

# The “Mystery shopper” goes to Tasmania

## Introduction

During my October school holidays, my father and I went to Tasmania to visit my uncle and aunt. As part of our travels, we visited each of the four tourist cave locations on the island. My father said that the price I had to pay for my holiday was to agree to write a mystery shopper article (with his assistance) for this Journal. I agreed to do so and this is it!

I have visited a number of tourist caves with my family and friends in Australia and overseas (including doing some mild adventure caving at Jenolan). I really enjoy going into the caves and hearing the explanation from the guides about their formation and the various hydrological, geological and other influences that have created the shapes and colours. I am also glad, for the most part, that the guides have, since I first visited a cave when I was about 10, mostly stopped suggesting that particular formations looked like Yoda or a wedding cake or something else.

## Gunns Plains cave

We started, after our arrival in Launceston, by driving to Gunns Plains Cave.

Gunns Plains Cave was very interesting. Our guide was very well informed for a privately run cave. I was also glad that we had a small group so that the guide could focus on the individual people and their questions.

The cave was formed by a stream running along it inside its containing hill. The stream still runs through the centre of the cave. The cave was home to cave lobsters - even though we did not see them, there was a photo at the cave entrance.

The cave also sloped with the angle of the hill. You could see how the outside hillside would appear from the path we followed up the slope in the cave. The cave had been discovered when a sinkhole collapsed. The area was filled with similar sinkholes. The cave also continued beyond where you could walk to on the formed pathway. We were told that, to continue, you would need to crawl on your stomach for a long distance.

The formations in this cave were stunning and our guide described them comprehensively. He knew all the scientific words and a lot about how caves were formed. There were multiple colours in the cave and the guide knew how to explain how all of them came into being. The cave had some exceptionally beautiful formations and a few of them differed from those I had seen before in other caves.

This cave especially stood out to me because of the helictites. This was the only cave of the four that we visited that had these. They were very beautiful, unique, and added something different to this cave for me.



Helictites at Gunns Plains Cave (above)

Shawls lit to show translucence (below)



## Travelling to Mole Creek

We then travelled the back roads across country from the Gunns Plains Cave Reserve to Mole Creek where we stayed the night. On the way, just after crossing the Mersey River, we stopped and walked through the bush to the entrance to Croesus Cave, a cave which my father had visited with my twin sisters about 30 years ago and visited again with my mother about twenty years ago. We had tried to walk to Croesus Cave during a family visit to Tasmania a few years ago but had only got about halfway there when my third sister, only a few years older than me, trod on a beehive in the foliage of a tree which had fallen across the track. On that occasion, we had hastily gone back to our parked car to remove the bee stings and the many remaining bees in her clothes.



Although dad had explained to me why it was a gated cave to protect it, I was still disappointed that I couldn't go inside with him. Perhaps sometime in the future?

## The Mole Creek caves

This was my second visit to the caves at Mole Creek. The new Visitors Centre was impressive compared to what I remembered from my family's earlier visit.

### Marakoopa Cave

On the morning of our second day in Tasmania, we visited Marakoopa Cave. We went on the "Underground Rivers and Glow-worms Tour". We were in quite a large group, 20 or so, so there needed to be a bit of bunching up to hear what was being described by our guide. However, the tour was informative and there was very little description based on giving human world descriptions of any of the formations.

Marakoopa Cave was a beautiful cave, full of interesting formations and colours. We had a reasonable guide who knew most of the relevant information.

The problem with this cave, however, was the group size. Too many people were allowed in the group which prevented any individual attention and made it difficult to hear. The cave also had some dark colouring from bushfires. The formations were going grey and even black in some areas. Although this was damaging to the cave, it was not as bad as some of the effects that had occurred as consequence of people touching formations. At least the smoke damage was natural.



Rim pools in Marakoopa Cave

### King Solomons Cave

The tours at Marrakoopa Cave are timed so that it is possible to drive the nearly eleven kilometres to King Solomons Cave in time for a subsequent tour of this cave. At King Solomon's Cave, we again had quite a large group with about sixty percent of them having been on our earlier tour at Marrakoopa. King Solomons Cave was the stand out one of those that I visited.

I have deliberately chosen not to name most of the guides because I do not wish to embarrass them. However, our guide at King Solomon's cave, Aaron, warrants special mention for a number of reasons. These were:

- He did an amazing job. He knew every detail that he should and more!
- He did not try to sugar-coat anything about future impacts of climate change on caves such as this one;
- He told us the proper scientific names of the formations and how the colours formed from the different minerals in the water as the formations grew;
- He didn't give human identifying names to any of the formations; and
- It felt like he actually cared about how the caves were managed.

This was the only cave where we saw any cave life. At the entrance to the cave, there was a cave spider. The guide explained that this spider was pregnant, which meant that it was much larger than usual. Seeing her (and the guide's explanation of this and of the cave overall) set this cave above the others that we visited.



**A very, very long straw in King Solomons Cave!**

This cave still had damage but was not always as obvious as the other caves. Also, there were bones of animals that had fallen into the cave and died. This cave definitely had the most fauna related features.

However, this mesmerising cave was also rather cramped with our party (although certainly not as much as at Marrakoopa).

### **Hastings Caves**

We drove the hundred kilometres or so from where we were staying in Hobart to Hastings Caves to the south down the Huon Valley. Although we made the trip especially to visit Hastings Caves, on our return journey, we diverted to visit the Tahune Forest Air Walk, some 26 km into the forests to the west of Geeveston.

All of those going on our scheduled tour through Newdegate Cave assembled outside the cave entrance. I was surprised at how many people there were for our scheduled tour given the distance that Hastings Caves are away from the main centres of population. We had such a large group that we had to be split up into two separate parties, each of about 20 people. The two groups went through the cave starting about a minute or so apart under the instructions of our separate guides. This was part of the problem with this cave.

In the end, however, it was the guide's description of the

cave that did the most damage to enjoying its features. There were still good and beautiful formations that were as dazzling as in all the other locations. The lighting, which seemed to have been renewed as LED lighting, was also well arranged for displaying the formations, including, as the guide demonstrated, the translucence of formations.

Our guide, however, did not do anything to contribute significantly to the tour. She did not talk about how anything in the cave was formed and she also compared a large number of the formations to real-world items. There was no description of how the caves were coloured and the impact of the sediment that had been washed into the cave or any description of the impact of bushfire smoke. There was still a wide range of beautiful and different formations. There was also a part of a stalactite that had broken off and enabled us to see the original straw formation from which it had evolved. My only regret is that it would have been a much richer experience if the guide had explained it better.



**One of the missing stair tread safety strips**

As a matter of visitor management and safety, my father noticed that the edges of three of the paved steps in the major chamber at the foot of the entrance staircase were missing part of their non-slip trim. One of the three steps from which this element of the safety feature was missing can be seen on the photograph. This, dad told me, might reflect an inadequate attitude to ongoing maintenance. Although we didn't see anybody slip, nonetheless, it showed a hazard which should have been noticed and fixed.

### **Overall conclusion**

Although all four caves that we visited had different visual and guiding experiences for me, each of them showed me differing aspects of the beauty that can be created by the activity of water flowing underground through limestone geology.