

# BLACK WATER RAFTING SELLS OUT TO THE GLOWWORM CAVE

- Peter Chandler



First, some explanation is required. Through the natural enough emergence of aggressive entrants into the adventure caving market, especially at Waitomo, Black Water Rafting Ltd (BWR) lost the exclusive use of the term. As a result, we re-branded as *The Legendary Black Water Rafting Company*. Since losing a hard won and short-lived Trademark in 2002, we have had comments such as “Why bother to protect a company name through a Trademark at all”?

Black Water Rafting, which began trading in September 1987, operated as a partnership of John Ash and myself for ten years. It then became a private company with our wives Martha and Libby involved. It certainly rode a wave of popularity catering for a need for an adventure cave product. The rather off beat idea of a wacky, but memorable, name was embraced by a generation of cavers and locals alike, and what was delivered to visitors was unlike their expectations, and generally far exceeded them – especially with the enthusiastic staff and continual addition of creature comforts now added to the modern day experience.

With this sixteen years of product evolution has come a huge maturing of the Tourism Industry in New Zealand, where activity based tourism has been recognized as almost an equal to the traditional ‘observing scenery’ visitor market. The proliferation of camper vans, cheap rental cars and backpacker coaches has certainly spread tourism out to the provinces, and provided associated benefits to those communities.

A down side of this though is when copycat products do not deliver, let alone exceed, expectations, and as a fly on the wall, comments are heard like – “Well I thought we were going Black Water Rafting, but I would hardly call it that”. When visitors on a tour coach are told, “We don’t do other companies products due to insurance”, it is usually obvious to the discerning passenger that the matter is more to do with commissions paid back to head office.

The first Black Water Rafting product, formerly Black Water One became ‘Black Labyrinth’ perhaps

conjuring up a network of confusingly convoluted passages that characterize the midstream of Ruakuri Cave – which I would say does so more than any other cave passageway in the Waitomo region. What is now renamed as ‘Black Abyss’, certainly described the sequel product, was introduced in 1991 as Black Water Two. The increased patronage for this product, between May and October 2003 is certainly an endorsement for the powers of marketing, even considering the increased numbers that the *Kiwi Experience Company* brought on this tour since again including Waitomo in overnight stays from April.

Of course, Ruakuri Cave (through which both BWR trips run) was long open to traditional cave tours until February 1987, when its landowners, frustrated with their dealings with the now deceased Tourist Hotel Corporation (THC), erected a trespass notice near a land boundary extrapolated underground. The THC certainly over-reacted, also closing Aranui cave for a short time – but once closed, the dry galleries of Ruakuri cave have been difficult to re-open a show cave once again. Certainly, for BWR, the closure the Ruakuri show cave operation had no negative effects, apart from the uncertainty associated with its future.



Tourists “Spellbound” on a tour with Pete Chandler

In 1999 BWR, having consolidated our operations at the Black Water Café (now the Long Black Café) and its adjacent operations base, faced something of a choice of getting involved with the Ruakuri redevelopment in a more formal manner, or with Derek Mason's Limestone Valley Tours. The outcome was that we did both! Putting the BWR stamp on Derek's product (upon his retirement as its operator) and re-labeling it as "Black Water Dry" certainly brought growth in visitation to this boutique trip. The overall experience was subsequently re-branded and marketed as Spellbound Tours, within the BWR operation. Likewise, having a stake in Ruakuri gave us a real chance for cooperation between the wet (BWR) and projected reopened dry (show cave) tours in Ruakuri Cave.

Enter Tourism Holdings, who after doing some investigations about Ruakuri Cave around ten years ago, with an earlier team of staff, went on to purchase the lease of the Waitomo Glowworm Cave in 1997. With the hugely successful Black Water Rafting operation and grand plans for Ruakuri as a re-opened 'traditional' show cave, it made sense for both tours in the one part of Ruakuri cave to be run by the same operator, with the areas of crossover of adjacent visitors to be managed together for the success of both of them. The stage is now set for this. BWR has been sold to Tourism Holdings (Van Watson remains as Operations Manager), while John Ash has assumed an ongoing role consulting on the re-opening of the Ruakuri Show Cave – hopefully, in the not-to-distant future.

As part of the deal, my wife Libby and I, after much consideration, opted to retain the Spellbound operation which is, of course, geographically separate, and doesn't require the BWR base and café infrastructure for its operation.

With support from the landowners Derek and Jill Mason, this was done because the product still has lots of growing to do. A license has been entered into for the low-level development, visitation and restoration of *Te Ana Oteatua* (translation = *The Spirit Cave*) formerly known as Mason's Dry Cave. After a land ownership change in 2000 the land above this cave (which will become the second cave used by Spellbound Tours) became part of a green belt owned by local Limestone Quarry McDonalds Lime, so providing a great opportunity for a positive relationship between the Tourism and Mining Industry!

Spellbound Tours now operates from the Waitomo Museum of Caves. The guiding staff presently consists Norm Fleming (an ACKMA Member, formerly a guide at Yarrangobilly Caves in New South Wales, and an early BWR Guide), Paul Hunt (a former THC Guide and *Lost World* guide, and a pioneer with Simon Hall in *Cave Canoeing*), and myself. There is still a few years of development work to do, as well as the daily visitors to look after, and certainly the many hugely positive comments from visitors and from people in the industry are a source of encouragement!



Peter and Libby Chandler with a new Spellbound Tours minibus outside the Waitomo Museum of Caves