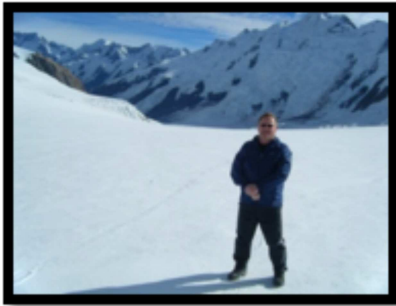


JENOLAN CAVES, NEW SOUTH WALES - BUSY DAYS

Scott Melton

Acting Deputy Manager, Jenolan Caves



For those of you who know or have visited Jenolan Caves, you will recall that we are situated at the bottom of a 450 metre deep valley with two very narrow access roads, limited parking and very little flat ground. So you may wonder how we cope with visitor numbers which can approach 2700 daily cave visits (like Easter Saturday 2017) or approximately 8,500 visitors over the same four day Easter period in such a confined space. Jenolan Caves receives such high visitation because we are located a 3-4 hour drive from approximately six million people. This gives us an average annual visitation of approximately 230,000 cave visits.

At Jenolan, we have been keeping daily visitor statistics for quite a number of years so we have developed a very good record of our peaks and troughs of visitation. This has also enabled us to develop a set of staff/cave rosters that allows us to cater for these variations in visitation. In addition, on a busy day such as Easter Saturday or Sunday, we will employ up to three “helper” guides who are not initially assigned guiding duties unless a staff member calls in sick or we need to schedule extra tours.

I have worked at Jenolan Caves for 24 years and during that time I have seen a big shift, both in our visitation patterns/makeup as well as the way that we run the operations. Back in 1993, tickets were sold manually on a first come, first served basis and the length of the ticket office queues was legendary, often stretching up the road past Jenolan Caves House Reception. It was also not uncommon to take 100 visitors on a tour of the Lucas Cave at an interval of 15 minutes between tours on the really busy days. I have been reliably informed that back in the 1970s, the Lucas Cave did not even have a set number of visitors per tour and one guide with 200 visitors was not uncommon. Often, it was easier to station a guide at each viewing platform and just have the visitors walk through the Lucas Cave at their own pace. My own personal record group size in the Lucas Cave is 181 visitors set on a Good Friday when tours resumed after a blackout.

Jenolan moved to a computerised ticketing system in the mid 1990s but we still had long queues in the Ticket Office. Part of the problem was that we were allowing people to ring up and make an unpaid booking for the cave tours; they would then often not turn up meaning that tours were not running at maximum capacity and people in the ticket office line often had a three hour wait for the next available tour. To overcome this, we started getting people to make a credit card payment over the phone with us so that we would receive the revenue in advance and could more clearly see which tours were full. This allowed us to then schedule extra tours as needed to cater for those visitors who did not ring up and book in advance. Visitors would then collect their tickets from the Guides Office, allowing them to bypass the Ticket Office. As an aside, I added up the value of uncollected tickets after the first six months and it totalled just over \$4,000 of revenue.

We moved to our second computerized ticketing system prior to the Year 2000 Sydney Olympics but still allowed visitors to ring up and book tours in advance. As time progressed, we found that more and more people were booking in advance which effectively moved the ticket office queue into the Guides Office which started to suffer from crowding issues. We also saw an exponential increase in the number of phone calls being



Jenolan Caves on a quiet day. Photo: Steve Bourne

received as well. We started to think of an online booking system and approached the developers of our ticketing system to come up with a viable system but this proved to be very complicated and was eventually abandoned.

As a result, after much investigation, we moved to our third computerized ticketing system along with an online booking platform in early 2017. As we were new to online bookings, initially we only allowed people to book up to 48 hours before the start of a tour until we were certain that the system was operating to our satisfaction. We have subsequently reduced the lead time to 24 hours, 8 hours and now 4 hours. We will not reduce the lead time any further as we feel that four hours will give visitors enough time to drive from Sydney to make their tour start time. What have we seen with the introduction of the online booking system with a four hour lead time:-

- A big reduction in ticket office queues (which means we can often use one of the ticket sellers for tour duties);
- Fewer visitors coming into the guides' office to collect tickets (we still take phone bookings however);
- A dramatic decrease in the number of phone calls; and
- A change in customers' booking preferences as we now target our more expensive cave tours to appear first on our online booking system, which leaves the higher capacity caves available for our walk-in visitors.



This is what they come to see, spectacular cave. Orient Cave, Jenolan Caves. Photo: Steve Bourne

So what is involved on a typical busy day at Jenolan Caves such as Easter Saturday 15th April 2017?

The Easter Long Weekend fell in the middle of our school holiday period this year and was our first major test of the online booking system and ticketing system so we were all interested to see how it would go!

Our staff and tour rosters can be prepared up to two months in advance. This gives staff plenty of time to let us know of leave requests and for our casual staff; they can give us their availability surrounding other lifestyle activities. Based on our statistics, a suitable programme is prepared to cater for the anticipated number of visitors that we are expecting. For Easter Saturday, we prepared a roster/programme that saw us schedule an initial 67 tours which took into account the general public and inbound tour operator needs. We subsequently added an extra two tours to our schedule during the day. This programme then catered for just under 3,000 cave visits.

The Manager or Deputy Manager of the Cave Operations Department commences work at 8.30am and opens up the office for the day's trading. Generally, any sick staff will ring in by about 9.00am and suitable adjustments are made to the roster. Occasionally, we may need to cancel a scheduled tour (if no one has booked on it yet) but we don't like doing this as the tours are advertised on our website.

We are able to cater for large daily numbers because our two biggest caves, Lucas and Chifley, can cater for 60 and 40 visitors respectively and at a pinch can take a few more. In addition, due to the circular nature of the tour route in both caves, we can schedule tours 15 minutes apart. As the Chifley Cave tour is only one hour, it is often the easiest tour to schedule at short notice for extra capacity. We currently have an issue with groups exiting the Lucas Cave as we cannot use the exit stairs due to rock fall issues so groups must return back to the Grand Arch; this means some congestion on the entry stairs but our staff have adapted their tours to this change and it is not a problem. To help with this congestion, some River Cave tours are directed to exit via the Temple of Baal Cave providing

there is not a tour in there, helping to alleviate congestion in the Lucas Cave entry passage way.

Two of our biggest concerns on really busy days are car parking spaces and people arriving late for their tours, either due to slow traffic leaving Sydney and the Blue Mountains or a preponderance of people to rely upon GPS devices to estimate how long it will take to drive to Jenolan Caves. Normally, on most days, our car parks are self regulating but on the busy days, our maintenance staff will supervise car parking. We will fill car park number one first and then direct cars to our number two car park. Once this fills, we can park cars on the old tennis court area. Once this area fills, we direct people to "Burma Road" which can accommodate about eighty vehicles. At this time we will shuttle visitors to and from the main visitor area with the "Bat Bus". By now, we generally start to see places opening up in the main car park as the earlier visitors leave the valley. One change that we have noticed since the introduction of online bookings is that our visitors are arriving at more staggered times in line with their booking times. Visitors used to turn up "en-masse" which would create strain on our parking resources but this has changed; it will be interesting to see how this pans out over the next year.

On the busy days, people can show up late for their tours due to slow traffic or incorrect GPS time estimations. If it is only a few minutes past the tour time and we have a spare staff member available, we will catch them up to their tour. Failing this, we will reschedule them where possible to the same tour at a later time or another tour. It helps when visitors ring us and advise they are going to be late as we can offer more solutions for them. If the visitors decide they do not want to come on the day, we can transfer the value of their tickets to a voucher with one year validity so they can return at a later date.

Overall, we have about ten really busy days a year. Thanks to good rostering, well trained and multi-skilled staff and by drawing on past experience, we are normally able to cope with these high peaks in visitation without too many issues arising. We are also fortunate to have a variety of tours to suit our visitor requirements. So while we can accommodate up to about 3,000 cave visits on a really busy day, a busy day generally runs just like any other day!