



Mendip Caving Group Newsletter

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SHOW CAVE EXTRAVAGANZA TOUR

You've heard of Anecdotes from Arnside and Fragments from France, now read Antipodean Adventures!

Our big trip over Christmas 2000 was to visit relatives in Australia and New Zealand, and to possibly organise a caving trip or two in Aus and N.Z. Unfortunately when we were packed we could not pare enough weight from our baggage allowance to include any caving gear.

However, armed with some e-mail addresses we set off for Aus in December 2000 to find some sun.

Our first big surprise was to get up-graded to First Class on the flight to Sydney - jammy or what?! We had noticed that there were a number of caving areas in the Blue Mountains (west of Sydney) where there were limestone out-crops in an endless vista of sandstone and bush.

We hired a car with air-con (a must!) and drove west to visit the caves at WOMBEYAN. In the middle of a pleasant green valley with a slow meandering river issuing from a large resurgence portal. This was the exit point for FIG TREE CAVE visited later which was a self guide tour. There were only two members of staff on duty so there was only one show cave open. This cave was WOLONDILLY CAVE.

WOLONDILLY CAVE was situated on the top of a hill and a spirited descent by paths, stairs and iron ladders took you via viewing platforms to the bottom of the cave. This went through a vertical range of several hundred feet to the bottom of the show cave. The limestone at WOMBEYAN had metamorphosed into marble and had then been eroded to form caves and later the stal formations.

Large cavern followed large cavern which were spectacularly well decorated. Huge columns, slender pillars and stalacmites soared upwards to be met by stalactites and banded curtains (shawls in Australian). Helictites festooned the walls. Stunning lighting gave backlit formations clarity and beauty. Most of the stal formations were pure white. Pat and I were the only visitors on this tour with the guide which lasted about two hours.

The following day we woke up to find Kangeroos grazing around our cabin. We went off to tour FIG TREE CAVE which is a self guided tour. The cave was named after the wild fig tree growing above the entrance. Its roots passing down to the cave below. Again the breath taking formations started within 30 feet of the entrance, and continued all the way to the exit. This is a thorough trip to the large resurgence seen the day before. The river flowed through the cave mouth which

was 100 foot high by 40 foot wide. The show cave route ended about 25 feet above the river over a raised gantry foot path.

Large bats flew around the entrance and back into the cave hoovering up the insects that inhabited the large cave portal entrance.

The caves here were very impressive. I took photos in both caves but the camera developed a fault on the second trip and the photos were spoilt. Never mind. I'll just have to go back!

The following day we drove north to visit JENOLAN CAVES. Our route encompassed black top roads and dirt roads. At JENOLAN the road wound down steep hair pin bends down the hill to reach a small valley that was about 200 yards long. In this valley were the buildings and hotel for JENOLAN CAVES. The road continued through the opposite hill which was a part natural cave which had been widened to accept motor traffic in single file.

There are nine separate show caves to explore and we managed to "do" four in the two days we were there. The caves entered were IMPERIAL CAVE, ORIENT CAVE, RIVER CAVE and TEMPLE OF BAAL.

The caves were extremely well lit with back lighting behind giant curtains and stal. The caves were exquisitely well decorated with all forms of stal. The best features that I saw were huge clumps of helictites finger sized and up to 12 inches long, and rimstone pools, all glistening pure white or stained with minerals leached from the bush and rocks above. We were both spellbound with the sheer beauty of the abundant formations.

I visited SHATTER POT in MENDIP last year and wrote in a newsletter that it was possibly the best all round decorated cave that I had seen, but these Australian caves made it seem just like a hole in the ground. Sheer beauty wherever you looked.

The show caves went from the hill top to valley bottom on well lit paths and stairs. The only downside was the 50+ visitors on each trip party.

The following week my nephew took us on a bush walk to visit a gated cave that had genuine Aboriginal artwork inside. It was a large rock shelter 30 foot long and 10 foot high which was gated all its length. It was possible to see the Abo' paintings which were animals, zig-zag stripes and hand prints. It was well worth the hour's walk through the bush to see it. The temperature was 30°C+ and we were able to perfect the Australian salute - known for brushing the hoards of flies from your face and eyes!

After Christmas 2000 we stayed for five days in the Aus' capital - CANBERRA. West of CANBERRA - about 100 miles is WEE JASPER CAVES. There is a small showcave complex here with a choice of two cave tours.

Pat, myself, my niece and her husband went to CAREYS CAVE and were the only people on this tour. We were the last party of the day and were shown around by our guide called Geoff who also took us around the second cave route. This was another very impressive cave with good formations but not on the level of JENOLAN CAVES. On the plus side many formations were stained with minerals leached from the rocks above.



We later flew onto New Zealand where we were able to visit WAITOMO CAVES. These are internationally renowned for the glow worms breeding there. This is only a short cave trip but the exit was interesting as the tour party had to exit on boats on the main river running through the bottom section of the cave. There we were able to pass under hundreds of glow worms on the roof shining like stars on the dark cave roof.

There was another guided show cave about 3km's up the hill called ARANUI CAVE. This cave is spectacularly decorated and is a huge fossil passage boring into the hill, pausing at a barrier that marked the end of the show cave.

A bush walk above the hill containing this cave wound its way through and over gorges with a river that bored its way through the hill. In these gorges, black water rafting and abseiling were trips that could be booked. The black water rafting was a led trip and involved jumping pools and floating through the cave on rubber rings (truck inner tubes). The abseiling trip was a 300 foot free hang with no re-belays. The instructors led small parties with 1/2 hour of instruction technique before letting people have a big dangle.



I brought back lots of information on caving (show caves) for Australia and New Zealand. Adventure caving trips can be booked for JENOLAN (AUS) and WAITOMO (N.Z.). Equipment can be hired but which need to be booked in advance. Videos of JENOLAN and WAITOMO CAVES are now in the library with caving information. See Jean Goddard for details.

