



FROM MARGARET RIVER TO ROCKHAMPTON

– Kent Henderson

My wife, Marise, had never been to Western Australia, and so it was that we decided to spend the days between Christmas and New Year therein.

After a night in Fremantle, we motored down to Margaret River, where we were very kindly accommodated for a couple of nights by Robyn McBeath. Naturally, we gravitated to the odd cave, although I was ‘forced’ to visit several wineries as well....

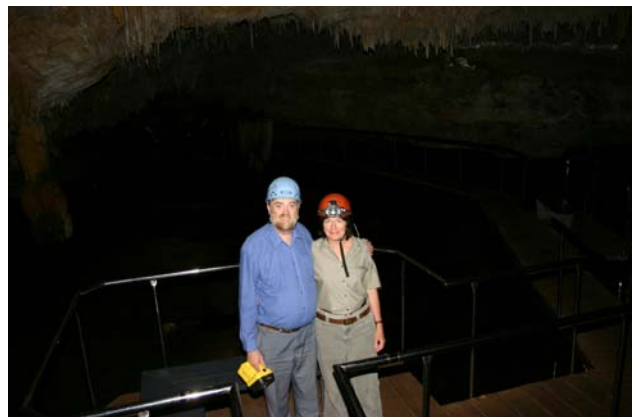
Our first day in the area, amidst considerable imbibing, featured a trip to Lake Cave. We were warmly welcomed by Pete Bell, and took a regular tour – very good as expected – and I again admired the skill of Pete and Robyn’s re-lighting of the cave, effected a couple of years ago. Marise liked the cave too! We then wound our way down to Jewel Cave near Augusta, for a private tour with Pete.

It remains a wonderful cave, which has been enhanced in recent years by considerable new track work. The challenge, when the funds become available (Robyn is working on it...) is to re-light the cave. Pete’s idea is to highlight features above the (long since dry) lake beds in the cave.

It should be great when it occurs, undoubtedly (at least, one hopes) before the 2009 ACKMA Conference

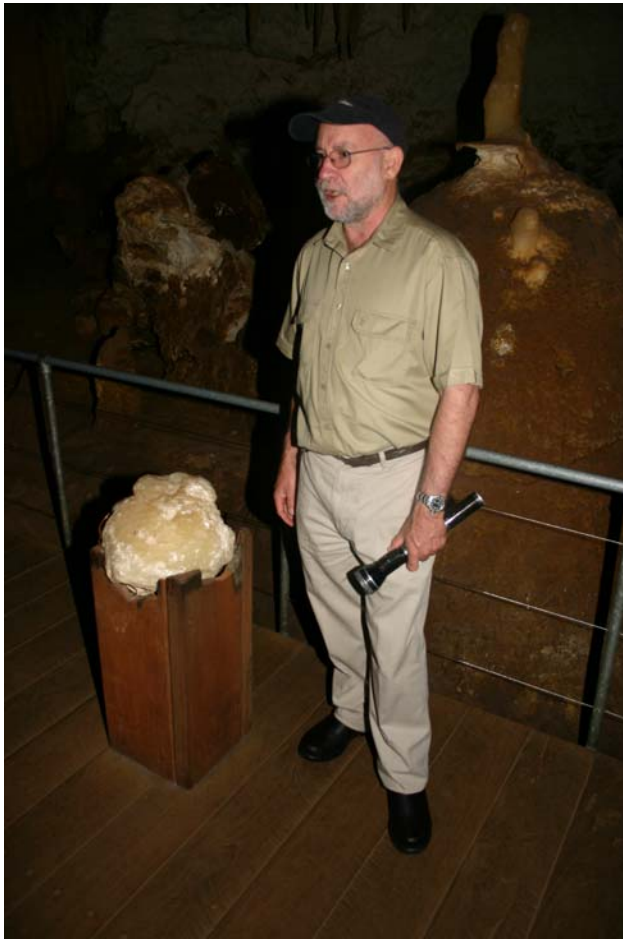
at Margaret River. The other challenge is to fund a re-vamped entrance and other cave entrance infrastructure, the current buildings being very ‘tired’ to say the least.

After a pleasant time at Jewel Cave, we progressed onto the Cape Leewin Lighthouse, and of course climbed the same on a tour to take in its sea great views, and those back over the surrounding karst landscape. Of particular note is a doline which supplies half the Augusta town water supply.



With Ann Wood in Calgardup Cave

Pete Bell in Jewel Cave, Augusta



The Lighthouse precinct, which is managed by the Augusta-Margaret River Tourist Association (in addition to the caves), is being updated, with an old lighthouse keeper's house being revamped as a Visitor's Centre. Pete proudly took us on a tour thereof – it will be great, and probably finished by the time you read this.

We also had a chat about pre and post conference tour possibilities for the 2009 ACKMA Conference. A pre-conference trip across the Nullarbor is a strong option, with a good post conference tour option being Yanchep and *The Pinnacles* (and maybe including Rottneest Island – see below).

We bid farewell to Pete for the moment – after all, he did have other things to do than show us around, though I couldn't imagine what – and we tottled off to the CALM estate caves back towards Margaret River. At Calgardup Cave we surprised the cave manager, Ann Wood, who very kindly interrupted very important report writing, to take us down her hole in the ground. Much extended tracking and railing has been put into this self-guided cave since my last visit – all wonderful stuff, and it was great to catch up with Ann!

After a few more wineries (of course..), we made it back to Margaret River for a most pleasant dinner that evening at a local restaurant, with Robyn and Pete. They were both off the next day for Sydney, for

a break, and to look at lighthouses! Many thanks Robyn and Pete for looking after us so well – most appreciated.

On the way back to Fremantle (via more wineries...sigh...) we called at Yallingup Cave, and I did a quick tour, having first had a chat with Mark Strugwell, the acting cave manager (vice Liam Kinsella, recently resigned).

Yallingup is an interesting cave, and one of great beauty. Its development/re-development has, unfortunately, been rather haphazard in the past – it contains varying amounts and types of pathways, boardwalks and handrails.

Historically, an overall plan for the whole cave seems to be missing – I could be wrong, of course. It definitely appears that bits have been done, in many stages, obviously when money has been available, but not necessarily in keeping with past improvements. This is certainly an area the new manager, when appointed, will hopefully address as a priority.

Back in Fremantle, on New Year's Eve, we took a day trip/tour to Rottneest Island – which I hadn't visited before. A wonderful place! Rottneest is totally karst, but no caves that I am aware of.

As a result, it possesses very interesting geology – mostly dune limestone, known locally as Tamala Limestone. Very young, it is less than 150,000 years old. In its cliff sections, this aeolianite shows well-developed cross-bedding with steeply dipping bedding planes, representing successive advancement of the dune slopes. The land is covered by only very thin soil.



Above: A view over some of the salt lakes on Rottneest Island.
Below: Signage at Ngilgi Cave, Yallingup



A limestone display in the excellent Rottneest Island Museum



The other, even younger, form of limestone on the island – Hershell Limestone – is found well inland around and under the island’s numerous salt lakes. It is mostly made up of shell fossils which have been sand-cemented by hundreds of years of weathering, and it is quite coarse and grainy. Dating suggests an age of only 5-6,000 years.

The said salt lakes on the island are plentiful. They were originally a linked lagoon system, once connected in several places to the open sea. They are heavily salty, 6-8 times more salty than sea water, and in places up to three metres above the modern sea level.



Dianne Vavryn at the entrance to Bat Cleft.

Most interesting karst features indeed! Oh, and of course, the other fame of Rottneest is its quokkas – small rat-sized marsupials. And yes, we got to pat one...

I was back in Melbourne for about a week before flying off to Rockhampton for a few days on business, staying once again with Dianne Vavryn at *The Caves*. On what amounted to my only spare evening, we ascended Mt. Etna to visit *Bat Cleft* – which I had done several times in the past, but I’d never been there before in ‘Bat Season’.

Bat Cleft is a major maternity cave, and for the past twenty-seven years Di has been leading tours up the mountain in January and February (three to four tours per week) to see the bat emergence.

Needless to say, Di knows a bit about bats, the local flora and fauna, not to mention the fact she knows more than a tad about caves too. Oddly, on the night I went (it was a scheduled tour night) I was the only starter – every other night she had sizable parties. Clearly, the locals must have known I was coming.

So, up the mountain we went. In recent years the Qld National Parks and Wildlife Service has done some major upgrading of the tracks and handrails up the mountain – very well so, too.



A view of the bat emergence

A certainly disreputable character slithering into feeding position at Bat Cleft



Above: A certainly disreputable character slithering into feeding position at Bat Cleft.

Below: A Rottnest Island quokka



Upon arrival, Di put on a harness, and locked on to the wall right at the cave mouth. Each visitor, in turn, is also harnessed, whence he or she braves the entrance themselves. Some fairly severe OH&S rules here... Mind you, being surrounded by snakes is not

for the faint-hearted – there were plenty there for a bat dinner (and they don't starve, either!)

I spent more than a few minutes watching where I put my feet. Di knows most of the regular snakes from their markings. She hasn't quite got to the point of given each its own name, but she certainly knows which is which.

The bat emergence is, to say the least, spectacular. One positions oneself right in the middle of their exit flight path. As expected, a great many came very close, but rarely actually hit me.

About 150,000 emerge each night during the peak season! As I was the lone tourist, I got to stand at the entrance considerably longer than the average punter. Amazing stuff! Many thanks Di for once again looking after me so well!



Our tour group gathering at Lake Cave, Margaret River



Obeying all the occupational health and safety rules at Bat Cleft