

## “The mystery shopper” – an occasional column

**Editor’s note:** The concept of a “mystery shopper” is used regularly in the conventional media. The person writing the consumer report purchases an item or consumes a service and then writes a review. The purchase is undertaken anonymously so that the supplier is unaware of its true purpose.

Over a number of years, people I know have consumed experiences at show caves in both Australia and New Zealand. For the future, I propose to solicit short “mystery shopper” articles for publication in this Journal. The first of them appears below.

I urge all of you potential “mystery shoppers” to contribute your reviews of sites you have visited — they will be published anonymously!

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### A return visit to Waitomo – decades later

In the mid-1990s, I took my (then) teenage twin daughters on a two-week father/daughter adventure trip to various locations across the North and South islands of New Zealand. An inevitable part of such a journey was a visit to, and undertaking adventure activities at, Waitomo. On that occasion, we went Black Water Rafting and, the next day, did the abseil descent into The Lost World. The experience for us was unforgettable



*One of the 2018 party descends into The Lost World*

The world and life moves on, however! In January 2018, I decided to reprise that earlier trip with my wife and my youngest (now teenaged) children. We revisited all of the various activities undertaken some two decades earlier, including those at Waitomo.



*One of the 2018 party enjoying Black Water Rafting*

I have been asked to write a “mystery shopper” piece about the comparison between these experiences decades apart. I should say, at the outset, that the experiences were all positive, but the more recent ones were, in several respects, quite distinctly different from those in the 1990s.

The first (and blindingly obvious) differences were in the physical facilities. Today, for both Black Water Rafting and The Lost World, the check-in facilities are computerised and efficient; and Internet booking of the activity makes it possible to arrive on a specified day and to depart on the activity at the nominated time. This is to be compared with the more haphazard experience those decades ago of trying to make arrangements by telephone from some hundreds of kilometres away. In addition, the equipment handling facilities were a lot more organised and, to the relief of my wife and children, the post-activity catering at both bases was tastier and with a much wider range of food that I had led them to expect!

For my own part, however, having had to engage with issues of site safety many times during my working life, I was significantly impressed by the changes in the induction processes for each of these activities. Although, at the time of my much earlier visit, the induction and safety briefing (as well as the guides’ management and control of any risky elements of either activity) did not give rise to any matters of concern, the changes (improvements) since then were immediately obvious. The inductions were more focussed on safety than I recalled and the emphasis on seeking to understand who needed special assistance (and providing it) was impressive on both activities.

Although my knees will not permit any future attempt of the 32m ladder pitch necessary to exit The Lost World, my children have both told me they propose to return independently when they leave school. I am satisfied that they will be in safe hands!