

Travel

Nikau Cave on New Zealand's North Island

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During the ACKMA conference at Takaka in the far north of New Zealand's South Island, I met the owners of Nikau Cave, Philip and Anne Woodward and guide Ray Walker. I had not previously heard of this cave in the North Island, so I was keen to catch up with them and visit their adventure cave after the conference.

This worked in well because after the conference I was flying to Auckland to meet my partner Katerina, and then spend eight days sightseeing around the North Island. The drive south from Auckland to Nikau Cave (located at 1770 Waikaretu Valley Road, Waikaretu) took just 1.5 hours. The scenery along most of the road is truly breathtaking with rolling lush green hills, dotted with sheep and cattle farms.

Upon arriving at the property, our first sight was the impressive building which serves as visitor centre, accommodation and cafeteria (Figs. 1, 2). From inside there is an amazing panoramic view through the enormous windows that face the striking grass covered hill with limestone outcrops.



Figure 1: Café and reception building at Nikau Cave (left).



Figure 2: Inside the café looking towards the beautiful view and limestone outcrops (right).



We were warmly greeted by Ray, Anne and Philip. Ray, our tour leader was expecting us, so we quickly donned our gear along with another couple, ready for the underground adventure (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Ray giving Corentin, Charlotte, Katerina and myself the final briefing before heading to the cave (left).



Figure 4: Rolling hills of lush grazing and curious cows encountered on the walk to and from the cave (right).

There was a short safety talk and check of equipment, then we walked about 500 m up an easy foot track to the start of the cave. We followed a track high along a ridge through grazing pastures (Fig. 4) and then descended into a thicket of larger trees to the cave's spacious outflow entrance.

In the first 100 m I tried to keep my feet dry, but that soon became impossible so there was just no option but to walk in the shallow water (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Katerina Fulton in the active stream passage decorated with an abundance of speleothems (left).

As Ray guided us through the active stream-way cave he provided an informative running commentary on all aspects of the cave from geology, cave development, speleothems, cave fauna, through to the history of the property and setting up of the adventure tours (Fig. 6).

Figure 6: Ray Walker describing how stalactites are created (below).



For most of the cave the water was ankle deep and occasionally it became knee deep as we traversed the 1 km of cave passage. Stalactites hung from the ceiling and walls and in many places, they almost touched the water (Figs. 7, 8, 9). Stalagmites had formed on parts of the cave floor just above the stream level.

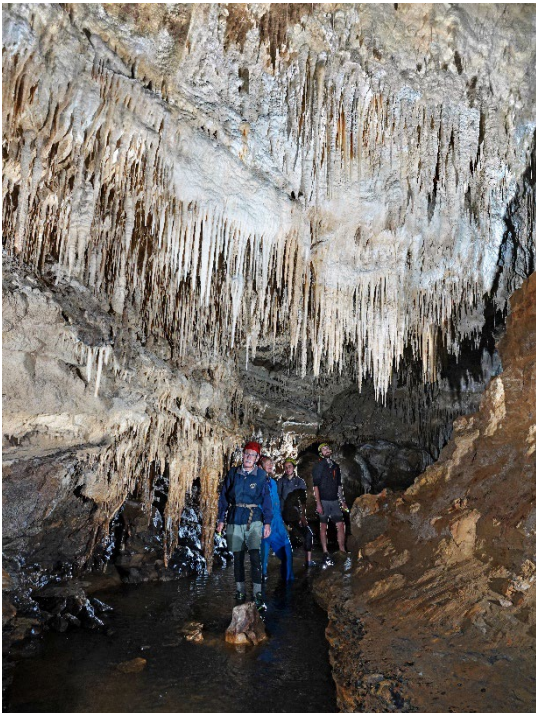


Figure 7: Ray Walker guides our group along the streamway, being careful to dodge the stalactites (left).

Figure 8: Stalactites that are coloured brown / red by humic and fulvic acid derived from decomposing vegetation at the soil surface (right).





Figure 9: Katerina Fulton observes the stalactites just before the low section in Nikau Cave (left).

Figure 10: Long, slender stalactites hanging in a high section of the cave (right).

There is no infrastructure such as handrails or formed pathways, so tourists must be careful to avoid bumping the stalactites while walking along the streamway. There were intermittent chambers with high ceilings covered in many stalactites (Fig. 10).



Most of the time we walked in shallow water, but there was a short section of just a few body lengths, that involved crawling in water up to about 300 mm deep (Fig. 11).

Figure 11: Ray Walker in the short, low stream crawl (left)

After the low crawl section, we continued walking about 600 m along winding streamway to the start of the large chamber.

Ray then asked that we turn off the torches, so that our eyes adjusted more to the darkness, and as we stood there, we were soon able to see the thousands of glow-worms all around us and right up to the 15 m high ceiling chamber above. What a glorious sight, like a starlit night. This large chamber, which is just before the exit, contains a sizeable column, lots of white flowstone and rimstone pools (Fig. 12) which was also quite a sight when we turned on our torches.

Figure 12: The well-decorated large chamber towards the end of the cave (right).

The real bonus for tourists undertaking this adventure tour is that they get up very close to the glow-worms and can see the intricate fishing lines they produce with rows of sticky droplets to catch their small flying insect prey (Fig. 13). There were plenty of shell fossils in the streambed and one just had to look underfoot while traversing the cave. Ray pointed out some prominent examples of Kina (sea urchin).

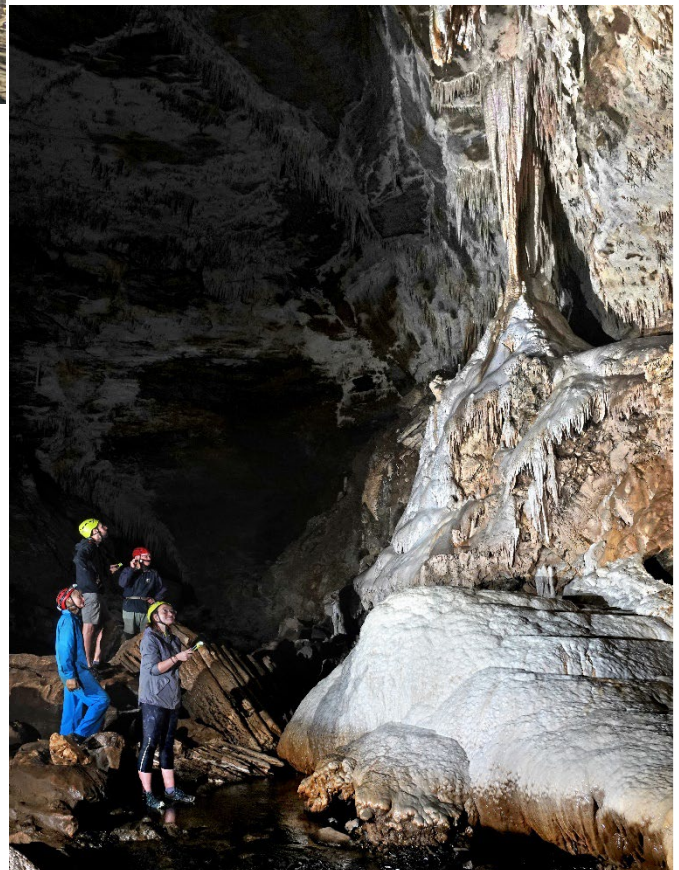




Figure 13: Glow worms can easily be observed close-up in many sections of the cave (left).

We also saw two of the resident eels that live in the active stream way. While not true troglobites they have adopted the cave as a place to live.

The cave temperature was around 13°C and the standard tour takes a minimum of 1.5 hours. Flash photos are not normally allowed in the cave as it affects the glow-worms. However, an exception was made on this trip so that I could provide photographs for this article.

Upon exiting the cave via a large chamber, there was a 20-minute pleasant walk back to the visitor centre and facilities, where we changed into our dry clothes.

At the visitor centre cafeteria, we enjoyed a coffee and cake to finish a fantastic day while chatting to Ray and Philip.

The real bonus of this cave is that it contains, lots of fossils, glow-worms, speleothems, an active stream and even some resident eels. The Nikau Cave has lots to offer the adventure tourist. Our tour with photos took just over 2 hours - Thankyou Ray.

Other attractions

Just around the corner from the café is a 60-minute bushwalking loop track which leads to a beautiful 10 m high waterfall. This is included in one of the multiple sections of land (totalling 9 ha) that Anne and Philip have put into QE II Trust; open space covenant, to protect the extensive native plantings for perpetuity.

What is supplied to adventure tourists?

A helmet and waterproof hand-held torch are supplied free of charge to each participant. Participants are encouraged to bring their own appropriate footwear and clothing to wear in the cave, however these items can be hired at the visitor centre if required. Allow extra time for fitting if you intend to hire clothing.

It is recommended that people wishing to undertake this amazing adventure, should come prepared with a spare set of dry clothes to change into afterwards. Participants should wear covered footwear, plus a long-sleeved top and long pants that they are prepared to get wet and possibly a little dirty. Jeans are not recommended as they soak up water and become heavy and cold. Layering is a good idea with a thin thermal top underneath, but it is best to stay away from wearing heavy thick clothing (e.g. wool) that will soak up a lot of water and become heavy. A pair of gloves that won't soak up water may also be helpful to protect your hands. There are conveniences and change rooms at the visitor centre.

Accommodation

There are several options for accommodation at the caves so that visitors can fully relax and appreciate the beautiful peaceful surroundings.

The self-contained **Apartment** is upstairs from the cafe. It contains a separate bedroom with a double bed and two single beds in the living room, dining table, oven, fridge and private bathroom.

The **White House** cabin is located at the edge of the family home's extensive gardens. It contains a queen size bed and bathroom.

The **Hut** and the **Bunkroom** are comfortable accommodation options, suitable for people on a limited budget.

Consult the website <https://www.nikaucave.co.nz> for more details and the current fees. The phone and email contact details are on the website if there are further questions.

History of the Nikau Cave

The Māori knew about the existence of the cave well before the arrival of Europeans. Sometime before 1950, the Whare family became guardians of the land and cave. Then in 1950, Ken Whare sold 258 acres of land including the cave to Ivan and Betty Mannering. This created some discontent within the Whare family.

The Mannering family built a small basic house by the road, near the existing cattle yards. Their two sons Alex and Raymond collected artifacts from the cave and surrounding farms. Then in 1970, Ivan built a new farmhouse up on the hill. To serve as a museum for the artifacts collected, he constructed another building next to the farmhouse, using some of materials salvaged from their first house.

Philip and Anne Woodward purchase the property from the Mannering's in 1978. They took pleasure in guiding their family and friends through the cave. The NZ election of the Labour government in 1984 marked the start of economic reforms, which became known as 'Rogernomic' changes. The NZ dollar was devalued by 20% and the traditional price support and production subsidies for New Zealand's agricultural sector were removed. This resulted in the demise of many family farms. To supplement the farm's income the Woodwards made their first attempt at making showcave tours into a commercial venture in 1986, however this was not successful. Despite this, they did continue showing small non-paying and some paying groups, including some school groups through the cave.

Then in 1994, to supplement the farms grazing income the Woodwards undertook a second attempt at cave guiding. They advertised, to promote the activity and began an association with the Auckland Adventure Operators Group. This generated more interest in the cave making the operation viable.

By 1997 the number of visitors had increased to such an extent that Philip and other members of the family could not do all the guiding. Some locals started to be trained as casual guides (Ray Walker being the first) and trips were run from the farmhouse and newly built sheds.

The Nikau Cave Company was formed in 2005 and the business operation was supported by family members. As the number of cave visitors continued to increase, it became apparent that the operation had outgrown the "farmhouse". It was also determined that the safety management systems needed revisions. At this time Philip was still guiding most cave tours, despite a number of new guides being trained.

The vision to construct a new base building and include a café, accommodation, and caving equipment rooms, presented considerable financial obstacles, however after much perseverance, Anne found a bank prepared to lend the required funds. The much-needed building was then constructed in 2008 on land purchased from the neighbours, just along the road from the original Mannering house.

In 2012 a long running local TV show called 'Country Calendar' ran a program featuring the Woodward family and the cave. This created plenty of new interest in the cave and resulted in increased visitation.

Anne and Philip then joined ACKMA in 2013, thanks to Pete and Libby Chandler's encouragement. They attended the ACKMA conference at Waitomo and forged new relationships within the management community, which resulted in their continued participation in all of the subsequent conferences to the present day.

The New Zealand government introduced laws in February 2017, requiring the auditing of safety systems of commercial operators who provide adventure activities, so they had to be registered with WorkSafe New Zealand.

Then the global pandemic 'COVID-19' struck in early 2020, which led to the closure of the caves for many months. During this time (June 2020) an ACKMA project saw the installation of a data logger to measure changes in the cave climate.

In 2022, Ray Walker celebrates 25 years guiding at Nikau Cave. Quite a milestone in any career, well done Ray.

At present the café continues to support the caving trips/tours and has become a ‘destination’ for many people. The staff at Nikau Cave have noticed repeat visitors bringing their family members. It certainly highlights that the Nikau Cave tours are providing a lasting impression of good memories when they see second generation families return for caving adventures.

Assorted Info on Nikau Cave

Tour Times: 10.00 am and 2.00 pm, however can be varied upon request to suit visitor’s needs.

Tour duration and length: There is a 10-minute walk (400 m) to the cave entrance, then 1.25 hours (1 km) in the cave, walking in the stream with some climbing over rocks and a 20 m crawl section, followed by a 20-minute walk (900 m) back to the café.

Cave Temperature: varies between 10 – 17°C. The water is colder (refreshing!) in the winter months.

Flooding: May occur from time to time, however Nikau Cave’s Safety Management Systems are very rigorous to ensure no cavers are present if there is any likelihood of flooding.

Largest Chamber: 15 m to the ‘dome’ style ceiling

Fauna: The cave has large numbers of Glow worms (*Arachnocampa luminosa*) throughout the cave. There are occasionally Cave Harvestmen and Cave Weta sighted. In the underground stream some Tuna (Long-fin Eels) are commonly sighted. Less frequently Koura (freshwater crayfish) and Native Fish (Galaxiids) are sighted. On very rare occasions a rat may be seen.

Geology: The cave has formed in an Oligocene limestone member locally known as the Waimai Limestone Member, which forms a part of the Aotea Group of rocks (formed 28 million years ago). The Oligocene limestone (34 – 23 million) is sitting on a Greywacke base (now exposed in Nikau’s large chamber). Significant faulting can be observed in sections of the cave walls. Pebbles now present in the underground stream are predominately of local volcanic origin.

The limestone contains an abundance of fossils, including Kina (sea urchin), crustaceans (unknown), scallops and other brachiopods.

Acknowledgements

Thankyou to Philip and Anne Woodward for their hospitality, and Ray Walker for a great tour.

Also, a special thankyou to Ray, for tracking down the statistics and history timeline of the Nikau Cave.



Biosecurity for Cave Dwelling Bats

Nicholas White

The White Nose Syndrome (WNS) fungus is classified amongst the eight most important exotic threats to biodiversity. **Australian Border Force may introduce controls impacting international caver travel return to Australia due to possible WNS fungus contamination of clothing and equipment.**

WNS and other bat health issues are now grouped on a Bat Health page on the Wildlife Health Australia website: <https://wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au/Resource-Centre/Bat-Health>. This page has Covid-19 material; Australian Bat Lyssavirus information; White Nose Syndrome; and Hendra Virus information.

Please make sure you check on all biosecurity requirements if you are planning an overseas caving trip and taking your own equipment!

