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11:30 "As we walk through the waist-deep water, fish swim around our legs, and we see bats and spiders on the walls."

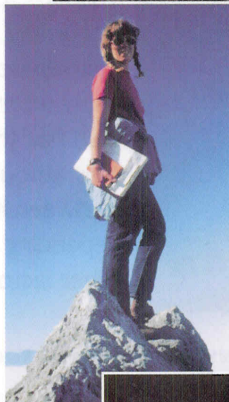
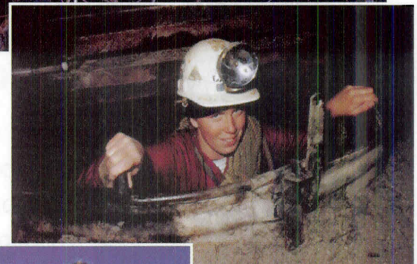
cave woman

WHO: Louise Hose **JOB DESCRIPTION:** Director of the National Cave and Karst Research Institute in Carlsbad, New Mexico
AGE: 51 **SALARY:** \$77,000

5:45 "I hear roosters crowing as I wake up in a hammock in a house in Tapijulapa, Mexico. I'm here with a seven-member team of scientists, college students and experienced cavers. We're studying a local cave, Cueva de Villa Luz, known for its range of microbes and fish, despite the acidity of its environment. I'm caving about two months a year; otherwise, I'm in Carlsbad, advising federal and state officials who manage caves around the country."
7:00 "I head to a café across the plaza for tea and time to write in my journal. I've been divorced for eighteen years and enjoy being alone. I'm newly open to having a serious relationship, though; for the first time, I plan to be in one place for a long time."
7:30 "The team arrives. We eat quesadillas and make our plans for the day's work."

8:30 "As team leader, I pack my own equipment and the safety gear, including a sensor that sounds if oxygen levels drop."
10:00 "We pile into a boat for our ten-minute ride to the caves. Once there, I don kneepads, a helmet with lights, gloves, a gas mask, a small scuba tank and the sensor. We don't know the long-term effects of working in this cave, but we're here only a few times a year. It is great for the complexion—an acid peel!"
2:10 "I'm on my back in nine inches of water in a space that's seven feet long and eighteen inches deep. The sensor starts screeching, meaning we have minutes to get to safety. My need for adventure may be higher than average, but right now I'm very concerned—until everyone's out."
4:00 "I emerge and dive into the river to rinse off the acid."

The boat takes the gear and most of the team, while the rest of us swim back."
5:00 "A student and I test samples. I like mentoring. When I was an undergrad, the geology department chairman told me I'd never get a job in the field because I'm a woman. After a master's and a Ph.D., I proved him wrong."
7:30 "Back at the café. One of our cavers has turned twenty-one, so I've arranged for a cake, a band and local moonshine."
11:00 "More data analysis, then I slip into my hammock. I fold my jacket into a pillow and drift off, exhausted. The next day, it starts all over again." —Hillary Quinn



From top to bottom: Louise Hose, descending into a cave near Carlsbad, New Mexico; caving for fun as a speleologist-in-training, 1971; mapping the longest cave in Mexico, 1980; measuring gas levels, Cueva de Villa Luz, 1997.



PHOTOS: FROM TOP: MICHAEL DARTER, JOHN WOODS, TOM STRONG, DAVID LESTER, HAIR AND MAKEUP: KATIE DOUTHIT.