

ADVENTURE CAVING in WAITOMO

John Brush



L-R. George Bradford, Hans Loder, Cath Sellars, Dirk Stoffels, Lily Petrovic, Marj Coggan, John Brush enjoying the wet section of the Black Abyss tour.

Photo: BWR guides

Waitomo is world famous (at least in New Zealand) for adventure caving activities and with the ACKMA conference in town, it was reasonable to assume delegates would take on an underground adventure or two, especially with some of the operators offering very special prices. No doubt the trips were largely for research purposes, but who could ignore the opportunity for some fun, excitement, rewarding experiences, blood-pumping thrills, truly awesome descents, mind blowing heights, breathtaking challenges or a high Rambo rating? Or so the glossy brochures suggested.

There are five organisations* in and around Waitomo area providing commercial adventure caving activities and four of these offered generous discounts to ACKMA delegates, ranging from the absolutely free tubing trips offered by Cave World along the stream in Foot Whistle

Cave, to a flat \$20 fee for any of the 3 trips offered by the Legendary Black Water Rafting Company (Black Labyrinth, Black Abyss and Black Odyssey - all in Ruakuri Cave) and to 50% discounts (resulting in prices ranging between \$87 and \$233) for trips offered by Kiwi Cave Rafting into part of the Mangawhikau system and by Waitomo Adventures into Lost World, St Benedict's Caverns, Haggas Honking Holes and Tumu Tumu Cave.

Quite a few of these trips attracted ACKMA delegates, mostly on the Friday during the pre-conference caving trips or on the following Wednesday during the optional activities afternoon. However, a few dedicated souls quietly snuck away from the formal presentation sessions to undertake additional underground research activities.

On the pre-conference Friday, about 15 people rolled up to the Black Water Rafting Company base ready to experience any one of the 3 trips on offer. I have been told the 3 hour Black Labyrinth rafting (ie on truck inner tube) trip was a lot of fun. Some others delegates attempted the challenging Black Odyssey trip high into the roof canyons of Ruakuri and thought it was a fantastic trip but, as experienced cavers who were used



*John Brush in action.
Photo: BWR guides*

to rope work and high traverses, they did not think of it in terms of “mind-blowing heights” or “extreme traversing”.

I was among a party of 7 who took on the 4 hour abseiling, water-leaping, tubing and waterfall-climbing Black Abyss trip. It was all great fun. However, what I enjoyed most was when we all linked our tubes together, turned off all lights and snaked our way along the streamway as we drifted with the current under a low tunnel of glow worm lights. Magic. At one point, it seemed to be happening in slow motion until the guide realised someone, who shall remain nameless, towards the rear of the human chain had grabbed onto a rock projection and was holding the chain motionless in midstream.



*John Brush emerging.
Photo: BWR guides*

Lights on again, more floating, some wading, a wet crawl and then we climbed a couple of thundering waterfalls to emerge in thick forest at the bottom of a doline. Kitted out in wet suits, the trip was not as cold as I had expected. I think Cath Sellars was the only one who



*Jumped or pushed? Dirk Stoffels in full flight.
Photo: BWR guides*



*A pensive Phil McGuinn on the Black Odyssey trip.
Photo: BWR guides*

shivered her way along the stream, but she still seemed to enjoy the overall experience.

A few days later, along with Phil McGuinn, Dirk Stoffels and Brett Dalzell, I returned to BWR to tackle Black Odyssey. This trip has been available for just 6 months and as a consequence all the equipment and rigging still looked very new. The size of bolts used for rigging points is very reassuring and with 3 cows-tails attached to 2 separate safety ropes (allowing a minimum of at least 2 points of attachment at any given time), it all felt incredibly safe. The trip starts off in a very comfortable manner along the metal and plastic elevated walkways of the show cave part of Ruakuri. Soon however, we were hanging off ropes a giddy 50 cm above the cave floor. That, we were told was just a test. As everyone passed, we were soon onto the serious stuff. That basically meant a series of ledge traverses, via ferrata (i.e. walking on metal pins mounted on the cave walls) sections, an abseil, 3 flying fox (zip line) rides, a rope swing around a corner and two ladder crossings (just like they use to cross giant crevasses in the Himalayas – except that crampons are not required in Ruakuri).

The next day I joined a small team (Dirk Stoffels, Lilly Petrovic, Laura Dawson and Greg Middleton) for the 100 metre abseil trip into Lost World. As this trip is billed as being suitable for people who have no previous abseiling experience, it was interesting to see how people were belayed. Rather than the usual top or bottom belay, an



*The impressive rigging at Lost World.
Photo: John Brush*

ingenious safety mechanism is used. We each had our own abseil rope and rack as well as a cows-tail that was attached to a locking mechanism operated by a guide. Up to four clients abseil together attached to their guide's safety device. If tension is placed on the cows-tail (i.e. if anyone gets more than a metre or two below their guide), the rig automatically locks, as I discovered when I got a little enthusiastic. So there was no chance of an uncontrolled descent. However, once one of the guides was on the bottom and was available for a bottom belay, some of us were allowed to unclip from the other guide's locking device and free abseil to the bottom.

As the Lost World chasm is surrounded by thick vegetation, it is hard to gauge its size – it is perhaps 50m long and 10 m wide at the surface, but as it overhangs on all sides, the floor area at the bottom is larger than these dimensions suggest. The walls and the bottom are covered with all manner of greenery and a hovering mist provided an eerie backdrop to our descent and scramble across the bottom. After posing for photos we headed into the underground proper. The stream we crossed was surprisingly small for the amount of noise it generated in the chasm. Before long it was time to climb a 30m fixed vertical ladder. After catching our breath, there was some traversing, more climbs on ladders, a bit of scrambling and then back to the surface through another entrance a couple of hundred metres from the



*L-R. John Brush, Laura Dawson, Iain (Lost World guide),
Greg Middleton. Lost World cave tour.
Photo: Flyn, Waitomo Adventures guide*

main chasm. A longer trip that involves heading upstream all the way to the stream sink is also available.

After 3 adventure trips, all involving vertical rope work, with two different companies what conclusions can be drawn? All the trips were pitched as exciting, adrenaline-pumping experiences suitable for reasonably fit people with no previous caving or rope experience. Most of the promotional imagery suggests companies are primarily targeting 15-30 year olds, and the language used in feedback comments suggests this is who they are mostly attracting. But how was it for a grumpy (ie discerning) 60+ year-old caver? Pretty damn not bad, I have to say.

Each of the trips felt very safe and was immensely enjoyable. Tubing under glow-worm displays, underground zip lines and walking along (near) horizontal suspended ladders were all wonderful and interesting new experiences for me.

On each trip we had 2 guides. They were invariably personable, alert, attentive, competent and well trained in the use of nearly all of the gear. The exception, perhaps, was in the use of the cameras they carried and used frequently. The adventure companies are very efficient at getting images off the cameras and onto big

screens in the office and then on to memory sticks for clients to purchase (although very generous gifts were made to ACKMA parties). If only the quality of the images was better. Now, I admit there are serious limitations on what can be achieved on the run with a point-and-shoot camera in a large wet passage. However, as some of the shots were nice, it shows that it can be done. My gripe is that if a little more care was given to framing shots, and also a little more time was allowed for the camera to focus, more pleasing results could be captured more frequently.

The equipment was generally of a very good standard, apart from the lights. All companies appear to use similar lights and while these appeared to be robust and waterproof, they did not produce much light. They were adequate for seeing the way forward immediately in front, but were hopeless for illuminating the cave in general, or so it seemed to my old eyes. I was told the dim lighting was intentional – it prevents inexperienced people blinding others when they faced them and also stops people wandering off. As a caver, I like to see all of the cave passage that I am passing through, so after the first day, and with permission, I used my own helmet and light. Some others did likewise.

Are there impacts on the caves? Of course there are. Opening up a cave for adventure activities does result in a range of impacts and some of these are permanent. Even if all of the installations (for example, rigging, platforms, ladders, slides and weirs) are removed, the worn trails and bolts (or bolt holes) will remain. However, as clients are generally kept to specific routes, the area of impact is limited. Additionally, relatively few of the caves in the Waitomo area have been opened up to adventure caving, at least so far. On balance, a cursory examination suggests the caves I visited appear to be bearing up pretty well and the benefits of having a broader cross section of the general public having some knowledge of, and perhaps affinity with, caves should not be ignored.

What is on offer at Waitomo is not unique, but is certainly an eye-opener from an Australian perspective. Some of what we experienced during the ACKMA week would be impractical or impossible in the Australian context. However I believe it has certainly given some cave managers something to go home and think about. Is that right, George and Don?

All in all, we saw some incredible things and shared some wonderful experiences. On behalf of all delegates who participated on the trips, I would like to thank our guides and also the operators who supported the ACKMA conference with these special trips.

*The fifth operator, Greenglow, is a small family-run business operating from a country home about 20km out of Waitomo (and a little closer to Te Kuiti). Greenglow provides low-key, tailor-made trips into the nearby Mangarongapu Cave.