

PUNCHBOWL CAVE, WEE JASPER

Mary Trayes

I arrived at Wee Jasper's Cooradigbee Shearing Shed for the ACKMA AGM about 1.00pm on Friday May 4th, a trifle earlier than most people. After waving my brother good bye, bagging a bunk and checking out the kitchen I went out to see some other early-comers, including John Brush and Marjorie Coggan, who were putting up their tents.

They were soon set up and asked if I'd like to go up to Punchbowl Cave where some of their friends from the Canberra Speleological Society (CSS) were setting up a tyrolean traverse for the following day. Just wear boots and bring a light. So off we went by car, back out through the farm and past the T-junction turnoff at Wee Jasper and along to a local Nature Reserve where there are three or four caves in a small catchment headed by a doline area called the Devils Punchbowl.



*Entrance to Punchbowl Cave.
Photo: Mary Trayes.*

There's a good track to Punchbowl Cave from the carpark and I set off with Marj and a friend of hers, for the fifteen minutes up to the cave. Warren James, from CSS, was to follow shortly with another load of rigging gear. The route led up the hill, over a stile, past a cave entrance by a big gum tree, clambered over a few stretches of limestone rocks, then headed down into a cave entrance – just mind the blackberry bushes and slippery rocks.

Inside we found Dirk Stoffels (CSS) in a large outer cave area, working on setting up a tyrolean traverse across the top of a wide 20m deep pitch which leads down into the cave proper. As a permit is not needed for access to Punchbowl Cave it's much used by recreational caving groups, like Scouts, who want both some straightforward SRT work and a round trip.

Basically the round trip entails going down the abseil pitch, heading across the chamber at the bottom up and to the left, through a short crawl and then following on round a route which takes in some very large chambers such as the Ballroom. Eventually the route reaches a high point on the other side of the entrance pitch looking back 30m or more across to the daylight of the main entrance. At this stage most people abseil into the entrance pitch chamber then prusik back up the original abseil rope to exit the cave but for the Wee Jasper 'wild caving' experience the local cavers decided to take out the last two steps and set up a tyrolean traverse. A good practice for them and the visitors wouldn't need to bother with SRT gear.

Warren had arrived with another load of rope and gear by this time and after some dialogue about what was and wasn't needed he and Dirk abseiled into the cave to go round the loop to the 'other side' to do more work on the rigging over there. The rest of us, having had a good look around the rest of the outer cave, debunked back to the cars and so back to the Shearing Shed where we found many more people had arrived. ACKMA 2012 was underway.

That night Andy Spate blew all the previous choices we'd made for the weekend out the window and made us do them all again. Not to worry. This time my Saturday choices were a trip into Carey's Cave, going to the AGM, then an afternoon trip to Punchbowl Cave. The morning over on Saturday, John and Marj were very busy after lunch fitting out those wanting to do the Punchbowl trip, with whatever gear they didn't have, courtesy of CSS. As most were New Zealanders, that meant harnesses, and for some like me, helmet and

light as well. Most people wanted to do the round trip but Deborah and me opted for testing the lower – raise aspect of using the tyrolean traverse.

Up at the cave it took a while to get the ‘round trippers’ down the abseil but soon they were all gone leaving Deborah Carden and I to be hauled out, one at a time, over the pitch then lowered down. This didn’t quite go to plan when Joe Sydney, over on the far side of the tyrolean, couldn’t haul me out far enough for a mid-pitch lower – too much tension in the system? - and Dirk ended up lowering me down the pitch ending up just to the left of the abseil line. Deborah, being a bit lighter did better, but she too was against the wall much of the way down rather than being hauled out to hang free, then be lowered.

By the time Deborah was down and we’d done an initial exploration of our new home for the next hour, we could hear voices high up on the far side. Here we’d found a rope hanging down a very steep slippery slope and Travis Cross soon appeared, abseiling his way down to us. After having a brief chat and admiring his caving gear (shorts) he set off back up the original abseil rope. Having foregone a turn on the tyrolean, he would end up helping haul people across instead.

It wasn’t long after that we then sighted Dave Smith swinging his way through space way above us, enjoying someone else doing all the work for once. After watching Celina Yapp have her turn and trying to take some photos of her (which didn’t turn out) Deborah and I went off to look for the way they’d gone. Eventually we found it up at the back of a mud bank we had thought was a dead end, and she crawled on through to explore for a bit while we waited our turn to be ‘retrieved.’ Being without overalls and a really good light was a bit of a deterrent for me so I spent some time looking at strata in the cave and thinking about the way it had been formed.

Eventually it was our turn again and the rope, with a weight on the end was dropped down to us mid-pitch. On the return trip we were hauled up (Deborah first) away from the cave walls until almost at the pulley and then pulled into the cave entrance side of the pitch by the tyrolean set-up. This worked pretty well except for a bit of spinning on the way up for both of us and for me almost going through the pulley (I did say 1m!) and then being dropped (a bit) once when they re-set the Z-pulley system. Not to worry, it all made for a very interesting afternoon. By the time we got our gear off, packed up and carted out some rigging gear to the cars we were late for the Bat Talk and had to tiptoe in. Thanks Marj for the ride back and to Joe, Dirk and Warren who did all the rigging.



Left: Deborah Carden abseiling into Punchbowl Cave.

Above: Dirk Stoeffels rigging tyrolean.

Photos: Mary Traves