

# SPELLBOUND GLOWWORM and CAVE TOURS

Libby & Peter Chandler

## **Fact File**

### **SPELLBOUND GLOWWORM AND CAVE TOURS**

Compiled by: *Libby and Pete Chandler*

Position: *Owner Operators*

No. of staff: *Around 6*

**Personal Background:** *We have lived in Waitomo for 26 years and we have been involved in cave tourism for all of them.*

**Trip Market:** *Family friendly and Eco Tourism*

**Business Philosophy:** *We take our customers into a typical Waitomo Karst landscape to show them New Zealand glowworms at their very best.*

**Retail Cost:** Adults *NZD\$73.00*  
Children *NZD\$26.00*

**Tour duration:** *3 ¼ hours*

**Awards:** *Winner - Trip Adviser's Certificate of Excellence and Waitomo's top attraction for 6 years. Qualmark endorsed visitor activity*

**Best moment:** *Hosting Sir David Attenborough for the filming of Life in the Undergrowth and Planet Earth. Meeting and hosting Sir Peter Jackson on a private family day out.*

**Worst moment:** *Pete accidentally setting fire to the plastic planking on our new walkway on the day we opened it!*

**Message for ACKMA members:** *We look forward to seeing many of you here in May, our tour will be offered as one of the Conference field trips.*



In the beginning, Boddies Road farmer, politician, inventor and ACKMA member, Derek Mason initiated guided tours to the Mangawhitikau Glowworm Cave and Mason's Dry Cave in 1994. He called his tour 'Mason's Limestone Valley Tours'. Derek would seat his customers on a purpose built trailer and take them down a farm track behind his tractor, to visit an exceptional glowworm display and experience a wild walk through cave in its natural, if muddy state. Derek's personalized and unique tours were phased out when Jill convinced him it was time to sell the farm and retire.

In the summer of 1998/1999 Pete Chandler and John Ash of The Legendary Black Water Rafting Company negotiated to continue the tours where Derek left off. This began the long series of developments and improvements that can be seen today. Initially naming it the 'Waitomo Moa and Glowworm Experience' and then 'Black Water Dry', it was marketed to families with children too young to do a wetsuit trip and to those passengers off backpacker buses who didn't like the concept of wearing a wetsuit. After several months, Black Water Dry suffered a set-back by losing access to Mason's Dry Cave due to a land sale. It became the property of McDonald's Lime quarry operation and they were a bit wary of dealing with cave tour operators at the time.

In 2003 Pete and John sold most of Legendary Black Water Rafting to THL but Pete and Libby bought the Ash share of the dry tour, now named Spellbound (yes this was its fourth name in nine years).

Pete felt great enthusiasm for getting the tour up and running as a stand-alone business. He wanted to emphasize and heighten all the many 'wow' moments the tour offered and combine them into a cohesive and meaningful tour experience. There was also some promising dialogue with the new manager at McDonalds Lime. He was open to the idea of working with

Spellbound to come up with a strategy for use and protection of Mason's Dry Cave.

At take-over we inherited a red raft three and new bridges which led visitors safely into the Mangawhitikau Glowworm Cave. Whilst in the cave, visitors could see glowworms close up and in great profusion, but due to the low light required, they barely saw a cave.

To address this deficit, the next step was to tackle development of Mason's Dry. Liaison with local Maori revealed that its true name was Te Ana o te Atua or Cave of the Spirit. The cave's history also included a visit in 1849 by Arthur Thomson, a military physician who described the cave in the Edinburgh Philosophical Journal. By 2006, carefully designed paths and lighting were added, transforming this previously unexceptional seeming cave into an experience that could hold its own alongside the Mangawhitikau glowworms. Te Ana o Te Atua also gave our guides a lot of scope to talk about cave formation, speleothems and fossil moa bones and tourists could take as many photos as they wished.

The present phase of development began in 2010 and is almost complete. This is an extension of the work begun in the Glowworm Cave and the purpose is to set the cave up to be more flexible for guiding at different water levels and of course to further improve the visitor experience. The first part of the work involved extending a walkway beyond the raft-loading bridge, over a rock platform to a brand new jetty - the spot in fact where Derek originally loaded his visitors. This allows our guides to board customers onto the raft downstream of the swiftest section of the stream at a gentler section where the raft is easier to control. The new jetty can be raised or lowered by winding up or down a pair of trailer jockeys. When water is too high to safely run the boat ride, the new walkway has seats and railings, customers can spend time there looking at glowworms and trying out their photography skills. It is also possible to take groups of up to twenty into the cave, half can take the boat ride further into the cave while half stay behind on the walkway, then both groups swap over. The design has 1100mm high handrails on both sides and no steps. This gives visitors security as they exit the cave, seeing more glowworms with little or no extra light needed!

Over the past year we have been building a tripping dam. Our current (1999) dam has to be disassembled by hand in rising waters, this can be a bit of a challenge. The dam is reassembled when the river flow returns to normal. Dropping the water level periodically has been a necessary chore because the Mangawhitikau stream transports tons of shingle during flood events, building up in the stream bed in the ponded section above the dam. The extra shingle creates swift sections as the

water level recedes. It's desirable as well to let the shingle move through naturally allowing the stream to keep all its normal rhythms. Our new tripping dam will be safely released, remotely if necessary, from the upstream walkway. With the expertise of Gary McCowatt, HTG caver and hydraulic engineer, we will calibrate the force required to lift the locking pin at different water levels. The new dam is positioned downstream of the current one, extending our raft ride by 12 metres but more importantly giving visitors a view of the glowworms at the cave end. As per our resource consent the new dam will have a 'fish pass' for eels to swim up and a jetty to allow people to go down to the sump - a fascinating and slightly spooky place!

Note:

Longfinned eels, *Anguilla dieffenbachii*, are endemic to NZ and, like all freshwater eels world-wide, spawn in the ocean. They are considered a threatened species though there is still a quota management system for them and for the more numerous short fin eels, *Anguilla australis*, which also common in eastern Australia. At the cave's stream sinking point some visitors get the opportunity to see and even feed several tame specimens.



*Red raft put to use transporting concrete*



*Above. Libby Chandler and Moira Lipyeat in Cave of the Spirit. Photo: Peter Chandler.*

*Below. Glowworms in Mangawhitikau Glowworm Cave. Right from top. Track to Cave of the Spirit; farm land around the two caves; feeding an eel; moa bones in Cave of the Spirit. Photos: Steve Bourne*

