

By SLOW BUS from WAITOMO to AUCKLAND: The ACKMA POST CONFERENCE FIELD TRIP

John Brush

Fish and chips in a remote and sleepy coastal village, rain, thundering waterfalls, a disappearing lake that hadn't, showers, a breakfast cruise around beautiful Raglan Harbour, drizzle, a wet and windy walk to a deserted black sand beach and an evening visit to a stream cave, such was the first two days of the post conference field trip. There were some experiences to treasure as our group of some twenty delegates from Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and the United States meandered along the slow and scenic route from Waitomo to Auckland, expertly chauffeured by Pete Chandler and Dave Smith.



*Cath Sellars, George Bradford and Hans Loder making out it's just not happening.
Photo: John Brush*

There was more limestone than you could point a calcitic finger at: around the northern side of Raglan Harbour, underneath the lava flow at the far end of the black-sand beach at Waikaretu, on the slopes around - and presumably beneath - the enigmatically-named Lake Disappear and in the hills near Nikau Cave and Café, which was to be our overnight base.

Nikau Cave and Café, an easy 90 minute drive from Auckland, is operated by Anne and Philip Woodward on the family farm. Anne manages the food and accommodation side of the business while Philip runs adventure-style trips through a stream cave on the property and, judging by the Sunday afternoon crowds, he also knows how to make a decent coffee.

Late in the afternoon, when most were relaxing over another latte, or something stronger, Philip started organising gear for the caving trip. "It is not a cold cave and I am going dressed just like this" he said, pointing to his shorts, polo shirt and sandals. "If you want shoes there are some over there" indicating a door labelled 'First Aid Kit' and, appropriately, 'Shoes'. I changed into

Top. L-R. Ann Musser, Regina Roach, Sasa Kennedy, Dave Smith, Philip Woodward (note caving footwear), George Bradford in Nikau Cave.

*Middle. Stream passage and decoration.
Bottom. Sasa Kennedy admiring the cave.*

Photos: John Brush



shorts and T-shirt and chose shoes from Philip's large collection. As an afterthought, I also put on a thin polar fleece jacket. As we headed off on the short walk to the cave entrance, I noticed Philip was now wearing a thick polar fleece over his shirt. Perhaps this is another example of kiwi cavers never giving Aussies the full story.

We entered Nikau Cave close to the stream resurgence and met the stream at the bottom of a muddy slope. The cave, once known as Mannering's Cave, is the best part of a kilometre long and the route through the cave just follows up the stream. Most of the trip is easy walking in shallow - up to knee deep - water, but in one place there is a low water crawl and in a couple of places there are boulders to scramble over. There is some attractive decoration along the passage and also in an upper level chamber that we could see into but did not enter.

Towards the upstream entrance, there is a large chamber with rim-pools and massive flowstones, but at first we could not see this as we entered in darkness. Philip had us turn off our lights and inch forward along the stream in total darkness to prepare our eyes for the impressive glow worm display in the chamber. It was not hard to imagine it was a clear starry night until someone turned on a light. We could then see we were in a large chamber with a few large rocks and fallen lumps of flowstone in the stream. At the end of the chamber, Philip has installed a short section of walkway and a few



Top. L-R. Ann Musser, Sasa Kennedy facing camera and Regina Roach in Nikau Cave.

Above. Waikaretu beach walk.

Photos: John Brush

steps to ease the way out of the cave and into the bushy stream sink.

On behalf of the nine field trippers who went into Nikau Cave, I thank Philip for his generous offer to show us through his cave.