

Michel Siffre Story



How did you celebrate the new millennium? Like many of you, Frenchman Michel Siffre rejoiced in a New Year's celebration. Yet unlike most of you, Michel celebrated three days late!

Michel Siffre, a 61-year-old cave explorer, descended 2,970 feet into a cave located in southern France as part of an experiment. In this deep cave, Michel lived for two months with no contact with the outside world. He had no instrument to measure the time of day. He found it difficult to keep track of time while living without cues of any kind to help him tell if it was day or night. While in the cave, Michel used artificial light to read novels and journals and to cook. Of course, he napped. The naps were the key to throwing off Michel's sense of time.

Scientists were (and still are) interested in learning about human sleep patterns. They wanted to study Michel's sleep habits while he was in the cave. Michel wore electrodes on his body that allowed scientists at the cave opening to monitor his sleep. They observed that Michel's sleep/wake cycles varied considerably. His "day" (the time between major sleep periods) varied between 18 and 52 hours (average "day" = 27.5 hours). Scientists are using information from monitoring Michel and from other experiments to help astronauts follow healthy sleep habits during long space voyages.

This was not Michel's first journey underground for a great length of time. He spent two months in a cave on the French-Italian border in 1962, and another 205 days in a Texas cave in 1972.