

# Mimbi Caves

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I visited Mimbi Caves on the long drive back from a Ning Bing Range expedition north of Kununurra in Western Australia in July this year. Mimbi caves are on Gooniyandi country, Mt Pierre Station, 90 km East of Fitzroy Crossing. Back in 2000 a proposal to develop a tourist business was prepared with suggestions for infrastructure and a 3-year cashflow (1).

Considerable mapping work had been conducted in this area by Illawarra Speleological Society in the 1980s (2) and some continuing work is currently being done by Alan & Megan Pryke. Quite a few caves are now known and mapped in this Devonian Limestone reef, which extends from Windjana Gorge right up to the Cape Domett area on the north coast (including the Ning Bing Range). This is between 350 & 400 million years old, much of which is quite isolated, but continues to give up quite extensive cave systems to those who make the effort to look.

I believe Mimbi Caves as a business operated in a rudimentary way before becoming 'official' in 2001, mainly conducted by one family although the area is owned by the local aboriginal community. Currently the main guides are Rosemary Nugget and her estranged husband with office work conducted by Rosie's daughter and a third guide is engaged, but I was given the impression this person isn't reliable. There is obviously a need for more of the community to undergo some training in cave guiding, however Rosie gave me the impression that none seem keen. This makes the whole operation challenging to sustain, even though it would give a reasonable income during the season. Two of Rosie's teenage granddaughters were along to orientate them into the possibility of taking on the business in the future. (3)

I booked the tour plus one night camping via phone with the Kununurra tourist office; it was difficult to get a booking date that suited as some days were booked out, others not operating so I altered my travel arrangements to ensure I could be accommodated. The cost for the tour is: Adults \$90, Concession \$70, Children \$45, Family of 4 \$240, with camping \$22/Adult (3). At no stage was I informed that I would need a torch, but being a caver, of course I carried one. With mobile phones being ubiquitous these days, most people managed, although some were ill-prepared. Delving into the Mimbi Caves web site, a torch is mentioned, however so are safety helmets, which were not provided (1). I did notice a heap of them in a rock alcove near the entrance to the main cave.

Figure 1: Mimbi Caves welcome sign (right)

Access is signposted on the Great Northern Highway, with a 3.5 km drive in and further signage directing the traveler to the campsite, with the office on the way. Unfortunately, the campsite is about 2 km from the tour meeting place, resulting in those travelling in single-unit setups not being able to make camp before the tour.



Tours operate 'roughly' Monday to Friday 08:00 and 14:00 and Saturday 08:00. The season starts April 1; however, I couldn't find out what the seasonal closing date is. (4)

I joined the 14:00 tour, requiring checking in at the office, then meeting the guide at 13:45 at a gate leading about 1 km to a car park. A minibus was driven by our guide who transported any who had caravans or non 4x4 vehicles. The 22 visitors all met at a rough gravel car park and walked some 300 m to the cave entrance, on a graveled path.



We were instructed to pick up a small rock and later near the entrance, to rub in an arm pit then throw it into a pool. Rosie explained that this was “introducing us the Girloorloo”, the local spirit, a welcome and good luck. I considered this to be likened to people throwing coins into a pool/wishing well. We were shown what looked like a restored hut where two ‘squatters’ had been living some years ago and a shady spot with cool air coming from a cave where they had a chess set and board carved from local rock: quite unusual.

Figure 2: Chess set carved from local rock (above)

Rosie spoke a lot about the history of her people, the stolen generation issues, and told us about several plants and trees and their medicinal value. I felt this was a measured and realistic presentation.



The first cave visited seemed quite a maze; I believe we only saw about 200 m of it. Being winter it was not active, with many dry but reasonably impressive speleothems. One was the “pregnant woman formation” in a “healing area” with Rosie explaining some success for a non-indigenous woman in recent years (in falling pregnant). At one entrance the whole group were let loose to explore somewhat, however none ventured too far.

Figure 3:  
Speleothems  
in dry cave  
(left)

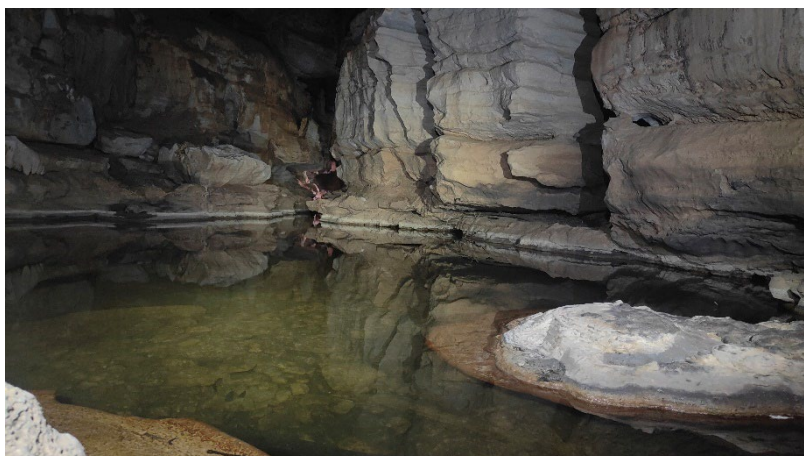


Figure 4:  
Internal pool  
in wet cave  
(right)

The second cave involved walking across a wet area, having the only infrastructure of a slightly elevated but crude mesh walkway. The whole route for visitors was rough and undeveloped, with some finding it a bit challenging, but a ‘realistic’ caving experience. Only a small section of this second cave was shown, mainly some petroglyphs near an entrance, which so far have not been dated. These were explained as representing an evil spirit which leads children away to get them lost. (3) After this we were seated for billy tea and damper and an extensive but confusing explanation of skin names and their relationship and who could marry whom.

Figure 5: Petroglyphs near the cave entrance (right)

My overall impression is that these caves are not particularly spectacular, although I am not the usual punter having been caving in the Northern Territory and Kimberley for some 20 odd years. This is predominantly a cultural tour with a focus on the caves, so it is not all about the caves. Our guide did not cover anything about geology or speleothem development but was aware of caver’s mapping projects.



The tour group seemed very appreciative of Rosie's explanations and most seemed impressed with the caves and certainly gained some cultural education.



The campground seemed to have recently been re-developed with grants in 2017 & 2019 I believe, resulting in excellent facilities including toilets and hot showers and several undercover barbeque/cooking areas and a communal fire pit. The 21 sites were generous in size with some screening for wind protection. (4)

So, if you want an indigenous cultural experience with a cave thrown in, I recommend dropping into Mimbi caves when you're passing; it's only 4,500 km from my home in Tasmania!

Figure 6: Limestone layering at cave entrance (above)

References:

- (1) Mimbi Caves Indigenous Conservation and Tourism Management Plan, West Kimberley WA Draft report April 2000 (for Kimberley Land Council)
- (2) Personal communication John Redpath ISS
- (3) Personal communication with Rosemary Nugget
- (4) Web site <https://mimbicaves.com.au>
- (5) Mimbi Caves Campsite brochure



## Vale Ken Flemming

### David Smith, NPWS Caves Supervisor, Wombeyan / Abercrombie Karst Conservation Reserves

Ken started work as a guide at Wombeyan Caves on 16 May 1960 under superintendent Clyde Stiff (Peter Stiff's father).

Ken was terrific guide with a welcoming personality, spending much of his time keeping the children enthralled with his stories and experiences. Ken was also involved in much of the earlier developments within the caves and reserve, particularly with track building and cave electrical work. He could even recall carting gravel in saddle bags, via horse, to areas along the cave tracks where a vehicle couldn't venture.

Ken was a wealth of knowledge, particularly with the history of the caves and surrounding districts. As a hobby, he ran a small museum from his property at Richlands called KenJoy Collectables, named jointly with his wife Joyce, and was President of the Taralga Historical Society.

Ken was a warden of the St. Luke's Anglican church in Taralga and was instrumental in organising the Easter Services in the Victoria Arch at Wombeyan Caves, a tradition that has continued until recently.

In 2010, Wombeyan Caves hosted a celebration of 50 years of sterling service to the caves, such was his respect amongst the local community. Ken continued to work casually for some time after that, making guest appearances at cave-related functions and historical events.

