cave set aside for religious observances. There are generally one or two acolytes and a priest here to assist in rituals and personal observances, other than when a major ceremony is underway, when all the priests in the Caverns at the time will attend. The more-or-less circular-section passages from Areas 8 and 6 have an overall slope up from northwest to southeast through here, while the cave floor in the Shrine itself descends steadily from the main statue in the northeastern lobe towards the southwest, where there is a sudden drop into a deeper pit-like area, indicated by the usual shadowed drop-line. The separation between floor and ceiling is around 15 ft (4.6 m), though this increases sharply to 25 ft at the southwestern drop-line (7.6 m), as

the floor falls away, reaching a maximum separation of 35 ft (10.7 m) at the deepest, shaded, part of this southwestern “pool”. Although the primary focus is the greater than life-sized statue of the leading Kachayan military deity Elvass, in the classic upright “standing” pose, holding an offerings-bowl at chest height in both hands, bas-relief carvings of other deities in the pantheon - chiefly having Kachayan, shark or octopoidal forms - are cut into the walls, floor and ceiling across this entire northerly lobe, with further carvings and short texts cut into the stone elsewhere. Around the entrance to the passage to Area 8 are twined two life-sized bas-reliefs of the main Kachayan craft deities Garak and Lar, names which loosely translate as “expert gem-cutter” and “great skill” respectively. Further bas-reliefs of the pantheon’s figures cover the ceiling, walls and floor - including the steep drop-line - around the southwestern deep “pool”. This area is used to hold offerings cast into it during major ceremonies, which items are always removed soon afterwards. There is generally some bioluminescent illumination here, more so when any ceremonies are being conducted.

8. Gem Store: Piles of uncut corundum gemstones and nodules containing more are scattered across the floors of several parts of the winding and more open caves here, all considered parts of this same Gem Store area. Some piles are clearly awaiting attention, while others have been sorted by size of corundum pieces, and sometimes by type or colour too, where that can be determined. Corundum colours include grey, blue (such as sapphires), pink to red (including rubies), green, and yellow to brown. Many stones remain in need of further cleaning and processing. Those stones best organised are located in the southwestern, hook-shaped, dead-end passage-like cave off the main Area 8 cavern, and in the furthest of the three chief widenings of the winding east to northeasterly passage-cave off the cavern’s northeastern side. The floors here have been deliberately flattened in places to make such sorting easier. The more open parts have a floor to ceiling separation of between 10-15 ft (3-4.6 m), while the narrower places can be assumed as roughly circular in cross-section, barring their flatter floors, where relevant. The southeastern parts slope up gradually towards Area 7, as the map arrow suggests. The remainder is more nearly level. Aside from the rising tunnel leading to the Area 7 Shrine, the separation between the Gem Store and the Gem Mine (9) is seen solely in the nature of the floor, where a distinct line is apparent in the rocks where Areas 8 & 9 connect. Once sorted and processed, any especially fine corundum specimens will be removed for further work, such as being fully gem-cut and prepared as jewellery. The majority of the raw corundum stones are though simply packaged and transferred into the Storage area (6), ready for export to other parts of the Province. Bioluminescent lights are common here, to aid in sorting, and 4-8 gem miners/cutters/sorters are liable to be somewhere in here at any given moment, usually wherever the lights are.

9. Gem Mine: This large, rambling series of caves is the lowest part of the entire West Caverns complex. The textured floor shows where corundum deposits have been located and removed, or are being removed, deposits which continue down into the floor to a still unidentified depth. Although the caves here started out as largely natural, they have been expanded considerably by the Kachaya. Given the miners’ interests are in what the floor contains - the ceilings and walls down to the current floor levels show no trace of corundum - the ceilings in the expanded caves are often much lower than elsewhere in the Caverns: less than 5-6 ft (1.5-1.8 m) in places away from the region between the number labels 8 and 9 on the map over the textured floor area, particularly closer to the walls. Piles of freshly-mined corundum and spoil are present in numerous places.

Corundum is shifted into the Gem Store (8) for sorting, while when sufficient waste rock has been collected, and if not required for construction projects elsewhere, this is taken out and dumped into the fissure well away from the Main Entrance (1). The rock the corundum deposits are in is the usual sea-floor black basalt. Miners and their bioluminescent lamps are always active somewhere here, expanding the Mine, collecting and moving fresh corundum, running a series of four shifts a day to allow for rest, sorting and continuous working. It can often be noisy in here too, and the visibility can be quite poor from fine-grain spoil as well.

10. Mining Leader: One of the smaller, largely natural, caves on the northwestern side of the complex given over to the Caverns' leaders. This being the closest of those to the Gem Mine (9), it seems reasonable the leading miner and geologist should be quartered here when off-duty. The three small chests here hold a variety of tools and measuring devices to assist with both mining, surveying and examining the nature of the rocks discovered. One also contains the better and more promising uncut precious gemstones found recently, together with teaching samples of the commoner rock types found in the Caverns and the nearby fissure. Several of the more experienced miners act as the leader's assistants, some of whom may be found in here at times too, or in the adjoining cave with the sharply-descending floor to Area 10's east. Discussions and instructional briefings for the rest of the miners are also held in this eastern cave. The steep ledges in its southwestern corner have been used repeatedly to lightly scribe diagrams into as part of these meetings, much of which might look like a vastly complex mystery to others, perhaps concealing some great cabalistic secret. This is not the case, however. The tunnels leading east to Area 11 and south to the Gem Mine from Area 10 are approximately circular in cross-section, while the cave ceilings have been roughly levelled-off at about 12 ft (3.7 m) above the floors. This levelling extends over the lower reaches in the eastern cave, so the floor-ceiling separation there is some 22 ft (6.7 m), and 32 ft (9.7 m) southwest of each respective drop-line. Bioluminous lighting is often present in both places whenever anyone is in either.

11. Priests' Quarters: Given there is friction at times between the mining and military components of the settlement's population, it is unsurprising the priests are quartered in a natural cavern on the rising tunnels between the Mining Leader's (10) and Military Leader's Quarters' (12). The location is not ideal, because of the distance from here to the Shrine cave (7). A chest holds ceremonial regalia for different occasions, and the High Priestess and her acolytes use the area for resting, eating and other non-ceremonial activities. The ceiling is about 15 ft high (4.6 m) over much of this cave, although neither ceiling nor floor is particularly regular. A more or less circular cross-section tunnel leads west and downwards to Area 10, while the broad cave leading up and out to the east is of similar size and character to the Priests' cavern. Religious bas-reliefs have been cut into the walls, ceiling and floor here in places, some of which extend into the adjoining passageways. This broad eastern cave-passage has become an unofficial extra Shrine in recent times, as simply more convenient than the "official" Shrine cave away to the south. Although lighting is uncommon in Area 11, it is more often used in the eastern extension when someone is there, or when anyone is working on fresh bas-relief carvings.

12. Military Leader: The Baron's quarters, leader of all the Shark Bridge stronghold communities. His personal items, including some ceremonial ones, are kept in a small chest here. His private rest area is the smaller cave to the west of the labelled one, while

the more open area east along the broad passage leading down from Area 12 is used for briefings of his more senior staff, when required. Despite the seeming proximity of the Gem Mine (9) to Area 12 on the map, the rising tunnels out of the Mine and along the tunnels leading to here mean the floor of the Baron's private chamber is about 50 ft (15 m) above the nearest part of the Gem Mine's ceiling. At least some of the Baron's assistants and personal guards will be here too if he is. Bioluminous lanterns or creatures are common in all these caves whenever the Baron and his staff are present. The only time all are without such lighting is when the Baron is absent from West Caverns for a time. These more or less natural caves are of a comparable character to those around the Priests' Quarters (11), so have an irregular, if general, floor to ceiling separation of approximately 15 ft (4.6 m). To the northeast of the lowest, briefing, chamber, a narrow, round-section tunnel connects with the northwestern end of Area 13.

13. Armoury & Tools: A large, natural cavern, despite its relatively regular plan shape, with a raised platform along its southern half by the walls, which slopes down to the normal floor level in the cave's northwestern corner. This has attained the usual 10 ft (3 m) steep-descent height by the time it reaches the southwestern corner of Area 13. The ceiling here, running through into the adjoining Barracks cave (14), has a somewhat domed to arched nature, centred on the lower parts of both caverns. It reaches an irregular, maximum height of between 16 to 18 ft (5 to 5.5 m), the greatest of these over the central part of this cave. Consequently, much of the raised platform is quite shelf-like, and is used throughout caves 13 and 14 predominantly by resting Kachaya. Four large "cabinets" of reused wood, bone and net construction are set on more level parts of the floor in the higher part of this cave, reaching almost to the ceiling. They hold spare weapons, and those not carried routinely, along with tools - including for mining - as well as materials to make and repair more. The lower parts of this cavern and the broad eastern linkway into the Barracks cavern are often used when large-scale community meetings happen, for example to pass on instructions and news to the collective membership of the West Caverns. The leaders and priests will sometimes stand on or float above one or other of the "corner" angles of the raised platform in Areas 13 and 14 to make such addresses, as these are the raised places with the greatest headroom, which can also be seen from a much larger part of the lower floors. Ordinarily though, besides resting Kachaya on the platform, there will be usually several Kachaya carrying out tool or weapon work and maintenance around the "cabinets" particularly, commonly accompanied by some form of bioluminous lighting. From here and the connecting eastern extension to Area 14, several tunnels lead off to both north and south, of varying sizes and relative starting locations between floor and ceiling. In their narrower parts, they tend to have a rounded to near-circular cross-section, opening out appropriately where they link with larger caverns. To the northwest, the passage to the Leaders' and Priests' Quarters (Areas 10-12), beyond the unofficial Shrine cave just east of 11, is normally only used by the people from those quarters and their assistants, unless a report needs making more urgently. The southern exit leads by winding tunnels eventually into caves 5 and 6. Miners use this and pass *via* Areas 6 & 7 to reach the Mine (9), while the military Kachaya reach their posts in Area 2 using cavern 5. The winding northerly tunnels are natural ones, which are currently too far from other parts of the complex to have any regular use. Kachaya seeking quiet or especial privacy for some task, such as meditation, occasionally use parts of these, or the smaller eastern cave off the southerly passage, whose entrance is just beyond the platform drop-line in that tunnel.

14. Barracks: Beyond the details regarding the physical nature of this cave and its use by resting Kachaya described under the Armoury above (13), this is where the bulk of the ordinary Kachaya spend their time when not engaged in their duties or other tasks around the Caverns. At the southwest end, a semi-circular tunnel, although not indicated as such on the map for space reasons, rises from the normal floor level of Cave 14 to the 10 ft (3 m) height of the raised platform. In common with most passageway tunnels throughout the complex, this one too is roughly circular in cross-section. The passage east to Area 15 is an exception to this rule, as it has a more vertical-oval form instead in its narrower segments, and while partly natural, it has been shaped to be of this form in places. It averages around 10 ft high (3 m) for most of its length.

15. Watch Posts: A linked pair of smaller caves just within the outer wall overlooking the fissure. A series of small watch-holes has been bored through this wall, allowing a view into the fissure itself. Both caves are always occupied, with a constant watch kept, and all sightings recorded here. At least four Kachaya are likely to be in here at any given time, swapping watching and recording duties periodically to help maintain alertness. The small northerly tunnel off the northern Watch Post has no current normal use. The heights of all areas here are comparable to their mapped widths as a guide.

16. Bridge (High Above): Simply a projection of where Shark Bridge and its supporting arch are in relation to the Caverns. The Bridge top is about 1,500 ft above (460 m), while the base of the arch is roughly 50 ft (15 m) above the floor at the higher Main Entrance doorways (1).

17. Fissure: The western wall of The Clawmark fissure drops in a near-vertical cliff to an unknown depth below.

18. Corals: Coral growth began soon after the Caverns first came into use by the Kachaya, feeding largely on waste around the Main Entrance doorways (1), and also the small viewing openings from the Watch Posts (15). Taking advantage of this to increase the Caverns' self-sufficiency, further corals have been seeded nearby since, and regular food crops harvested from time to time.

19. Luminous Jellyfish: Seemingly also attracted by the edible waste generated by the settlement, numbers of bioluminous jellyfish have taken to congregating nearby at times as well. Their numbers have increased over time. They are not good to eat, but the Kachaya do catch and use them for lights, as they produce a reliable, steady, moderate level of illumination. Although their luminosity fades in captivity after a while, if released, they appear to quickly regain their previous lustre. They seem to come from somewhere deeper in the fissure. A few suspect they may have something to do with the Mysterious Unknown believed to lurk in the fissure's depths too.