

# WAITOMO GLOWWORM CAVES VISITOR CENTRE

## rises from the ashes

– Greg Martin



The Minister of Conservation, Hon Kate Wilkinson, celebrated the full opening of the new Waitomo Glowworm Cave Visitor Centre at a wonderful function on the evening of 21 October 2010. The doors are now open at the stunning new Waitomo Glowworm Caves Visitor Centre, marking a new beginning for this iconic tourist cave destination in New Zealand.

The original centre was devastated in a fire in 2005 and since then Tourism Holdings Limited (THL), the Ruapuha Uekaha Hapu Trust (the *Hapu*) and the Department of Conservation (DOC) have worked together to create a centre that reflects the local culture and the environment.

THL CEO Grant Webster says, 'We are very excited to have the Waitomo Glowworm Caves Visitor Centre open to the public and for visitors in the area to be able to enjoy this spectacular new building.

'We hope this multi-million dollar complex will become an iconic New Zealand tourist attraction in its own right. The Waitomo Glowworm Caves provides a uniquely New Zealand experience and we believe this complex will greatly enhance visitors' experience at Waitomo.

THL has invested significantly in this iconic tourism centre which will be the first of its kind on this side of the globe, and promises to deliver an even more exceptional experience to our customers.'

The design reflects the weaved shape of a 'hinaki' (eel catcher) and the association that the local people have with eeling near the caves. The *Hapu* has been strongly involved in the design of the building and descendants of *Tanetinorau*, the Maori Chief who first explored the Caves in 1887, still guide visitors through the Caves today.

A Maori *Poupou*, which was first carved in 1987, now stands renewed at the entrance to the Waitomo Glowworm Caves Visitor Centre. It depicts *Tane*

*Mahuta*, the God of the Forest, guardian of the caves and their inhabitants. The Waitomo Glowworm Caves Visitor Centre has been designed to create a minimal intervention environmental building that provides a lightweight canopy. The top structure canopy follows the curve of the Waitomo stream while the base of the building reflects the contours of the land.

Christopher Kelly, Architecture Workshop says, 'The canopy gridshell of the Waitomo Glowworm Caves Visitor Centre follows the curve of the Waitomo stream. It reinforces the idea for this project of a simple lightweight 'sky shell' to contrast the subterranean cave space that is moulded out of the ground. The innovative use of New Zealand Radiata pine for the grid shell structure in combination with the transparent cladding of the canopy is internationally significant.'

The new building offers a variety of facilities and experiences to Waitomo visitors. A restaurant spanning two levels seats up to 250 customers and includes exclusive dining area for groups. There is also a 50 seat café. Added extras include an exhibition space, which is currently exhibiting *Building an Icon* around the creation of this new Visitor Centre, and a theatre where viewers are taken on an emotionally connecting journey with a wonderful introduction to the people of Waitomo through a short film created by *thedownlowconcept*. A gift shop offers a large variety of high quality gifts and souvenirs, including a Kiwi gallery featuring local artists.

The complex serves as a fabulous access point to the stunning Waitomo Glowworm Caves experience – including the boat ride under a starry sky of glowworms and a tour through limestone caves that have been created over millions of years.



The Waitomo Caves Choir entertains guests at the Official Opening.

After five years of negotiations, design and construction, it is great to have this facility now fully functional and ready to receive the many visitors that come to enjoy the natural wonders of the Waitomo Glowworm Caves.