

# A TALE OF CAVING IN FOUR STATES AND TERRITORIES

## (in the one holiday)

- Deb Hunter

The diversity of Australia's caves has been the inspiration to write this article, and my other impetus has been my perceptions of how cave presentation has improved since the visit I remember to Jenolan Caves as a school girl. I've not long returned home from my annual trip to caves of the Northern Territory, but this time I traveled by car the long way around.



In the entrance squeeze to Fox Cave, Naracoorte

### **NARACOORTE**

It was my first trip to Naracoorte. Thanks to George Bradford for putting me up and helping show me around, and to Steve Bourne especially for allowing me to join a trip to Fox Cave with himself and Frank and Barb, who were familiarising themselves to be guides for adventure tours there. The South East of South Australia is a fairly dry climate, and the karst geology is very interesting. See the excellent little book by Judy Murdoch, 'Light on Dark', which I picked up at the Mt. Gambier Visitor Information Centre.

A series of dune deposits accompanied the repeated rise and fall of the sea over the area, resulting in older and younger caves over a very large area – about 50,000 sq. km. However, only 28 of the caves are in the relatively small reserve at Naracoorte. Most caves are relatively shallow, with collapses giving access through daylight holes.

The boat from Tasmania docked in Melbourne at 5.30 am, so there was plenty of time to get to Naracoorte and catch George on a day off. He was able to show me around the fossil centre and to the self-guided Wet Cave (I gather it was so named because it has dripping formations, but it does not have a stream going through it). This is an ideal self-guided cave, being level and uncomplicated, and with its interesting alcoves and nooks it probably gives visitors some sense of discovery.

The Wonambi Fossil Centre really blew me away! The static displays are colourful, interesting and

professionally laid out, but those reconstructed megafauna (complete with movement and animal noises) are just awesome! The original vision, the funding and hard work has certainly paid off, since recognition of the value of the fossil deposits in 1994 with World Heritage listing and funding.

I hope that Brian Clark's new challenges are rewarding enough after such a wonderful outcome at his previous workplace here. On Sunday afternoon I appreciated that Fox Cave is very worthy of careful management. This 1,500m long cave contains magnificent sand cones, but when one careless party recently allowed a member to traverse one, the spell was broken. The main stream passage with the cones is large, and the combination of colours and shapes of rock, sand, formations and roots was worth some tripod photography.

My host, Steve Bourne, gave an animated commentary throughout, amply accommodating my fondness for crazy crystals. He didn't take us out until after 2.75 hours of 'ooing' and 'ahhing' at features, and some bruising fun. I really enjoyed the time taken for discussions and speculations about the mysteries of the cave's features. That was enough for one day.

So on Monday morning the priority was to see as much of the scenery in the reserve as possible, before traveling on towards the Northern Territory. I soon saw that cave entrances which previously had had concrete collars for the foundations of fences around them were all being refurbished with fences which allowed natural water flow and humus to enter. I saw Cathedral Cave, where George and his nine Green Corps young people are restoring the place after over 100 years of each visitor throwing a rock or two into the hole, and those who entered signing their name on the walls.

There is now a huge steel construction providing access to the cave via stairs and ladders, and a defined path at the bottom. There's a huge daylight hole and dark zones off that. The cupolas were delightful! The beautiful sculpted, rounded shapes of the cave overall is lovely. The cave is used for wild cave tourism.

The next place was the well-decorated Victoria Fossil (show) Cave. Our guide, Liz, included excellent geological interpretation and encouraged discussion about karst land management issues. She also took much time discussing the paleontological digs which led to the mammal fossil discoveries and the actual discovery of those sites.

This cave is still being pushed via digs, and planned removal of fill from within the cave from when it was first developed could well reveal more leads and/or cave formations (see the article by Steve Bourne, this issue – Ed.).

It is already a very extensive and most interesting cave. Then, because there were no other visitors to run a trip in the Alexandra (show) Cave, I saw the Bat Cave Teleview Centre, which is part of the experience you buy when seeing Blanche (show) Cave. I saw footage of other times of the year, and through the remote cameras, saw the bats in the cave. Then we were taken into what is another of Naracoorte's Caves with much history of human interest – Blanche. It was reopened in 1986 after forty years of closure. Blanche Cave is one of the closest to the surface of the caves here, with major collapses letting in light at either end of a large arch.

The place has long been used for social gatherings as well as sight-seeing. Nowadays, there's a large podium for addressing an audience and the interpretation pays homage to the original pioneer fossil enthusiast of Naracoorte, and his diggings. There was once quite a cottage garden in the large daylight hole beyond this section, but more recently the ivy and periwinkle infesting the place have been removed, and a garden with a mixture of non-invasive exotics and natives is being established. Moisture is more easily conserved here than in the surrounding landscape.

To the early developers it was an obvious garden site. Then at last, because of our group being small and well-behaved, we were allowed to briefly view a colony of hundreds of bats in torpor at the back of the cave. I set off to join the annual Northern Territory expedition. However, because of the conditions of the permit for ongoing exploration in this National Park, nothing can be published.

### **KEEP RIVER NATIONAL PARK, NORTHERN TERRITORY**

Near the WA/NT border, the beautiful sandstone formations of this relatively new National Park rival those of the Bungle Bungles, and it's easier to get to. It has many aboriginal art sites, a few of which the visitor is able to see. The finest gallery of art we saw was in an arch cave a short walk off the access road.



Keep River National Park art site (sandstone arch cave)

### **TUNNEL CREEK CAVE, KIMBERLEY, WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

This self-guided or self-timed wet cave experience is widely promoted as a 'must-see' for self-drive and

tour bus visitors to the Kimberley. It sure is. It tunnels 750m through the narrow Napier Range (Devonian limestone), some 55 kms off the Gibb River Road or 68 kms north off the Great Northern Highway. At the time of our visit, the cave stream was still flowing (just) although the Kimberley did not have much of a wet season this year. Good historical and geological interpretative information bays exist throughout the parks of Kimberley, and Tunnel Creek is no exception.

On the day of our visit, we met the usual complement of 4 WD visitors, Australian and international, plus a tour bus group which was just leaving. Of course I carried my 12v 'cave blaster' light plus 6v Oldham, and so found myself at an advantage with lighting in this very large cave, and also found myself assisting photography and helping interpret the features for other visitors.



Landscape near Tunnel Creek Cave

This cave is very well decorated, and its speleothems are still growing, some with good crystal facets. Although the area is monsoonal and our visit was in the dry season, some formations were still active, notably two large gours which provided small tributaries which seemed to be keeping the small flow going. Dramatic, large cupolas could be viewed in the ceilings, and the large, sandy-floored exit on the far side of the Napier Range begged some slide photography.

There is a large collapse part-way along the cave, bats come and go, and the cave supports a population of small pale fishes and other probably best unidentified things lurking in the stream. I also spotted owl food pellets.

There is no ranger presence here, but wading the deeper parts of the crossings or falling over on rocks is the worst that could happen to people. Most of the formations are very high up and most people would not notice them, so they are in excellent condition. Do take enough light when you visit!

### **TANTANOOLA CAVE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

One of the perhaps lesser known show caves of the South East, this is an old sea cave which later became closed off and grew formations when the sea retreated. A boy discovered it looking for his ferret which had gone down a hole and not come out. Our

guide, Fiona, let me run back to the car and get my flute when I heard the acoustics.

I am not the first to appreciate the cave for this reason – there have been both classical and rock concerts here! We spent 45 minutes in the cave. It is a single large chamber, richly decorated, and has a delightful pool at the bottom. The interpretation was interesting yet factual, the lighting tasteful. And I got to see more helictites. This guide enjoys her job! Well worth the visit. See you at the next Guides *Gabfest*, Fiona.

Entrance steps – Cathedral Cave, Naracoorte



#### **ENGLBRECHT CAVE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

Under the streets of Mt Gambier, ordinary people are confronted by a fully equipped cave diver mannequin! This was a truly surreal experience. The diver is suspended mid air, giving an impression of what it's like to cruise through a flooded cave.

This show cave is a training dive site, for cave divers and rescue divers. The cave has a long history of being used as a rubbish dump, including taking unknown quantities of a disgusting sludge discarded from whiskey manufacture. In 1979 the cave was

cleaned out, and is now run by volunteers from *Life Line* as a fund-raiser.

However, the interpretation was expert and very interesting. We saw the leads to the dive sites, one of which we could see leading off into the flooded section. Like other caves of the South East, the water level is consistently dropping, the reasons for which were discussed by our guide.

The groundwater is a precious resource in the South East, and land management issues affecting it are the subject of hot debate. Grab the booklet when you visit.

#### **PRINCESS MARGARET ROSE CAVE, VICTORIA**

This beautiful show cave is a vadose canyon, although abandoned by flow now. It was a complete change to what we had seen elsewhere in this part of the country. Its formations are growing, and it's deep enough that many were dripping still, even though the whole region is very short on rainfall this year. Tree roots have found their way into the cave, some calcified.

The present entrance was dug through the soft limestone, but you can see the original entrance which was incredibly steep, and how they had notched timbers into the walls for the stairs above the present entry.

The tour goes as far as the final (unsuccessful) dig, if the group is small enough and well-behaved, as the cave narrows and passes close to decorations. Down in this part of the cave, the original guide used to play the spoons on the stals, which suffered accordingly. Big scallops on the walls were quite a feature here, plus suspended flowstones with semi-consolidated gravels providing interest for me.

Well, that was quite enough for a whirlwind tour of caves of Australia in the time that we had! I came back to the cold wet ones here in Northern Tasmania. But even they're nice too!

The interpretation in show caves today has changed from fairy tales to fact. About an equal blend of history and speleological subjects is what can be expected; some are throwing in an element of wider karst land management issues, which would depend on the knowledge of the guide and the interest shown by the visitors.

However, it's worth bearing in mind that if you visit tourist attractions outside of peak visitation periods, you are going to get a more personalized experience as we did in the southern caves. But dry season was peak time in the far northwest of Australia.

I am grateful to all the guides and managers who showed me around, accommodated my interests and exchanged brochures with me. I hope that you will all be able visit at Mole Creek at some stage.