

# A VISION OF TE ANAU

- Kent Henderson

Upon leaving Nelson after the 1997 Post Conference Study Tour, I found myself (not totally without expectation) in a hire car with Robyn McBeath and Neil Taylor, with plans to head south to Te Anau. Trapped for days with two sandgroppers is not everybody's idea of fun, particularly with the looming spectre of deep and torrid discussions of Western Australian karst politics high on the mouthguard. The first item of contention was whether to go down the east or west coasts of the South Island, but we finally decided on the more picturesque, but longer, west coast route. As it turned out, we hardly saw a car the whole trip, so the travel time was probably on a par.

Thus, down the West Coast we flew, occasionally changing drivers when we slowed down marginally at hairpin bends. I discovered that evidentially there are no speed limits in WA, which it was naturally assumed was the case in NZ as well. We zoomed past the wonderful karsts of the Paparoa National Park, which brought fond memories back to me of the 8<sup>th</sup> ACKMA Conference in 1989. I did manage to persuade "Sterling Moss" Taylor and his coach to stop, very briefly, at the wonderful *Pancake Rocks*, en route. But thereafter, on we sped. There was some talk of stopping in Greymouth to briefly say "hello" to Geoff Schurr, but by the time that was decided on that we were 50 km past the town! Sigh... Needless to say, we made Queenstown in record time, and if we hadn't of been short of petrol, making Antarctica that night was a real possibility!! Queenstown is rather beautiful. No karst, but wonderful lake, high surrounding mountains and heaps of charm, even the myriad of tourist traps were not totally unpleasant.

The next day we motored (yes, quickly) onto Te Anau. A beautiful little town on a beautiful lake - the largest body of fresh water in New Zealand (Southern Hemisphere?), we were told. We promptly found Neil Collinson, who kindly installed us in staff quarters. As with the previous night, I was given a room by myself, because I snored, I was told. Humpph! ..these guys obviously haven't slept in the same room as Kevan Wilde, or Robert Tahiri - now that's snoring!!!

Soon after settling, we were on a boat to cross the lake to the karst. Despite his frantic schedule, Noel's boss, my old friend Noel "Johnny" Walker, found time to get away from the office to spend a few minutes with us. It was great to catch up with him, and I look forward to his attendance at the Naracoorte Conference in 1999. We had a useful chat about the new developments at Te Anau Caves, which again reinforced to me what an enlightened karst overseer Noel is. More power to his efforts!

And so to the lake crossing, albeit in pouring rain, so we saw nothing. Still, it was the first rain we'd had since we'd been in the *Shaky Isles*, so no complaints! As some may know, rain at Te Anau

and Milford is measured in metres (many!), not millimetres. We were due to view the tourist cave later, but Neil Collinson had very kindly arranged a special permit to ascend the karst into the closed National Park above to visit the Aurora Caves. The park itself is the habitat of the extremely rare and endangered Tahahe flightless bird, and access to all but selected scientists is banned. We were indeed privileged. The Aurora Cave entrance is about half a kilometre up a fairly steep karst mountain, with very thick forest and undergrowth, and right in the middle of Tahahe territory. The Te Anau tourist cave is actually the lowest section of the Aurora System, which itself bisects the mountain.

We finally made the gaping top entrance after a most energetic climb. Of course, Neil Taylor and Robyn were pretty exhausted but, naturally, I was fine! (you will believe anything, wont you?) The entrance is magnificent, to me very reminiscent of Babylon Cave in the Paparoa karst on the West Coast. And the climb down was just as long! ...but my, was it worth it! Underground streams were rampant, together with a myriad of incredible phreatic passageways. We breached may a water course, and raging river. At the end of our progression, we came across the *twin falls*, two 15 (?) metre waterfalls. Amazing stuff. I have been in many caves, but none better than this. Naturally, I took copious photos.....

Finally, we alighted into light rain from the entrance and descended the mountain, on occasions slightly quicker than anticipated in the by now very slippery undergrowth. Of course, yours truly, being very sure-footed, has no such problem!

And so, back to the tourist cave Visitor's Centre on the lake edge to "dry off" and change films. Oh dear! Yes, as Robyn and Neil Taylor will never let me forget, I went through the entire Aurora Cave System taking "photos" with any empty camera. Even I'm not perfect! Sigh..... My camera was, of course, very quickly loaded for the glories of Te Anau Cave. And what a cave! The immediate, and unforgettable, experience of the tourist cave is its water, its sheer power, its unending roar. Currently, a punt trip takes one to the middle of the cave for a short boardwalk, whence a second punt ride brings you into the glowworm chamber. It is a quite different experience to that of Waitomo, where the grandeur of its glowworm grotto and the sheer numbers of glowworms dazzles the senses. At Te Anau, the numbers are fewer, but the experience is much more intimate, with viewers able to get up very close to the "starry displays". Captivating stuff!

We spent quite some time with Neil Collinson while he explained the redevelopment of the cave, which will be completed in two stages over the next 12 months or so. The first punt ride will be replaced by a suspended pathway. Many other pathways will be replaced, as will the lighting. Most fittings will be 12v, with a number underwater. The plans are

exciting, and I look forward to photos and regular reports from Neil as things progress.

Thus, it was back on the boat to Te Anau township, to a meal and a drink (or two..) The next morning, Neil Collinson and Noel Walker had most kindly arranged for us to tour nearby Milford Sound. Even the road trip in, through a massive mountain tunnel, was a great experience. The tourist trip, on a very large boat, was spectacular. The Milford fiord,

with its myriad of waterfalls, is unsurpassable in its beauty. Thereafter we "flew" back to Te Anau, and after brief thanks and goodbyes it was off towards Christchurch and home.

Indeed, I must, I am sure on Robyn and Neil Taylor's behalf also, sincerely thank Neil Collinson and Noel Walker for their magnificent hospitality during our all too brief stay at Te Anau. I, for one, can't wait to get back there!