



Mendip Caving Group Newsletter

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CAVING DOWN UNDER

Although I've been living in Tasmania since September events have conspired to prevent me doing much caving, however, with three trips under my belt I figured it was time to give the MCG a taste of caving in Tassie

Milk Run - Saturday November 6 1999

Jeff Butt, Alaric and I arrived at Arthur Clarke's place outside Dover late on Friday night, to be greeted by the enthusiastic barks of the new puppy and the even warmer welcome of Robyn, Arthur's partner. We were halfway through our first cup of tea when David, Andrew and Janice arrived from Launceston. We chatted for a while before anticipation of the arduous day Jeff had planned for us drove us to bed.

An early start by caver standards meant that we were able to rendezvous with the other cavers from Victoria only half an hour late. Jeff quickly split us into two teams so that we would be able to rig both Milk Run and Cyclops (with the plan being to derig them the next day). I found myself teamed with the Launceston group and having loaded up on rope we set off into the bush.

We followed the trail to Exit cave for about 40 minutes before heading off on a much rougher track that we hoped would lead up to the entrance. For someone who has spent the last five years on the Canadian Prairies, the stunning temperate rainforest with its lush foliage was an amazing experience. Given the dense vegetation we wasted a surprisingly short time trying to find the entrance. Once there we were able to clearly see the well-flagged trail that we had somehow missed on the way up.

We rigged the 44m entrance drop off a nearby tree and redirected the rope from another, running it over the rotten log that used to be the main anchor. The pitch was a fairly impressive shaft with a clear free hang after the first couple of metres. A small chamber at the bottom offered shelter from the debris knocked down by those above. From the chamber a series of three short pitches were rigged to the top of the next major drop. It was here that we lost Andrew who was worried that shoulder injuries would make the exit up the 44m drop fairly arduous.

David quickly rigged the 26m drop via a traverse to a bolt at an exposed pitch head and Janice and I followed him down into a fair sized chamber. A couple of metres of stooping passage led quickly to the next pitch where David was already traversing out over the drop to rig from another bolt. As he descended the drop Janice and I rigged the tail of the rope from the pitch above so as to make it easier to get on the rope. This 49m pitch was a beautiful free hanging descent through a clean washed limestone shaft typically 3-4 metres across.

In the chamber at the bottom we had a choice of two routes down to the end of the cave and chose the one on the left. A muddy drop with a snug pitch head dropped 9m to the top of the final pitch. As we were approaching the rendezvous time with the other group I turned back at this point and started out, leaving Janice and David to continue. As it turned out only David made it to the bottom as Janice turned round at the top of the final drop. Due to problems finding a rebelay point this ~30m drop included an unscheduled knot some 9m off the floor.

The trip back to the surface was pretty uneventful until I was about 10m from the top of the entrance pitch. Andrew chose this moment to suggest that I prussik more gently but refused to explain why. I cautiously continued my ascent to find that what we thought had been a free hang actually rubbed on the lip of the drop once the rope was loaded. We quickly changed the rigging and the other two soon joined us on the surface.

While we'd been underground (about 6 hrs all told) the rain had continued so we quickly headed off down the now much muddier trail. Back at the cars we were happy to get into warm dry clothes, although I was a little shocked to see how casually Janice removed the two leaches clinging to her legs. The Cyclops team made it back to the cars a couple of hours later, much to our relief as the thought of donning our wet gear to go and look for them was not very appealing.

With them safe, the Milk Run team headed back to Arthur's for some hot food. As we drove off we realised that we didn't know where the key was stashed. Rather than go back and ask we instead retreated to the pub for a beer.

The following day Andrew, Alaric and I entertained ourselves with a leisurely stroll down to Mystery Creek Cave. The cave was the scene of one of Tasmania's worst caving accidents a few years ago when a school group entered the cave in flood and rather than trying to wait out the rising water levels decided to cross a raging streamway. Three kids and one teacher were drowned. Only 20 minutes from the car park this pleasant little cave forms the exit for a fairly impressive pull through trip,

however we amused ourselves with a short walk down the main passage to look at the glow worms. These are apparently unique to the Southern Hemisphere and in Mystery at least are in sufficient numbers to light up the cave ceiling like a starry night.

Newdegate cave clean up and King George V cave, Saturday 11 December 1999

The local caving club had been asked to help with a cave clean up project at a show cave in south west Tassie run by the National Park Service. So on Saturday morning about 15 of us showed up in the car park at Hasting Caves. The plan was for us to head down to the bottom of the show cave where the Park Service had been removing the last 30 years of construction debris from the lower reaches of the cave. All this material had been put into bags and it was our job to carry the hundred odd bags up the 50m of stairs to the surface. With so many of us along this only took an hour or so in which time we managed to baffle quite a few of the tourists on their guided tours. Once everything had been wheelbarrowed back to the car park where it was left for later disposal we were offered a chance to visit the normally locked King George V cave.

A short drive took us to the start of the muddy track to the cave. At the entrance the usual fiddling with the lock quickly revealed an aluminium stepladder leading into the darkness. We were told that the Park Service were planning to use the cave for "Adventure Caving" trips for tourists so they were keen for us to give their route a trial run and provide them with some feedback. As our group included one 4 year old child and a relative novice (my wife Jill on only her third trip) we felt able to offer some comment. Once down the ladder a short traverse led to a section of stooping passage and a short crawl to a streamway, which soon terminated in a gravel sump. Backtracking a bit led to a 2m climb and some very pretty formations and then it was time to head back to the ladder.

We ended the day at the thermal springs below the show cave where the park service had laid on a BBQ complete with beer. Given that we hadn't really worked all that hard we felt a little guilty but we soon overcame that as we huddled around the log fires and watched the wallabies foraging on the grass.

Kazad Dum, Saturday 20 May, 2000

We left Hobart early Saturday morning and headed out to the Junee-Florentine karst. As many of the pitches in Kazad Dum had been pre-rigged, the plan was to take advantage of this. The weather over the last few days nearly brought an early end to the trip as a couple of trees had blown down on the dirt road up to the car park. Fortunately after we'd cleared a few branches there was just enough room to drive around them.

The cold damp weather meant that we wasted no time getting changed and were soon following the well-marked trail out to the cave. Once we got to the entrance it was clear that, in this area at least, Tassie's drought had well and truly broken. The raging torrent that was flowing in to the entrance forced us to reconsider our plans. We abandoned the ropes we had brought for the lower part of the cave, deciding instead to be satisfied with a trip down to the streamway and back.

We headed into the cave via the Serpentine route before rejoining the main route at the top of the first drop. Unfortunately we still had to cross the stream as it flowed into the cave insuring that we were all soaked to the skin. We quickly descended the first three short drops before reaching the 28m pitch. Coming down last I was able to thoroughly enjoy this drop as it popped out of the roof of a sizeable chamber. A quick scramble, a little bit of route finding and we were soon dropping down the 21m drop to the streamway.

Leaving behind some vertical gear we headed off down the streamway for a look at the next pitch. At times the water in the stream was thigh deep but it didn't pose too great a challenge. A quick look convinced us we had made the right decision. The rope was running straight down through the waterfall, despite being rigged in what had probably been a dry location a few days ago. As by now we were all soaked and starting to get pretty cold we headed back out.

The ascent was uneventful although a few problems with my lights meant that Janine had a long cold wait at the top of the last drop as Ric and I sorted things out.

Although an enjoyable trip, Kazad Dum was a rude reintroduction to the "joys" of cold wet caving, bringing back far too many memories of trips in the cold, miserable caves of Yorkshire, rather than more recent and warmer trips to Mexico. This was compounded by the fact that at one point during the walk back to the car the near constant drizzle changed to hail. At least the sun came out as we were changing!

Pete Hollings