

The Azure Caverns

The Azure Caverns (unimaginatively named for the local mountain range) consist of three interconnected levels of caverns that eventually make their way to *somewhere*. Somewhere deep underground, behind a certain door -- and the local natives do **not** care for adventurers asking impertinent questions about what lies beyond it. Whatever it is behind that door clearly has *something* to do with the local religion; and since the religions in the area oppose human sacrifice, wise adventurers do not press the matter. Best to let sleeping faiths lie, hey?

And best to let lie whatever else sleeps there, too. Explorers of the Azure Caverns -- surprisingly, the local tribes do not seem to mind outsiders freely exploring most of the cavern complex, as long as they do not interfere with the locals' own activities -- invariably report a feeling that there is a presence living in the darkness. Not necessarily 'lurks.' The presence does not come across as hostile, or even particularly unfriendly. But walk through the Azure Caverns and you will soon decide that you have Something's attention; and that prudence whispers that you walk just a little more lightly. Both the locals and explorers have stories about people or parties that clearly

decided to ignore those whispers, right up to the point where they went into the darkness and never came back out again.

The Azure Caverns themselves get used often, if inconsistently, by the locals. One can encounter a religious delegation from one or another the local tribes traversing the caverns at any given time, but the exact path to their final destination varies, depending on the liturgical calendar. Over the course of the year, any particular ritual pathway might feature regular lighting, smoothed floors, maintained rest stops -- or it might be dusty and dark and, above all, *silent*. The local tribes keep the Azure Caverns clean of vermin as much as they can, although that is a constant task.

Which is one way for adventurers to become involved with the Azure Caverns. The locals will happily pay for armed men and women to go in and make sure that nothing nasty has moved into next month's ritual pathway. Or to renew the torches. Or to simply replace them with these marvelous new things called 'oil lamps.' Or to go looking for people who have gotten lost. Usually lost. People being 'taken' hardly ever happens, and usually the fault there lies in a creature or monster that wandered in from elsewhere.

And then there is always the possibility of treasure. Thematically, the Azure Caverns work better as a place where you go to find a doomed and arrogant Lost Expedition's field notes, not the Sapphire Caverns of the Cerulean Gem-Spiders or whatnot. Still, explorers can still drop treasure, or monsters from outside could bring some in with them -- or the monsters could *be* the treasure, once they've been broken up enough.

Finally, it may be more interesting for adventuring parties to interact with the local tribes themselves. The minor, but real, mystery of the Azure Caverns clearly affects those living in the vicinity. The effects do not seem to be negative -- the locals act hospitably, and show no signs of hidden corruption -- but just what **is** going on down there?

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