Archaeologists find ‘mind-numbing’ maze of Indian catacombs

By MARY FOSTER
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NEW ORLEANS — Three young archaeologists crept through sacred rooms, over rocky precipices and past dangerous rattlesnakes to discover a huge complex of catacombs that could rewrite theories about the Indians of the southwestern United States.

“It’s absolutely mind-numbing. We would have never believed it could have existed,” John W. Hohman, one of the three archaeologists, said Friday during a meeting of the 2,000-member Society of American Archaeology.

“It will change a lot of what we believed about Indians in the Southwest. They may have been far more advanced than we believed,” Hohman admitted to feeling a bit like Indiana Jones, the archaeologist-adventurer from the movies.

Armed with a flashlight and a pistol, it was Hohman who rappelled down the steep fissures, which were frequently dotted with rattlesnakes sunning themselves on rocky outcrops, into the catacombs.

The catacombs his expedition found are the first reported in the United States, officials at the conference said.

“It’s very exciting to have it announced at this conference,” said Dr. James Schoenwetter, professor of anthropology at Arizona State University in Tempe, Ariz.

“It’s one of the few times we can say this is a first. Anytime you have a first in our business, it’s exciting. The idea of a very elaborate form of ceremonial chamber being built underground hundreds of years ago is surprising.”

Indians of the southwestern United States were not believed to have built underground, Hohman said.

For many of the cultures, the underground held special connotations, both good and bad, he said. Burials also were done much as they are done now, he said, in graves dug into the earth.

The catacombs, which Hohman and his colleagues say are about 700 to 800 years old, were discovered at a known prehistoric Indian settlement about two miles west of Springerville, Ariz., near the New Mexico state line.

Hohman, Diane White and Christopher Adams were investigating the area for the town with an eye toward developing it as a recreation area.

Called Casa Malpais, the site represents one of the largest and most complex ancient Mogollon communities in the nation, Hohman said.

The site has been known for about 100 years, and some investigation had been done there previously.

The area was known to have a three-story masonry pueblo, a large complex used for religious ceremonies, stone staircases, sacred chambers and other areas, all surrounded by a wall and all well preserved.

The Mogollon Indians occupied the site sometime between A.D. 1250 and 1400, Hohman said.

“There had been some suspicion that there was something underground there,” Adams said. “When we actually entered the catacombs though, it just blew us away.”

Getting there wasn’t easy.

“Every time I’d get halfway down, one of the others would find the entry way,” Hohman said.

The carefully hidden entrances to the catacombs varied from the size of doorways to small crawl spaces.

Once inside, Hohman and his colleagues found three to four acres of catacombs, ranging from small chambers to huge rooms 50 feet high and 100 feet long.

“The average person living at the site would not have had access to the area,” White said. “It was probably entered only by certain people.”

Several hundred graves have been identified, including graves under the floors, under stone cairns and in wall tombs.

“We were told by old-timers in the area that in some of the burials the bodies were just laid out on rock slabs and surrounded by offerings,” Hohman said. “We found none of those because they were all looted 50 or 60 years ago.”

Hohman said none of the burial sites will be disturbed.

“We feel it’s important out of sensitivity to the native Americans in the area not to disturb the graves,” he said. “We can still learn a lot from the site without touching the graves or the items used for the burials.”

Researchers already have found artifacts in the catacombs ranging from partial tools to wooden “pillows” designed to be placed under the dead person’s head, Hohman said.

The site, with its multitude of sacred areas and ceremonial rooms, may have been a ceremonial center for the area, White said.

Hohman expects the site to produce at least one more major find.

“We think there is something else underground there. We’re working in an area that we think will produce another major surprise,” he said.