

20TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SUBTERRANEAN BIOLOGY

– Peter Buzzacott



Predjama Castle and cave, Slovenia.

The Cave Divers Association of Australia (CDA) often support scientific projects related to cave conservation, and one recent project considers microbial mantle communities in Murra El Elevation, a flooded cave underneath the Nullarbor Plain in Western Australia. Over six months a team of CDA divers observed a variation in the prevalence of these communities, which look like wisps of pale algae (divers fondly refer to them as ‘snot’). Theories about the cause of this ranged from having something to do with water temperature, to being a seasonal cyclic event. The CDA agreed to sponsor production of a poster and attendance for one at the 20th International Conference of Subterranean Biology in Slovenia, in September 2010, so I got on the internet and booked an apartment in the capital, Ljubljana.

The view from the window of our *Adria Airlines* flight was one of snow-covered mountains, forests and lush, green countryside stretching to the horizon. This was my first trip to Eastern Europe and so, with my pre-trip preparation limited to re-watching *Borat*, I was delighted to discover that Ljubljana is actually a modern, thriving city steeped in history and culture. The public transport system is efficient, shopping and banking was a breeze, and (like the majority of Europe I went on to discover), Wi-Fi internet is free in many bars and eateries.

The conference was held in Postojna, one hour from Ljubljana by train, which cost just \$10 each way. From the train station there was a free shuttle by mini-bus but I chose to walk and to soak-up the Eastern Europe ambiance. The venue was an

impressive facility built beside the entrance to *Postojnska Jama*, a busy tourism destination catering for 5000 visitors per day, all keen to see the extensive decorations and especially the ‘human fish’, a remarkable half-man, half-fish up to a foot long that lives in the cave. So great is the interest in this wee beast that a modern vivarium has been built near to the main cave and visitors now have the option to pay for a separate experience, getting up-close not only to the *Proteus Aquinas*, but to beetles, cave shrimp and amphipods. There is a touch-tank, interactive exhibits, educational information in every direction and, like everything at Postojnska, it was all in four languages.

The conference could not have been better from my point of view. There was a wide range of speleobiology posters and presentations and some interest was shown in our Nullarbor observations. My main objective achieved, it was time to explore the two main attractions: Postojna cave and the cave below nearby Predjama Castle. I was especially curious to see the main cave after asking one conference attendee what it was like and, despite his considerable international experience of tourist caves, he’d been momentarily lost for words before gushing ‘*it was mind-blowing*’. I really hadn’t had much time to do any research before my trip so I didn’t know what to expect but, after visiting some of our best Australian show caves, I couldn’t imagine how it could be mind-blowing. ‘*Perhaps he is easily impressed*’ I thought to myself, buying a ticket and joining the queue for the hourly tour.



Walkway in Postojna Cave.

We shuffled forward on the appointed hour, en masse, and I found myself on an underground railway platform. The open train before me soon filled up and pulled away, disappearing into a tunnel ahead of us. Another long-train appeared and we climbed in. I was pleased to be up the front near the engine driver and, as we too pulled away, a third train pulled in behind us and began filling up. The train quickly picked up speed, we burst out of the tunnel into a large chamber filled with huge decorations from ceiling to floor, then around a

sharp corner we drove into a carved passage just inches wider and taller than the train, then weaved around natural pillars, stalagmites, in and out of passages, large rooms, faster and faster we seemed to go. Another train filled to capacity shot passed us heading the other way, people waved their arms in the air like a Mexican wave but for seconds only before heading into another tunnel. Five, ten, twelve minutes this went on for, like the most excellent roller coaster ride I have been on, for over two kilometers! I can now say with certainty, it was indeed mind-blowing.



A view from Predjama Castle.

The train pulled into a platform, we disembarked, and I wandered over to the English-speaking group. Tours in Slovene, German and Italian were also on offer, and followed the same route, separated by a few minutes so as not to speak over each other. We set off and were warned from the outset that the tour would be long and strenuous. In fact, it was, and we walked for about an hour solid along well-constructed non-slip footpaths. The extent of the cave is quite remarkable. Our guide explained that flash photography was not allowed, but that non-flash shots would be okay as long as we didn't dawdle and hold the group up, because we had to keep moving to catch the train back in an hour. The hour soon passed, during which I picked-up half-a-dozen sweet wrappers dropped by inconsiderate visitors, and I watched at least a dozen people deliberately run their hands over the decorations whenever we passed close enough to do so. This was despite repeated reminders not to touch. There is a lot to be said, at such times, for a ruler across the knuckles.

The ride out was equally thrilling and this time I videoed it. Playing it back later you can hear me shouting to the person next to me, above the noise,

'THIS IS AWESOME'. From memory, this is the only cave in which I can recall shouting with joy.

Next, we caught the free shuttle to Predjama Castle, which resembles something straight out of a Disney movie. There are guided tours available, or self-guided wandering is permitted (my personal preference), and the castle is built both into and above a large natural cave. Each room has a display of one sort of another, such as an armoury, dining room, or the very touristy (but nevertheless fascinating) torture chamber. On the top floor I came across a copper water-collection set-up, strategically placed to catch water dripping from the roof.

Our guide called us to the assembly point, distributed torches and we made our way down the steep, ancient stairs to the cave below the castle. A large iron gate from another century barred the entrance till we passed through it and milled around expectantly. There were nine of us, including the guide, and five torches. Miss Tomina locked the gate behind us, we switched our lights on and away we went, following a guano covered stone path. As many as 300,000 horseshoe bats were thought to have lived in this cave sometime centuries ago but today just 3000 reside here, possibly remnants that survived the white-nose syndrome when it swept across Europe (that's one theory, anyway). We climbed up ladders, ducked under low rock overhangs, and generally got a taste of 'real caving', all the while accompanied by our chatty, enthusiastic Slovenian guide, narrating in multiple languages.

The two caves could not be more disparate and I enjoyed both immensely, not to mention the trip to Slovenia generally. The people were friendly, English was spoken everywhere, at least rudimentarily, the infrastructure and customs were more than adequate for an Australian to just show up and get along comfortably. Plus, the show caves were breathtaking. If you're heading over to Europe, or looking for a unique holiday, then I thoroughly recommend Slovenia, and I congratulate the conference organisers for hosting a well-organised event, jam-packed with highlights.



The Conference Photo, taken on the steps near Postojna Cave entrance.