

Review of NZ Tourist Caving Experiences

By Anonymous Contributors

In 2018, I wrote a “mystery shopper” article about caving activities my family and I undertook in Waitomo (see ACKMA Journal 111, page 18). At that time, because of my children’s ages, they were limited in the range of caving activities that they were permitted to undertake. I promised that we would go back to Waitomo when they were old enough to undertake some of the more advanced activities. We returned to Waitomo in early January this year.

My children undertook two different activities during our visit. I had told them, in advance, that the price of me paying for those activities was that each of them would write a “mystery shopper” review of the activities they undertook – my son being no stranger to this, having done so for an earlier trip to caves in Tasmania (see ACKMA Journal 113, page 23). Their 2023 Waitomo reviews follow:

Haggas Honking Holes

Haggas Honking Holes is an adventure cave in Waitomo in New Zealand and takes around four hours to complete. The cave is for beginners as it is not difficult and is completely fitted out with infrastructure to allow caving for beginners easily. The cave does not have a height limit but may be difficult for some larger individuals as it has some tight spaces and some climbing locations that may be difficult to do if large or inflexible. Despite the apparent ease of the cave, it is a very fun cave to participate in as it involves plenty of abseiling and is a wet cave that even has sections that involve abseiling through a waterfall and climbing up wet rocks faces.

The company that sets up the Haggas Honking Holes has good equipment as they have all appropriate gear in order to keep an individual who is going in and out of water from getting too cold in an underground and consistent temperature environment (such as a wet suit and gumboots). Appropriate and current safety gear is also used in order to keep the individual as safe as possible within the cave (such as helmets, a light in order to see, harness, carabiners and modern abseiling equipment). The safety equipment also comes with an appropriate safety briefing that teaches the individual how to use carabiners and the abseiling equipment in the safest way possible. However, once in the cave (except on the largest abseils) the individual was allowed to use the equipment without always having it be checked by the guides.

The guides in Haggas Honking Holes were very friendly and informative on glow worms and formations when asked about. However, when they were not asked, they did not always provide information on the formations within the cave and were more focused on moving the people through the cave and allowing the people to enjoy their time within the cave without providing extensive information. The guides split the work effectively and interacted with the individuals within the cave, making for a fun experience but not for an entirely informative one. If the reason that you are participating in adventure caving is just in order to have fun and not to learn more about formations within caves then this is an amazing cave tour to participate in, with guides that are very friendly and helpful.

The formations within Haggas Honking Holes are, unfortunately, mostly dead and as a result, are not incredibly spectacular. There are many formations within the cave ranging from stalactites to stalagmites and even having some of the less frequent formations such as shawls, columns and straws. Despite all the formations within the cave, the large majority of the formations are dead and coloured in a brown or black hue. Out of the few living formations, they were all off the trodden path or on the roof and were mostly smaller formations such as straws. There were no particular stand out formations and this would not be a caving experience that will be worthwhile if the largest reason that you are caving is for the natural beauty of a “living” and evolving cave.

Haggas Honking Holes is incredibly enjoyable as it is a wet cave that involves frequent abseiling and some climbing up natural walls. It begins with an abseil into the start of the cave and then has many abseils, a large number of them including abseiling down waterfalls which was an incredibly fun experience. There are also some instances that involve crawling through small spaces in wet areas that were also fun to experience. There were a few times that involved climbing up rock faces that were also wet therefore adding another level of difficulty to the caving experience.

Black Abyss

To a tenured caver, the ‘Black Abyss’ cave tour might be described as ‘catering to the inexperienced adventurer.’ Inexperienced as I was and adventurous as I hoped to be going into the Ruakuri cave system, the tour delivered beyond my every expectation, so much so that I have no doubt even the most veteran cavers would appreciate the experience.

After suiting up and listening to our first round of cautionary talks, the group filed one by one into the faintly wet-suit-scented van that would drive us out to our point of descent into the Ruakuri cave. After double and triple checking our gear, the guides first explained and then demonstrated how to abseil safely, before guiding each member of the tour through their own practice runs on the outdoor training course.



The cave experience itself began with a 35 m abseil into the mouth of the system. This included a very short freefall abseil before a tight squeeze that opened into the start of our cave route. While the outdoor abseil training was instructive in a practical sense, it did very little to prepare us for the real-world experience of a 35 m abseil and had I not completed the Haggas Honking Holes adventure caving tour only the day before I am sure my abseiling ability would have been compromised when put to the test.



With feet on solid ground again, we moved to the next part of the cave while our guides talked about the history of the area, including the cave's discovery, exploration and its significance to the Maori people. For the next leg of our journey I volunteered to go first (following the guide), and was clipped onto a zipline, as the guides instructed all of us to turn off our head torches. Next minute, I was hurtling under a sea of glow worms in the complete darkness with no idea how far away the end of the line was. To describe those few seconds as surreal would be a criminal understatement.

The experience took a brisk turn and we were encouraged by our guides to jump into the river which hovers between 14–16 degrees Celsius year-round. Donuts in arm, we waded against the current for about an hour using ropes installed on the wall for support when necessary.

The reason for our upstream journey became clear when we were able to float back along the cave towards our starting point. In the near silence, with millions of tiny lights floating above, were it not for the bite of the water and occasional bump of a neighbour's foot or donut, you could be forgiven for thinking you were floating through space.

Nearing our return to the world above, we abandoned our donuts and began the outward climb. The two short free climbs on exit were unrivalled as the most adventure quenching and thrilling part of the journey, something everyone was eager for after our serene float back.

With no use of safety gear (but thorough instruction), this ascent up the face of an eight-metre waterfall was terrifying to the inexperienced adventurer. It was also, however, what I now reflect on as the highlight of the trip.

Though this part of the Ruakuri cave offers less than others in terms of spectacular cave formations, it satisfied everything I hoped to gain from the experience, offering a well-rounded cave journey interspersed with adventure, wonder and information.



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