

A view inside the Interpretation Area – Congo Caves Visitor's Centre



## THE GLORY OF CONGO CAVES

– Kent Henderson

A view inside the Congo Visitor's Centre



In late October, on my way home from Canada via London, I dropped into Johannesburg primarily to check out a few caves. The glory of South Africa is Congo Caves, of which much more later, but my first stop was two caves in easy striking distance from Jo'burg.

The first I visited was Sterkfontein Caves which are within a very important prehistoric site located about 45 minutes drive north-west of the city. The cave is in dolomite, in the region known as *The Cradle of Human Kind* – A World Heritage Area (see

Steve Bourne's review of the *Field Guide* to the area elsewhere in this Journal).

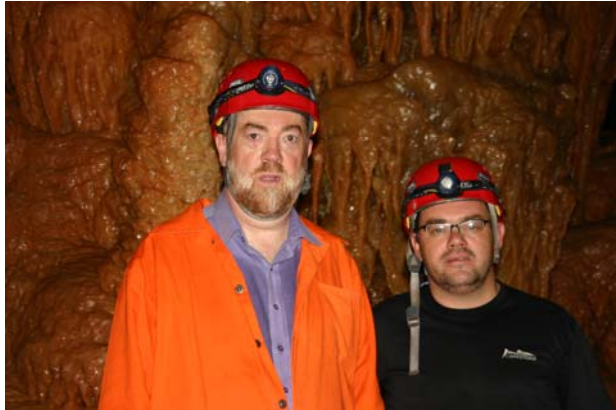
Sterkfontein was discovered in 1896 by a contractor who was blasting in search of lime. He found it, and as a result the cave was very largely denuded of all speleothems. However, its fame rests elsewhere. In 1936 the noted paleontologist Dr. Robert Bloom discovered the skull of a hominid at this site, the famous *Mrs. Ples* (*Australopithecus africanus*).

Despite the ascribed name, the skull was from a male hominid, and proved mankind lived in South Africa more than 2.5 million years ago. Since this first find, the cave has proved to be one of the richest sites of early hominid fossils in Africa. In 1998 the world's first complete hominid fossil of a full skeleton was found at Sterkfontein. The area was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1999.

Upon arriving, I first walked through probably the best Interpretive Centre I have ever visited (and I've been in a great many, of course...). The breath and quality of the displays was stunning. After the Visitor Centre, the cave was largely disappointing.

Due to the early damage I have already referred too, it is largely an 'empty hole' in the ground. The cave has two levels. The upper one was open to the surface for millions of years and contains the

prehistoric remains. The lower level has an underground lake (which was not very exciting...), and this section is open to the public. The cave infrastructure is okay, although there is no switching in the lighting.



Kent Henderson and Hein Gerstner in Cango Two

What I did rather like was a bit of excellent *in situ* interpretation. Shortly after entering, one passes a locked high gate to the right – beyond which is the fossil-laden upper section of the cave. At this point is a TV screen, which the guide operates – giving a very good short video (of perhaps five minutes) on the fossils beyond the gate. Excellent stuff! I can see great potential applications for analogous interpretive experiences in Australasia – particularly in Victoria Fossil Cave at Naracoorte.

My next stop was the nearby Wondercave. The cave is an ad-on to a privately-owned Animal Safari Park – the cave is within the park boundary. From a great visitor centre at Sterkfontein to none – sadly the Wondercave visitor centre burnt down about twelve months ago, but will soon be re-built. Wondercave consists of a single very large chamber. One enters this chamber by a forty metre descent from an elevator from the surface. It is quite highly decorated, with some stalagmites up to fifteen metres high.



The Ticket Office – Cango Visitor's Centre

The tour consists of a circumnavigation of the chamber. As the cave was only opened in 1991, the infrastructure is adequate, but has powerful lighting with no switching, with attendant *lampenflora*. My young Afrikaner guide had been in

his job for several years, and clearly his enthusiasm had waned. However, but his tour was 'okay' – if peppered with considerably more fantasy than science.

The following day I flew from Johannesburg to George in the Western Cape area, to visit the main aim of my South African sojourn, the fabulous Cango Caves (located twenty-nine kilometres north of Oudtshoorn – roughly halfway between Cape Town and Port Elizabeth). The Cave Manager, ACKMA member Hein Gerstner (who many will recall from his attendance at the 1995 ACKMA Conference in Tasmania), very kindly met me at the airport, and drove me inland to Oudtshoorn, where he looked after me for the next two nights.

Cango Caves were discovered by a cattle herder in 1780, and first explored by Jacobus van Zyl and others in the same year. They were opened for tours in 1891. They lie in the foothills of the Swartberg Mountain Range, and there is certainly evidence that were used by man in pre-historic times.

However, these early inhabitants appear to have never ventured much past the entrance area, as no human remains have been found further in. The entrance to the caves was originally rich in bushman paintings, but with time these have been damaged, although a couple of good examples remain.

Cango is in a Cambrian limestone belt which is 1.5 km wide and about 16km long, laid down about 750 million years ago. The caves were formed during the last twenty million years, first being water filled for a very long period. Draining rivers cut into the rock and reached the level of the caves about four million years ago.



Infrastructure in Cango One

After meeting me at the airport, Hein took me straight to the caves, and toured me through its large three storey Visitors Centre, which was built only a few years ago. Visitors access the various levels by circuitous ramps.

The Centre includes an obligatory tourist shop, offices, a restaurant, a theatre (where the wonderful Cango DVD is regularly played) and an excellent Interpretation Area (mostly designed by Hein) – it is equal to the best I've seen.

A massive shield – very common in Congo



Next it was into the caves themselves. I must explain there are actually five Congo Caves, imaginatively (!) called Congo One, Two, Three, Four and Five. Congo One is the Show Cave, which is 'divided' into two.

The first half is your 'typical' show cave with guided tours. The back half is the Adventure Cave section, which uniquely is the only 'Adventure Cave' I have seen which is electrically-lit! Congo Two (also known as 'Wonder Cave') is at the back of Congo One, and connected. It is a true wild cave, and rarely visited – I was honoured to be its first 'intruder' for well over a year. Congo Three runs off Congo Two, and so on – you get the picture. Congo Two—Five were only discovered in the 1972–1975 period.

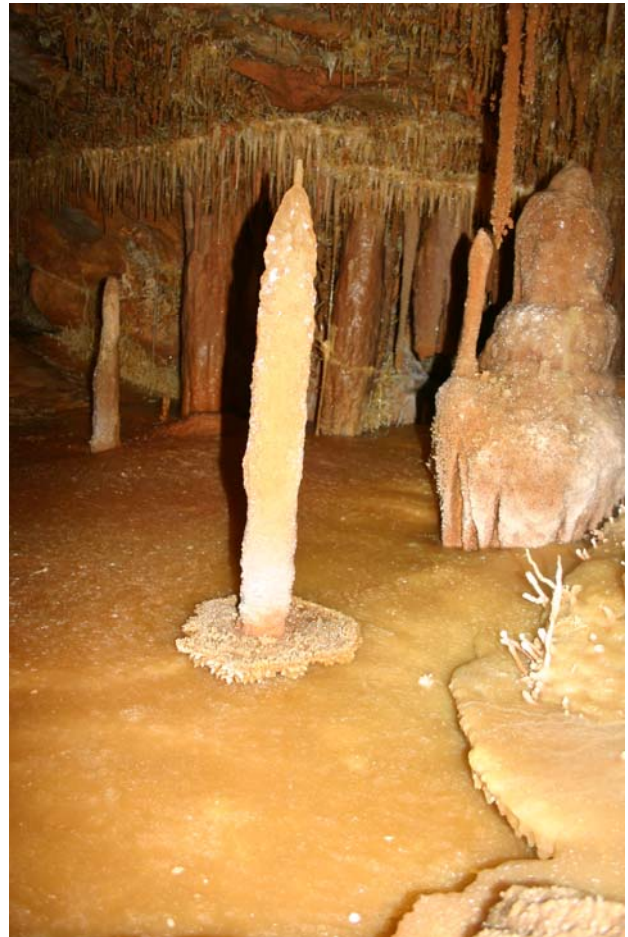


Helicmites – common in Congo Two in particular

Congo has two used entrances. The first is a large natural entrance (used as such today), and the second is a man-made cutting, now used as the exit. In Apartheid times, the exit tunnel was used exclusively as the entry for blacks and coloureds, who then merged with the whites who entered through the main entrance. They then toured together as a group. Happily, this lunacy has long since gone.

Hein sent me off on a regular tour with one of his guides. Upon entering, one comes into a medium sized chamber, to the right of which is a static display of the ancient San people whose habitation of the area finished about 500 years ago. There are a few extant art works in this chamber, but they are strategically left un-illuminated – a most wise management policy...

The tour they proceed into in the first of two massive chambers, Van Zyl's Hall (named after the first explorer, as noted above). It is over seventy metres long, thirty-five metres high, and seventeen metres wide. And the decoration is equally massive, with areas of huge, stunning decoration.



The 'Roman Candle' – Congo Two

Our guide had a well-rehearsed (and I suspect largely unvarying) patter, which was hardly riveting. While he dealt adequately with the cave's history and science; fantasy formed a substantial part of his monologue.

Massive helictes – Congo Two



We then traversed a wide passage into the second huge chamber, Botha's Hall – if anything bigger than the first! As indeed was the decoration, with one column standing at about fifteen metres. Stunning! A large section off Botha's Hall – the *Throne Room* – was particularly packed with enormous active decoration. Other narrower passages, relatively-speaking, are then traversed – although there is nothing particularly 'narrow' in Congo One...

More excellent decoration is viewed, until we come to the end of the show cave tour in the *Drum Room*. The name filled me with foreboding, and my fears were soon realised. To the side of this smallish chamber are some thick-ish stals which the guide proceeded to beat to undoubtedly an 'excellent' African drum rhythm. Of course, I had an instant 'cardiac arrest'. Oh dear... The guide, at the start of the tour, had commenced with the expected finger wagging about not touching the formations – yet here he was at it! Up to that point, the tourists had done as exhorted, but not surprisingly this changed. I watched – after the 'drumming' they proceeded to paw every piece of decoration they could get close enough to. Needless to say, Kent was not a happy camper at this point – more on this shortly.



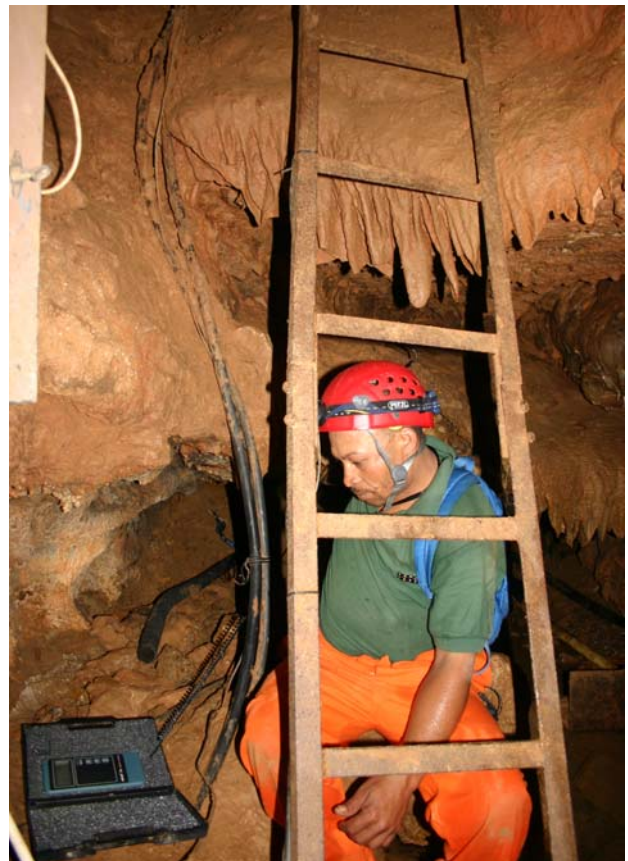
Huge decoration in Congo One

So, a bit on the infrastructure, but before I pontificate, one must understand the Congo management structure. Hein is the manager of the caves, yet to a large extent, he is not allowed to

manage them! The management authority is the local Oudtshoorn Town Council, which regularly sees more personnel changes than I have had hot dinners...

The Council formerly used the profits from Congo, easily the biggest tourist attraction in the region, to fund local public works – schools and the like. Now it applies the funds to exclusively run the municipality (salaries, etc). While not bad in itself, they have very largely ignored the needs of their 'cash cow' cave – a bit reminiscent of the attitudes of many private cave owners in America, frankly. Hein is almost constantly 'at war' with his council 'bosses' (who apparently often change) and rarely achieves a major 'win'. Hein has no ability to 'hire and fire' staff – he must take whoever the Council appoints!

The Council has a policy of appointing unemployed (often unemployable/uneducated...) black youths as guides or to other staff positions. While a laudable policy perhaps, it is analogous to appointing a gutter sweeper as chairman of a stock exchange... One recent guide was an alcoholic who only occasionally turned up for work – he actually died – the only way Hein could be shed of him! And so it goes – just to get the Council to provide toilet paper is a major battle. It is an appalling situation and I do not know how Hein puts up with it – yes I do actually, it is his unbounded dedication to the caves. Thank God for Hein, or Congo would indeed be in deep trouble.



Johannes Bezuidenhout at the pump site  
– entrance to Congo Three

The pump – entrance to Congo Three



As a result, the cave guides and other staff seem very largely an unmotivated lot – though I did meet a few good ones amongst them, but they appear a small minority, sadly. If a staff member wishes to ‘sit on his/her bum’ it is no issue – sacking is almost unheard of. Sigh...

I now return to the infrastructure. Remember we are dealing with, in my view, one of the great show caves of the world, and one of South Africa’s premier tourist destinations – which gets about 250,000 visitors per year. The lighting is tired, mostly massive parafloues, with no switching. As a result Congo has some of the worst *lampenflora* I have seen.



Stunning straw and helictite – Congo Two

But it is not Hein’s fault; he has pleaded with his superiors for several years to be allowed to do remedial work – they have only recently given him permission to tackle the problem. Thus, scaffolding has now been erected in Van Zyl’s Hall, and the work will proceed over the slower visitation months.

The cave desperately needs re-lighting, and considerable trackwork. Most of the pathways are compacted sediments. Raised tracking in places would be most beneficial. In Van Zyl’s Hall, for example, tourists can (and do...) walk anywhere in the Chamber. A raised track, even a ‘roped off’ track, confining tourists, would greatly reduce impacts. They do not need to walk everywhere to see the Chamber, nothing is concealed. And new lighting and switching will undoubtedly reduce the *lampenflora* problem significantly.



Crystal Basins – Congo Two

Congo has the money for re-lighting, and upgrading. The problem is getting the Council to spend it – there many well be a public utility in Oudtshoorn to use it on... Talk about ‘biting the hand that feeds it’! I have expounded the virtues of Neil Kell and Andy Spate for lighting and infrastructure advice, and hopefully Hein will be able to get them over to Congo in 2008 to write reports. He desperately needs as much pressure on the Council that can be mustered.

Returning to the ‘playing of the stals’ in the Drum Chamber, I naturally drew this matter to Hein’s attention immediately. He had no idea it was still happening – it was supposed to have ceased over a year previously (remember he has little direct influence over the guides). Anyway, he assures me it has now stopped. As I suggested to him – put a real African Drum in the chamber for the guides to play, or put a tape recording in there...anything but belting the decoration!

After the Congo One Show Cave, we then did the ‘Adventure Tour’ replete with crawls and squeezes and excellent decoration – and electric lights most of the way! It was great, and quite energetic. Not surprisingly it is also very popular. Hein very kindly arranged a Permit for me to visit Congo Two (again, his ‘bosses’ – who know nothing about cave management and care even less – had to approve...).

The static anthropological display in Cango One



One of the senior guides (and cave technician), Johannes Bezuidenhout, was given the task of taking me through, and Hein also accompanied us for some of it. He is a lovely man, a very dedicated to the caves. Cango Two (Wonder Cave, as it is also most aptly named) is stunning, and a very energetic traverse, I have to say! It was discovered only in 1972 when cavers spent six months chiseling through twenty metres of rock to get to it. The range and size of decoration in Cango Two is breathtaking. Its wonders include fine speleothems of many types, even bright yellow columns (sulphur leaching).

Near the end of Cango Two, Johannes led me down a number of constricted grovels to the entrance of Cango Three, and kindly (or not so kindly...!?) offered to give me access. At the bottom of the 'grovel' one comes to a small pool, the start of a streamway. There lies the pump. To access Cango Three, the pump is started to drain the water out of a completely water-filled 150 metre passage linking

Cango Two and Three. One then has eighteen minutes to crawl and squeeze through this passage to Cango Three before the water again fills up the passage! Hmmm...

I respectfully declined the opportunity to drown myself! On the way out, incidentally, one must exit the same way. The guide manning the pump at the other end starts it at a pre-appointed time to allow the eighteen minute crawl out. I am advised it is most unwise to be a few minutes late... Cango Three is reportedly as magnificent as Cango Two, some say even more so.

At the end of the day, Hein asked me to briefly talk to his guides, and I addressed a number of issues (the 'drum beating' being one). I must say I did not feel overwhelmed by their enthusiasm. We did give them the 'carrot' of one guide attending the Guides Conference at Jenolan next February. Hopefully, Hein can swing this, he will certainly be trying. Hein will also do his level best to get to the 18th ACKMA Conference at Margaret River in May 2008 – I sincerely hope he makes it.

I had a great time at Cango, and I am most grateful to Hein and staff for kindly looking after me so well. Cango is in great hands – if only Hein was allowed to use them! Cango has no environmental monitoring in place – another thing Hein has pleaded for. Sigh... Hein (and others) are working hard to get the caves removed from the Council's clutches to the management of the Provincial Government and, if achieved, this should help the situation considerably. We live in hope.

Cango is without doubt one of the world's greatest show cave experiences. It deserves much, much better than that to which it is currently subjected.



A view of the 'Throne Room' – Botha's Hall, Cango One