

EISRIESENWELT, POSTOJNSKA JAMA AND JENOLAN: A COMPARISON

- Jill Rowling

In August 1997, Mike Lake and I were backpacking our way through the European Alps after the caving conference in Switzerland. Two "must sees" I considered were Eisriesenwelt (ice caves in Austria) and the Postonia Caves (Slovenia). In both cases a little planning resulted in a fairly satisfactory tour, however there were some differences that an Australian or New Zealand cave manager may care to consider (or ignore!).

EISRIESENWELT

Eisriesenwelt (Land of the Ice Giants) is a well-run commercial venture. From an organizational view, it is probably most similar to some of the package tours available from Queenstown (NZ).

A minibus met the train at Werfen, just on spec that someone might want to go to Eisriesenwelt. We left our luggage in the station master's office and only took our boots and warm jackets. The tour guide checked that we had these things, as although it is a tourist cave, it is cold and wet. The minibus took us to the bus ticket office and then a larger bus took us and others up a scenic, winding road to a cable car (gondola). There was a fairly long walk up to the gondola ticket office. Here we had a choice of types of tickets: apparently a lot of hikers just want the gondola ride but not the cave tour. The ride itself was quick and everyone was standing, rather like in a lift. There were about 15 people per load, and the system was counterbalanced. After walking past some kiosks a fairly long and precipitous (but safe) path led to the entrance of the cave.

The cave tour

People were counted into groups of about 50. We were all cooling off from the hot weather but had our jackets on due to the icy blast of wind coming out of the cave entrance. The guides again checked that everyone had the correct footwear and warm clothing - Good Point #1. One person in three was given a carbide lantern and we entered the cave through a narrow entrance. The flame promptly went out but our smiling guide waited on the other side to re-light all the lanterns. At the first stop in the entrance chamber, it was apparent that our guide had a tiny thin voice and the whole tour was to be in German. Not to worry, though; the guide lit a magnesium strip to light up an ice stalagmite and Mike noticed how lovely the scene was, with the bright flare and all the lanterns. Good point #2: The lantern keeps the fingers warm in the freezing cold cave.

We walked up a long set of wooden steps and up a vast hallway. The guide occasionally illuminating a feature with magnesium. Bad point #1: Guides drop magnesium oxide everywhere. Good point #3: Wooden steps don't slip even when icy. Now that

our eyes were dark adjusted, we were able to see the most fantastic ice shapes and colours: Ice stalagmites, stalactites, flowstone, canopies and the occasional small crevasse all blue-green against the light grey and orange rock. Some ice crystals sparkled in the lantern's light. In areas where the wind blew, we had to shield our lanterns. We came to a room containing a *shrine* dedicated to the originator of the tourist cave and the engineers involved, then passed into a large hall where we were told that the cave continued upwards towards the surface but contained no further ice.

We returned via a different route. The guide pointed out some interesting ice formations but I disagreed with his interpretation of physical processes, but I didn't tell him that! - some things never change on cave tours!. As we walked through the cave entrance, the wind gave us all an almighty shove! Very impressive! Photography is not permitted in the cave. For once I agree with the management; it would totally change the effect, as most things are shown by backlighting with magnesium ribbon rather than direct lighting.

They do go to some pains to explain this in the guide book (in German). For once, also, the slides and postcards available for purchase do show most of the things you would have taken photos of. We were also able to purchase a map of the cave. This shows the tourist cave as being only about a tenth of the total cave. As it was lunch time, we enjoyed a snack at the nearby bistro and watched the antics of the local ravens wreaking havoc on other people's lunches. The view was out of the world: limestone alps as far as the eye could see.

Price wise, the entire tour, transport and experience was very good value for money. Ecologically, I know the magnesium and carbide is polluting BUT the cave breathes out all summer (a chimney effect) and the system gets a bit of a flush each year as the ice melts and all the mess goes out the front door. Is that so bad? An electric system could be installed, but I'd imagine that it would require a lot more maintenance. The carbide seems to be fairly pure as none of the lanterns smelled.

POSTOJNSKA JAMA - POSTONIA CAVES, SLOVENIA

My, what a difference between Slovenia and Austria! Slovenia has something "Wizard-of-Id-ish" about it: a bit run down, almost medieval and with strange politics. It is also in the middle of a wild frenzy of rebuilding but without apparently any town planning or building codes. They have chook runs, computer data centres and house cows. They hot up their cars and they dry onions on the second floor balconies. We had something of an epic getting from the railway station to the Kras Hotel (Karst Hotel) at Postojna (which I shall not bother relating)

and we walked to the caves the next day. Footpaths are often nonexistent.

Street signs have been removed (especially anything referring to Tito) so I navigated by geographical features. The *polje* was easy to find – flat, agricultural land that floods in spring from underground. On the other side of the road, buzzards slowly circled on the thermals. Slovenia still has deer, bears and wolves in its thick dark forests! The lavish caves hotel (Hotel Jama) is a slick marble, glass and chrome thing with lots of tourist kiosks. The caves management building, however, is large and imposing and a plaque in Latin says “Enter, Traveller, into this Immensity”.

The tickets cost about the same as at Jenolan. Italian tourists parade about in their finery (not quite what I'd expect to wear on a cave tour!). We got our tickets and lined up. Presently we walked onto a railway platform and took our seats on one of two grumpy little electric mine trains. These have wooden seats and jerk around the corners. The ceiling is usually high but gets super low in places and tall people crouch (no safety wire at all!). The entrance area of the cave is without stalactites and is totally black from an incident in WWII. The Nazis had stored petrol in that part of the cave and the partisans got in via another entrance and blew it up. The petrol burned for a week; the stalactites fell off and the walls were calcined from the heat. The odd white straw stalactite now stands out sharply against the black.

The train moved quickly through a large, well-decorated chamber (Congress Hall) decked out with electric chandeliers: a weird sight! We passed gallery after gallery: a fairly flat system somewhat reminiscent of Imperial Cave, Jenolan (only an order of magnitude bigger!). The electric lighting system adequately lit the scenes. After what seemed to be a long time (10 minutes, I think), the train stopped at a platform and we joined the group with the "English" sign above it (the majority of tourists stood under the "Italiano" sign; about 4 under the "Deutsch" sign but not many wanted "Slovene"). Our guide introduced herself and hoped we would all keep up with her. She walked quickly up the ramps to the top of the room ("Calvary"), then back down the other path.

Unfortunately the tour was rushed so there was not time to examine the myriad "stacked pancake" stalagmites which were a feature of just this room. We stopped at the "Russian Bridge" (funded by Russia) then continued on a figure-8 path through this part of the cave, past lovely speleothems that had been darkened by 100 years of tourist fallout. Some sections were cleaner: these were the ones that had NOT been formerly lit by candles and flaming torches in the past (as can be seen in the famous series of paintings by Alouise Schaffenrath). Many gour pools were filled with coins.

The last room, the "Concert Hall" was of immense proportions. You could easily fit in two full

orchestras and audiences, or a complete soccer field with spectators. The floor was all concrete and at one end was a tank containing a few of the famous Proteus amphibians. At the other end was a kiosk (selling the most amazing kitsch) and another railway platform. Presently we boarded a mini train and went out a slightly different route. We walked through spectacular wrought iron gates into blinding sunshine. Price-wise, I thought it was about right based on Jenolan pricing standards. However, I think by Slovene standards it is excessively over priced. This is why there weren't too many Slovenes on the trip. Photographs are allowed, which is just as well because the pictures in the kiosks are dreadful (some are in the snow-white & seven dwarfs category). Back at the tourist shops however we were able to buy some nice booklets and a Shaffenrath print at fairly low cost.

I think the tour is far too rushed. We covered about as much walking as the Eisriesenwelt tour, but in half the time. The guide knew sufficient history but very little of the cave's development. We asked her if any work was being done by the government or speleological societies to try to clean parts of the caves and she replied that there was none at all. The guides just clean the tourist paths and the lint builds up on the speleothems. (Indeed, we heard from some of the speleos and scientists that this particular cave does have access problems because of the commercial activity).

COMPARING WITH JENOLAN CAVES (AUSTRALIA)

So, I have compared two different commercially run tourist caves. How does Jenolan stack up? Transport-wise, Jenolan is a problem for the casual backpacker without private car (ie: not as well-organized as Eisriesenwelt) but if one was prepared to come by bus and stay overnight in the various accommodation options, one would get a better chance of getting a good tour. With respect to cave conservation, Jenolan is by far the most advanced. The caves are kept clean and tourists are educated as to what NOT to do (I don't recall any warnings about touching speleothems on our European tours).

In terms of lighting, for sheer effect, the Eisriesenwelt experience is unique and could not be duplicated in a cave with calcite decorations. The Jenolan lighting is more carefully laid out than the Postonia lighting. The Postonia lighting is fairly flat and could do with more imagination and less *lampenflora*. As for guides' knowledge, again, Jenolan beats the Europeans. The Europeans are very good at their histories and their fairy stories but when it comes to speleology they are about fifty years behind. The odd thing is, all these countries have active speleologists but much of the literature seems to bypass the European cave guides. In term of value for money, I think all the tours were good value and would recommend them to anyone.