

# LIMESTONE TOURISM

## – A SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ODYSSEY

– Sasa Kennedy

As we all know there is nothing a caver, cave manager or cave guide likes more on holidays than spending time underground – just for a bit of variety – but there are other activities worthy of consideration in limestone regions, mostly related to the happy coincidence that limestone underlying shallow soils is the perfect terrain on which to grow grapes.

So when a family of Jenolan guides (plus one non-caving partner) recently visited Naracoorte and Kelly Hill Caves we managed to find an array of additional distractions and pastimes such as visiting vineyards, visiting more vineyards, bushwalking, visiting distilleries, eating marron and kayaking that would also keep the non-caver happy.



An Alexandra Cave tour, Naracoorte.

Our first stop was Naracoorte, where it was great to see the changes which have taken place since our last visit, about six years ago. I had been keen to see the developments in the Victoria Fossil Cave, having heard about the infrastructure changes, but was equally impressed by the changes to the way the Bat and Blanche Caves are shown.

What were previously two separate tours, one focusing on history, the other on bat ecology and behaviour, have been combined in a way which greatly adds to the experience.

Blanche Cave adds a further dimension to the bat story, as bats sometimes stop for a drink there on their way out of an evening, and it also gives added faunal interest with the interpretation of a relatively new palaeontological dig in the cave.

The historical tour of Blanche Cave also benefits from the change as (for my taste, at any rate) it is seen to better advantage artificially-lit than in mixed light. I suspect the new arrangement also knocks on the head any problems with visitors being disappointed at not going in a 'real' cave during the bat tour. As we all know, not everybody listens to the details given when purchasing a tour...

The Victoria Fossil Tour is now a more satisfying experience than previously. I distinctly remember six years ago, regardless of excellent interpretation from our guide, being intensely

frustrated that I could not get a close look at the dig site; also trying to get a clear view of the skeleton models with a bar in front of them. The skeletons, from terraced steps with raked seating, are now clearly visible and, as previously, dramatically lit.

Access adjacent to the pit, via new steps and a platform, makes for a much more satisfying experience than before. Everyone has ample time to sticky-beak and photograph the bones, as the commentary can be clearly heard from this platform, just behind the guide. My observation was that the other visitors were just as fascinated as we were. Well done Naracoorte!

This was also an opportunity for us to have a look at Naracoorte's beginner caving trip – Stick-Tomato Cave – having completed the intermediate trip, Fox Cave, on a previous occasion. The trip was good fun, with a particularly challenging slot squeeze and climb towards the end of the tour.

Though it was completely optional it is difficult for non-cavers to know exactly what they are letting themselves in for and I confess I would not like to be the sole guide on this tour with someone having an anxiety attack in the slot. Having said that, all did succeed and were very pleased with themselves afterwards. We loved it and so did the rest of the group!

Many thanks to everyone at Naracoorte for the warm welcome and arranging everything for us. As soon as we left we started hearing reports that the town was threatened with flooding and we hope there was no damage to the caves or staff homes (there wasn't, happily – Ed).



Tiny shawls in Kelly Hill Cave, Kangaroo Island.

Cliff caves at Rocky River, Kangaroo Island.



Nearby limestone tourism attractions lie mainly within the glorious belt of *terra rossa* soil known to wine lovers as the Coonawarra, but *en route* it is well worth stopping in at the Yulgilbar Wood Gallery opposite the Naracoorte entrance. Suffice to say the variety of red gum growing on the local limestone makes beautiful furniture, but there wasn't any room left in the boot after the visit to the Coonawarra, so we had to settle for a few picture frames.

Between Alexandra Cave in the morning and the adventure tour in the afternoon we managed to fit in wine tastings at Wynns Estate, Balnaves, the Coonawarra Wine Gallery, Leconfield, Parkers and the wonderful Katnook Estate – is this a record?

For the record: we recommend adding some Sparkling Cabernet to the Sparkling Shiraz in your cellar, but Sparkling Merlot is an abomination and should be banned. And Katnook remains our favourite Coonawarra cellar door, followed by the ever reliable Wynns and classy Leconfield.



Seals in the cave at Admirals Arch, Kangaroo Island.

*En route* to Kelly Hill Caves we were to pick up David in Adelaide but first there were the limestone coast vineyards to consider. First up was Henrys Drive, with a nice range of reds and sparkling wines, at quite reasonable prices, followed by Padthaway Estate, a long established vineyard, which it must be said took us by surprise. A nice old converted stone stable was the venue, so far pretty typical, but as fellow imbibers will know, the average host at a wine tasting is an immaculately presented, bejewelled lady of a certain demeanour. Not on this occasion – this time we got the delightful 'bouncing girl'! Possibly bouncing due to the number of energy drinks consumed in a rather short period of time (it was a hot day...), or maybe it was just genetic.

Anyway it made for a highly entertaining wine tasting, especially when I apologised for using the spittoon (designated driver) and thus insulting her delicious wines and she replied by saying 'oh, don't worry, my dog loves it' (she was referring to the dregs) after which I felt compelled to finish each rather generous sample, in order to save the dog a hangover! Interestingly, she was highly knowledgeable about the wines and we ended up buying more here than just about anywhere else. It always pays to have a distinctive style in the tourism industry!



L to R: Richard Kennedy, Stephen Kennedy and Nick Heath at Kelly Hill Caves.

Onwards to Adelaide and a delightful dinner at a Malaysian Restaurant in the Central Markets, which I think indicates that I haven't forgotten Sarawak just yet. The next morning we went off for a bit of culture at the Art Gallery of South Australia, where I was blown away by the *Desert Country* exhibition. If you like Aboriginal art don't miss this exhibition, which is soon to travel around the states.

Then on to our next (smallish, no known caves) bit of karst, at McLaren Vale. Tapestry Wines had some nice shiraz and Serafino had an interesting range of Italian style wines and quality fortified reds. The best entertainment value here was, without a doubt, Hugh Hamilton Wines, with their 'Black Sheep' range of wines and matching t-shirts – also stunning views to gaze on while picking your poison. I was rather attracted to 'The Madam' Sparkling Merlot (see above) with its t-shirt featuring a black ewe in fishnets and carrying a whip, but settled for some Ratbag Merlot and Scallywag Chardonnay.



Our next stop was Cape Jervis, for the Kangaroo Island Ferry – and some much needed exercise to work off some of the wine. The walk to Breakneck Bay at Deep Creek Conservation Park took care of this requirement and also provided stunning views to our next destination.

Kangaroo Island is a glorious place, if a trifle hot in summer, and Kelly Hill Caves are, without a doubt, a must-see for karst lovers. The setting, among tall eucalypts, is beautiful and the ambience relaxed. There are some nice self-guided walk options to take in getting to and from the cave, one of which shows the original entrance.

The current sheltered cave entrance has a wealth of informative signs to occupy visitors waiting to do a tour. Once in the cave the new lighting, while not yet quite completed, shows its very pretty features off to good advantage. The cave is highly decorated and has an interesting history.

The adventure tour is well organised, varied and very popular, with a father and son combo on our tour returning for a second time in as many days. There was something for everyone, including highly decorated sections, fossils and palaeo dig sites, some scrambles, climbs and a few challenging squeezes. The visitors all got right into it and were constantly asking questions of Nick Heath, Cave Manager at Kelly Hill – and a most entertaining and well-informed adventure guide. The camaraderie on the tour also made for a fun trip.

The bushwalk from Kelly Hill to Hanson Bay passes through a range of ecosystems, ending up at one of the most beautiful beaches I've seen – a rather wild surf beach to the left, a heath-clad headland and then a sheltered cove; just magic. At 18kms return trip, it was nice of Nick to do a car shuffle for us, enabling us to squeeze in some sea lion observations at Seal Bay afterwards. Nick was a great host, organising two fabulous evenings of caving for us and he was also full of helpful suggestions as to which walks would suit us best and how to avoid the day-tour crowds. Many thanks to all the lovely staff at Kelly Hill.

The Snake Lagoon walk (also recommended by Nick) is a stunning trek along the Rocky River, being nestled below cliffs laced with ancient caves, with easily seen decorations, and again finishes at a magnificent wild beach. It was a wonderful hike, although not a snake nor a lagoon was seen, the lagoon currently being empty.

For a contrast to the karst areas *Remarkable Rocks* are aptly named, being a series of granite monoliths. For tourist free pix (magnificent) get there early! Nearby *Admirals Arch* is a huge limestone sea cave, full of New Zealand Fur Seals when we visited. Assorted walks connect around the Cape de Couedic Lighthouse, heathlands and nearby Weirs Cove.

Having filled the boot (and some postage boxes) long before Kangaroo Island we were not planning on visiting any more wineries but a distillery... now, there was something different. We took home a range of lovely liqueurs, some

incorporating bush food ingredients. Who needs foot room when driving from South Australia to the Blue Mountains anyway? We also collected some KI honey and KI eucalyptus products (good for guides with over stressed vocal chords). Stopping for lunch at Andermel's Marron Cafe (yummy yabbies and seafood platter, with bush tucker sauces) we couldn't resist one last wine tasting at the adjacent Two Wheeler Creek Wines and were somewhat surprised how well they shaped up after the more renowned wine regions we had just visited. 'Must be on limestone' was the conclusion we drew! And we squeezed a few more bottles in...

One last highlight was kayaking on the Harriet River, inspired by a certain canoe tour in Margaret River a few years ago. Oh, I nearly forgot a coastal walk at Cape Willoughby Lighthouse to round off the cultural component of the trip. Then the long drive back home to the Blue Mountains via The Coorong – one step ahead of the floods through northern Victoria.



Victoria Fossil Cave tour, Naracoorte.

There is a moral to this tale. Three of the people on this trip were cave guides\* and thus rather happy to spend endless days enjoying quality time together in caves (and wineries) but the final tourist, while enjoying a nice show cave or shiraz as much as anybody, does have a preference for balancing such pastimes with other activities. To convince him of the merits of the long drive to South Australia other temptations had to be offered. It must be said, if somewhat reluctantly, that this is true of most tourists.

As the *Global Financial Crisis*, rising interest rates and the high Oz dollar combine to make it harder to keep the visitors coming to our caves; we need to work with other local and regional tourism operators to promote our region as a whole, keep people in our area for longer and encourage them to tell their mates that the destination is worth the effort. We also need to be well informed about local attractions and be ready to promote them. They will return the favour. Oh, and remember to keep your credit card clear for any unexpected purchases when participating fully in the karst experience!

\*For those wondering – the travellers were Sasa, Richard and Stephen Kennedy and the non-caver was David, my husband – those who attended will remember him from Mulu last year.