

CANGO CAVES, SOUTH AFRICA

Steve Bourne



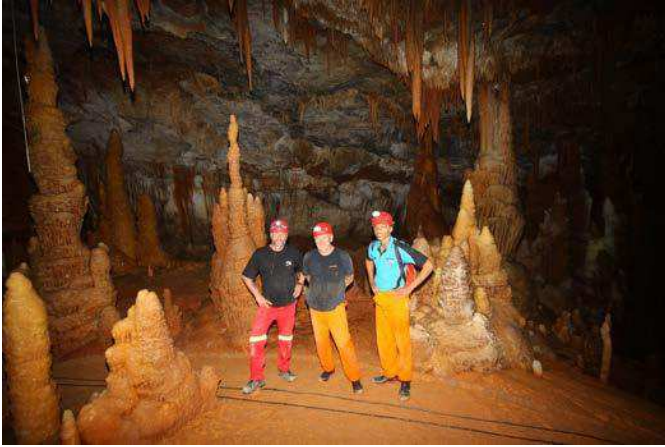
*Julian Hume (left) and Hein Gerstner on the range above Cango Caves.
The scenery around Oudtshoorn, indeed most of South Africa that I visited, is simply stunning.
Photo: Steve Bourne*

When I started planning for a trip to Madagascar to participate in the retrieval of extinct lemur bones, I looked at what else could be added onto a trip to this side of the globe. South Africa was the perfect option for several reasons; I needed to fly in and out of there to get to Madagascar (Mauritius route option was way more expensive), there are lots of great cave and fossil sites in South Africa, plus wildlife, and as I was to discover, two of the greatest hosts live there. I contacted Cango Caves' Manager (at the time) Hein Gerstner, and he and wife Andia developed a terrific itinerary for me. Near departure date, I asked my friend Julian Hume, who was to be on the Madagascar trip, if he would like to join me in South Africa, which he did.

The day we were to depart the Madagascar capital Antananarivo, Julian had a text message from partner Lorna. Julian had advised he was back from the field, to which Lorna said she looked forward to him getting home. Julian then let on that he was coming to South Africa with me - he hadn't told her! The homecoming from that one would have been interesting!



*Cango Caves visitor centre.
Photo: Steve Bourne*



*Steve Mouton, Julian Hume and Jarrod Moos
in Cango Two
Photo: Steve Bourne*



*Recreated scene of how the cave may have
been used by early people. This has been done
very well and is quite lifelike.
Photo: Steve Bourne*

In between booking the trip and arriving in South Africa, Hein resigned from Cango Caves. The issues around his departure are well documented if you search the web, so I won't elaborate here.



*Cave art in the entrance of Cango Caves.
Photo: Steve Bourne*

After Julian and I visited the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site out from Johannesburg, we flew to Bloemfontein to meet with Hein and Andia. We visited Florisbad Fossil Site, travelled through the Karoo, more fossil sites and to their home town of Oudtshoorn. I had heard quite a lot about Cango, from ACKMA members Andy Spate and Kent Henderson, who have both been there. Hein arranged for Julian and me to visit Cango One (the show cave and adventure tour) and Cango Two (limited access).

Our guide was Senior Guide Steve Mouton with Jarrod Moos making up the party of four with Julian and me. We inspected the show cave section and asked to go through the adventure section to compare to other

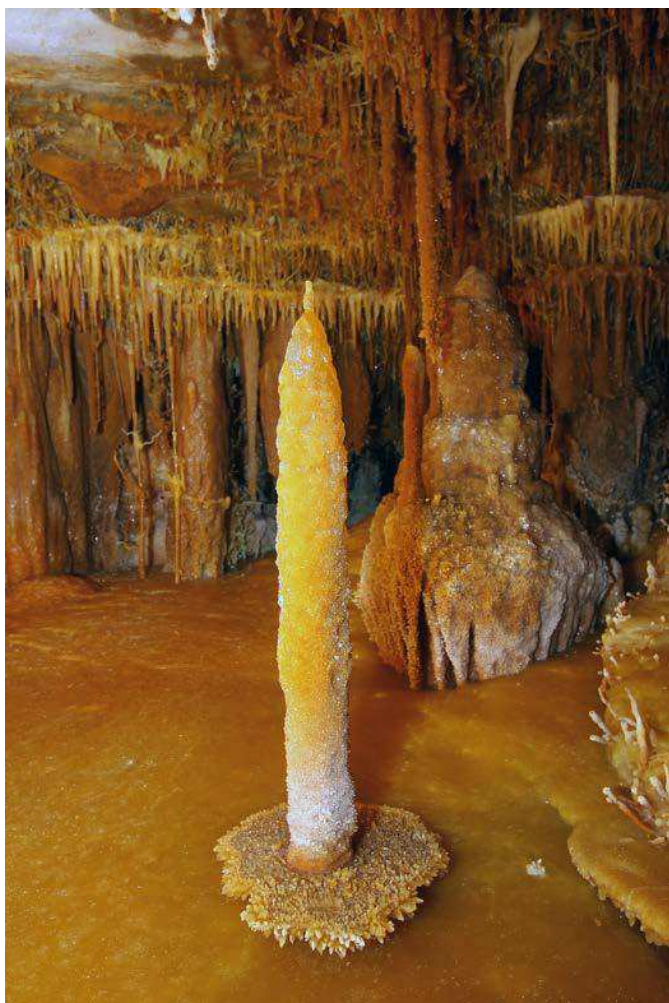
adventure caving tours but mostly to see where a large lady became stuck in the Tunnel of Love in 2007. Hein had recounted the rescue story to us and I just had the see the location. The promotional material for the adventure tour reads;

An iron ladder ascends from King Solomon's Mines into the unique caving adventure of The Devil's Chimney section. First you have to crawl through THE TUNNEL OF LOVE, a low passageway some 74 centimetres high, narrowing at one point to about 30 centimetres, where stouter cavers are apt to receive a loving squeeze!

This tunnel brings you to THE ICE CHAMBER, with its fascinating shelfstone ledge high around the outer wall. This ledge indicates the level of a cave pool from a bygone age. The pool's level ultimately subsided, leaving only a shallow pool in the cavern today.

Next comes THE COFFIN, a hexagonally-shaped hole in the shelfstone, which is the beginning and end of the final circular route. The cave opens out again as we pass through the ICE-CREAM PARLOUR into the colourful beauty of the DEVIL'S WORKSHOP. The brilliantly-coloured ceiling is decorated with many delicate helictites.

The way ahead leads over a steep hump, which leads you into the DEVIL'S KITCHEN, with its notorious DEVIL'S CHIMNEY. The guide points to a narrow crack in the wall - surely someone's idea of a joke! But no, this is the DEVIL'S CHIMNEY. Peering in you see a steep shaft about 45 centimetres wide which leads upwards for some 3.5 metres. There is a light at the top. Amidst an assortment of grunts, groans and, usually, hysterical laughter you squirm through the chimney into another larger chamber, only to be confronted by an even smaller opening.



*"Candlestick" stalagmite in Congo Two.
Photo: Steve Bourne*

Using 'Leopard Crawl' to wriggle forward you approach a low, wide slot - the only exit route. It is only 27 centimetres high.

Some guides recommend a head-first 'posting', which may be likened to a rebirth experience, as one emerges infant-like from the narrow crevice. The alternative of feet-first results in an easy slide (depending on girth or chest-size) down the smooth, sloping wall and being deposited on the flowstone floor below. You have now reached the furthest point of the tour.

A short scramble leads you back to the Coffin, through the Ice Chamber and Tunnel of Love and back down the iron ladder into King Solomon's Mines and back along the previous route, emerging into the welcome light of day at the cave entrance.

With a description like that, I just had to take the challenge! A group was exiting as we went in and I was surprised to see that visitors were in their street clothes and without helmets or protective overalls. The tour is lit with low level electric lighting and is a very well worn



*Jarrod Moos admiring helictites in Congo Two.
Photo: Steve Bourne*

path. The rocks and flowstone are worn smooth with the passage of many thousands of visitors. The low slot at the end was quite tight. For those who haven't heard the story of the poor lady who was stuck for over 10 hours, a media article follows.

An overweight woman who got stuck in a South African cave trapped 22 fellow tourists for more than 10 hours and had to be prised free with liquid paraffin.

The woman became trapped in the Tunnel of Love obstacle in the Congo Caves in Western Cape on New Year's Day.

The caves' manager said the woman had been warned she might not be suitable but she insisted on trying.

One of those trapped was a diabetic who had to be brought insulin. The woman and the other tourists were unhurt.

The rescue operation involved several ambulance teams and a helicopter.

Hein Gerstner, manager of Congo Caves, told the BBC it was an "expensive exercise" that could cost 40,000 rand (\$5,700, £2,925).

"We don't know yet who will foot the bill," he said.

The ordeal began when the woman became stuck just after noon on New Year's Day.

Mr Gerstner said the woman was "told at the ticket office that she was too big to take part in the specific section".

He said she was again warned by the guide but that it was "very difficult to discriminate".

Mr Gerstner said: "The obstacle has a narrow base. She lost her footing and went down in a splits position. There was no way she could get her body weight up."

But he said she was young and remained mentally strong throughout and the other tourists took the ordeal "exceptionally well".

The tourists, including two asthmatic children, were given blankets, water and chocolate bars as the rescue proceeded.

One rescuer was able to climb over the woman to deliver insulin to the diabetic.

No drilling equipment was needed and the woman was eventually freed with a pulley and paraffin used to grease the surface at about 11.20pm.

She was taken to hospital but is not injured and is expected to be released on Tuesday.

Mr Gerstner said: "We believe what goes in, must come out again. People get stuck all the time - that's one of the unfortunate things that happen, it's part of the adventure."

However, he said the caves would consider more stringent measures for those entering.

Much better though is to ask Hein to tell you the story. As with any caving story like this, its always funny after the event if no one is hurt, but I imagine the Muslim family stuck on the inside praying and wailing would have added quite a bit to the atmosphere of the rescue!

Cango Two is an easy cave to access, and mostly it's easy walking gazing at mountains of calcite in every imaginable shape. Like many ACKMA members, I have travelled a bit and seen a lot of caves. Cango is right up there with the best for its speleothem development. Steve took us through to Cango Three entrance. This can only be accessed by operating a pump to drain water from a tunnel, and when the level is low enough, crawl through 150m of passage - I imagine hoping like hell that the tunnel doesn't fill too quickly. I would love to have done this for the experience, but it would have added a significant amount of time to the trip and we weren't prepared with necessary safety procedures not in place. Of course I took lots of photos and could easily have taken a lot more. I have included quite a few that give you just a taste of how spectacular this cave is. If you ever get to this part of the world, make sure you visit Cango.



Helictites in Cango Two. The image on the right is a closeup of a single helictite that is just right of centre in the middle of the left image. It circles about 17 times - a cave guide's nightmare trying to explain how and why that grew like that!

Photos: Steve Bourne

