

CAVING with WAITOMO ADVENTURES: ST BENEDICTS CAVERN

Sasa Kennedy

This 4 hour tour with Waitomo Adventures is promoted as a dry adventure in a highly decorated cave,. My tour ran with 7 clients and 4 guides, two of whom were training as a result of modifications to the flying fox (zipline) rigging and procedures. One of the clients was a 67 year old woman suffering from a degenerative disease, who was trying to pack as many adventures in as possible while she still could. It was her third caving adventure in as many days, having never been in a cave before. Sure, she needed a bit of help and occasionally slowed things up a little, but what an inspiration! The other clients, all Australian, thought so too.



second pitch was quite lengthy, which might not work well with a first time caver.

Next obstacle, within sight of the pitch was a log balanced across an abyss, with handlines for safety. It would be very easy for the first abseiler, sick of waiting, to wander off here and get themselves into trouble, but I behaved myself.

The rest of the trip is mainly just scrambling over rocks in an open phreatic chamber until the flying fox take-off platform appears in front of you. While waiting to go on the zipline a nice snack of cordial and chocolate is served.

St Benedicts Cavern is an enjoyable commercial adventure trip, though only about two hours are spent in the cave - and most of that is spent waiting to abseil or take your turn on the flying fox. Like the other two dry adventures I did in Waitomo it was more about adrenaline on ropes than actually caving, but great fun regardless.

Prior to entering the cave the group had a "dry run" roping practice on a gentle slope. A good idea as rack descenders can be confusing for beginners and when abseiling in the cave you are largely out of sight of the guides. Guides were very careful with safety checks and putting clients onto ropes.

The entrance pitch was a 20m abseil down a beautiful pancake limestone tomo, followed by a scrabbly but fun 30m pitch. The guides wisely chose an experienced abseiler to go in first as the wait at the bottom of the

The zipline is located in a highly decorated and stunningly beautiful chamber. In a way it is a shame to fly through it so quickly, though there is plenty of time to gaze from afar as you await your turn on the flying fox.

The thought of swinging and breaking a formation was constantly with me as I flew across the chamber, but it was quite a buzz to see all that crystal zoom past. Then time to admire some nice rimpools, flowstone and stals in varying shades, as others caught up.

Then a quick photo opportunity and a short scramble to the airlock and it was all over bar the drive back to the well-appointed gearshed.

The clients all loved the trip, though personally I could have survived without quite so much cave fantasy. The guides did a great job maintaining a positive vibe and reassuring clients along the way. Highly recommended.

CAVEWORLD TOURS: FOOTWHISTLE TOUR

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It was late afternoon and our guide (also the cave owner), Ross, was very attentive to his group, beginning with a welcome and some interesting interpretation of Maori indigenous plant use as we made our way down to the cave.

Footwhistle Cave is not highly decorated on the whole, but has a rather nice stream flowing through it. The entrance is lit by candles, to allow your eyes to adjust more readily to the dark and better appreciate the glow-worms. A nice touch and quite romantic, though some delegates on Monday's tour noted that candlewax had dripped on the



formations. This had been cleaned up by our visit on Tuesday – good work Ross.

The main attraction is the glow-worms, which, however, are less abundant in this cave than in some of the other Waitomo caves. Ross provided some interpretation of the glow-worms and also a demonstration of the various types of cave illumination that have been used through the ages when we reached the end of the cave. This was a nice point of difference from the other glow-worm caves.

Footwhistle cave is definitely best seen at dusk, departing the cave after nightfall. As you leave the cave you climb up steps through a narrow canyon. The canyon walls are studded with glow-worms, merging seamlessly into the starry night sky. An unexpected and magical experience.