

Speleo Spiel 438

May-June 2020



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Front Cover: *Loong Coong sunbeams with
~~sexy~~ model. Photo: Ryan Deboodt*

Back Cover: *Janine tackles the scary 1-meter
pitch into HT-1 Sherwood Court.
Photo: Ric Tunney*

STC was formed in December 1996 by the amalgamation of three former southern Tasmanian clubs: the *Tasmanian Caverneering Club*, the *Southern Caving Society* and the *Tasmanian Cave and Karst Research Group*. **STC** is the modern variant of the oldest caving club in Australia.



Speleo Spiel

Newsletter of the Southern Tasmanian Caverneers Incorporated

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The views expressed in the *Speleo Spiel* are not necessarily the views of the Editor, or of the Southern Tasmanian Caverneers Incorporated.

Issue No. 438, May-June 2020

Contents

Regular Bits

Editorial	3
Stuff 'n' Stuff	3

Trip Reports

Cave Rescue Exercise 2019	Alan Jackson	4
IB-11 Midnight Hole	Gabriel Kinzler	7
Vietnam Pandemic Expedition 2020	Alan Jackson	7
HT-1 Sherwood Court – Marion Court	Janine McKinnon	17
IB-9 Big Tree Pot	Janine McKinnon	19
H-8 Wolf Hole	Alan Jackson	20
JF-237 Niggly Cave	Alan Jackson	20

Other exciting stuff

Exploration dive – Exit - MCC	Janine McKinnon	21
East Tower Karst – Observations	Adrian Slee	21
Mole Creek System Diving Projects	Stefan Eberhard	22
Great Western Tiers Sandstone Caves	Greg Middleton	23

Maps

IB-14 Exit Cave – MCC Sump	Janine McKinnon	29
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Fun and Diversions	30
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The Last Page	31
----------------------	----

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Editorial

Life already seems to be getting back to normal after the socially, economically and practically most disruptive event known to humanity since... World War II. Nonetheless, we shall refrain from letting our guard down as long as the risk remains tangible and strict rules are enforced by the governing bodies. STC abides by these rules thoroughly and sensibly whenever we go out caving.

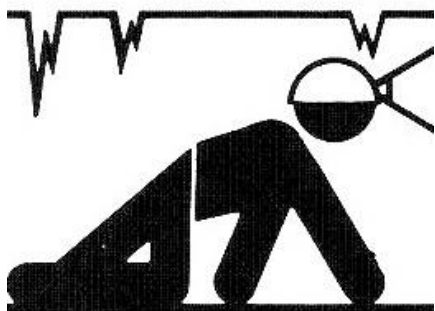
We certainly didn't wait very long to resume normal activities here in southern Tasmania. Motivation and anticipation are high, with several projects needing a conclusion, the dream of breaking new frontiers right on the horizon and the rise of a new generation of Tasmanian cavers beckoning, amongst other exciting prospects.

What promised to be a very meagre issue of *Speleo Spiel* has been generously filled by our usual (and unusual) benefactors, to whom I extend many thanks. I take pleasure in concocting what's much more than a newsletter, and the many hours spent on it allow me to escape to all sorts of places from the comfort of my arm chair. It's lovely.

See you underground!

Stuff 'n' Stuff

- Official announcement by the Australian Speleological Federation, on 17 May 2020: "The next ASF Conference to be held in Ceduna SA has been postponed until April 2022 (new dates to be confirmed). The ASF Executive supports the organising committee's recommendation to postpone due to the COVID-19 situation. Even though we are beginning to transition back to normal, there are still too many unknowns regarding future disruptions to travel and restrictions to group gatherings, until a vaccination can be developed. This is of especial consideration for the at-risk Indigenous community in Ceduna. We apologise for any disruption to your travel plans that this may cause and look forward to seeing you all safely in 2022."
- FUSSI member (and STC friend) Sil Iannello gave a very interesting interview on "The Caving Podcast", a podcast about caves and cave exploration, hosted by Matt Pelsor of the Central Indiana Grotto of the NSS. This interview, and many more, can be listened to for free following this link: <https://cavingpodcast.podomatic.com/>



The Caving Podcast

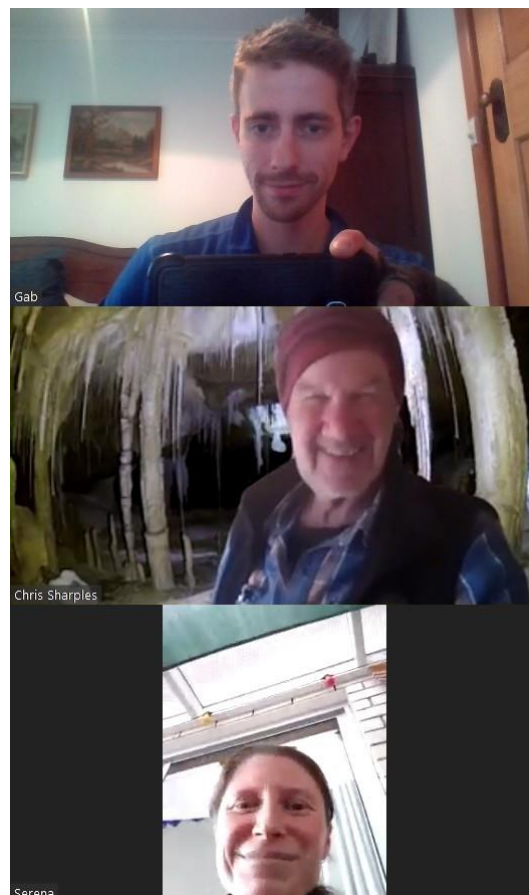
- The ASF Executive appointed two new commissioners at their May meeting. Rod OBrien was appointed Cave Diving commissioner and Rafid Morshedi was appointed SLARM commissioner (Safety, Leadership And Risk Management). Congratulations to both on their new roles.
- Stephen Fordyce's mug is a great way to fill up space in times of scarcity, as the 'Master Faffer' always has something in store to entertain the crowd. Whether it's worth watching is really yours to judge...



Here is a 6-minute compilation of narrated clips from the sump diving push he did into the "Bin Chicken Haven", in Niggly Cave, back in December.

<https://youtu.be/kFAeINSp2w>

- "Social distancing" was on everyone's lips in the last 3 months and so the Executive of STC had to find a new way to host their habitual General Business Meeting every month. This came in the form of teleconferencing, using the in vogue "Zoom" software. A first in the club's history. For funsies, you'll find a bigger excerpt in the Fun and Diversions section.



Trip Reports

Cave Rescue Exercise 2019

30 November 2019

Alan Jackson

Organisations involved: Southern Tasmanian Caverneers, Northern Caverneers, NSW Cave Rescue Squad (and ACRC), VSA, FUSSI, RMIT Outdoors Club, SES (Tas), SES (SA), Tasmania Police, Ambulance Tasmania

It's been a while since the exercise was held now but one benefit of a pandemic-induced lockdown is that you can't pretend you don't have the time to knock over all those boring jobs on the list.

The Basics

STC held their annual southern cave rescue exercise on 30 November 2019. The venue was Growling Swallet (entrance streamway series). I organised it, so of course it got way out of hand and the bite to chew ratio was a little iffy at times. It was attended by 49 people from a wide range of caving and emergency service groups. We had seven underground rigging teams spread through the cave, a surface team doing comms and the like and other sub-teams sorting underground comms, general access rigging etc. before re-joining rigging teams. Those 'glass half full' amongst us described it as 'ambitious'. Like the Sword of Gryffindor, I only absorb that which makes me stronger so I can't remember what the 'half empties' said.



Photo: Gabriel Kinzler

How It Unfolded

Stage one was advertising the event (too?) widely then maintaining a spreadsheet of potential attendees, working out who was travelling with whom, where they'd all stay in Maydena and Hobart, how they'd get to Maydena and then on to the end of the Eight Road, how many teams to have (based on numbers) and how to best assemble those teams so they'd be both semi-functional and a good balance of experienced and inexperienced people. That spreadsheet file was created 19 August 2019. Informing Parks of our plans was also done well in advance. Some risk assessment meetings and paperwork were required to get Ambulance Tas and Tas Police in attendance too.

Stage 2 was gathering all the necessary equipment and pre-sorting it as much as reasonable to save time on the day of the exercise. With STC now largely self-sufficient in rescue gear it wasn't too bad, but Tas Police were leant on to throw a bit of this and that in. FUSSI also provided comms assistance with their newly acquired CaveLink setup. Jacko provided plenty of tea-making facilities, of course. Significant effort also went into deciding underground stages and preparing maps and note sheets to hand out to team leaders and area supervisors.



Photo: Gabriel Kinzler

Stage 3 was mostly herding cats, firstly at Maydena and then again at the end of the Eight Road. Pre-briefing, splitting into teams and divvying up gear, assigning general rigging roles, comms roles etc. It was time consuming, stressful and bordering on chaos.

Stage 4 was the walk in, commute to respective stages, a rig-fest and comms fest (plus a bit of boredom, hypothermia and whining).

Stage 5 was the great patient extraction through the seven stages. I will point out here that I consider the extraction to have been great, not the patient; Chris was a good patient, but hardly great.

Stage 6 was de-rig, de-comms and disperse into the night and beds.

Stage 7 was a clean-up, BBQ and Cave Animal of the Year launch in Hobart.

Stage 8 was collate feedback and attempt to write something semi-intelligent about the whole exercise.

The Nitty Gritty

It was kind of everything I wanted it to be in the end. It wasn't necessarily what everyone else thought it would or wanted it to be but they'll know better for next time! It was long, arduous, cold, wet, noisy and we didn't kill anyone.

So what did people complain about (and praise), mostly? Variations on 'it was too long/finished too late and was physically exhausting' was a popular complaint. One is tempted to say 'harden up, princesses, do you think a real rescue from a long way into an actual proper cave is going to be a half-day jolly?' Clearly my info emails needed to

accentuate the ‘this is gonna be tough and long’ side of things. I’ll try to be more explicit in the future and at least now a few dozen more people from around the country know what I’m like. There were a lot of more-or-less total newbies to Tas/rescue/me.

Lots of whining about the bottleneck moving everyone through the initial climbs inside the entrance. As always, I underestimated how lame most people are and thought that only ~20% of people would use the ropes while the rest (mostly local cavers who normally free climb this stuff) would just surge through like normal. Instead, practically everyone used the ropes and waited in line for their turn, which was VERY slow.



Photo: Richard Bugg

On the one hand, essentially all caves (and therefore rescues affected in them) are going to have some bottlenecks that you just have to live with and on the other hand, I suspect in a real rescue you’re not going to have every rescuer arriving at the scene at the same time and all trying to get underground at the same time (they’ll stagger in in dribs and drabs); this certainly happened at Midnight Hole, with people rocking up by car at different times and even the shiny bums in the choppers came in three or four shifts/flights. It’s hard to balance the ‘everyone needs to be together to get the initial briefing’ with ‘everyone needs to be separate to avoid traffic jams’. Patience is a virtue and we should all work on it.

Inter-agency cooperation was generally lauded. We were all certainly from far and wide and the teams were deliberately split up so it wasn’t just pre-existing cliques working together.



Photo: Richard Bugg

Another aspect I particularly enjoyed as organiser was trying to further hone my ‘compatibility’ skills – i.e. picking good team leaders, combining crews so new relationships would be forged but also trying to ensure we didn’t have skill holes,

leadership vacuums, competing egos, sworn enemies lumped together, fools combined etc. I made a few errors (I’ll spare you the saucy details in the interests of decorum) but was generally happy with how everyone played.

Comms is often a pain in the butt. We mostly did well, with two independent systems in place quickly and generally working. Poor communication near the end of the exercise resulted in a cock up (they were packed up and spirited out of the cave before the patient extraction was complete).



Photo: Richard Bugg

The good thing is we cocked it up during a practice, not when it really mattered, and cocking it up for real is always a more lasting way of remembering stuff than a theoretical conversation/training package. So thanks to Brian and our surface team for ensuring that’ll never happen again when it counts! As anticipated, the smaller Michie units were often overwhelmed by the noise of the streamway. The base station models are clearly superior in this regard and we should get some more. But not all caves are noisy buggers and the small units are still valuable (small and effective in most cave passages).



Photo: Richard Bugg

Surface roles – no one wants to be stuck on the surface when all the fun is happening underground, but it is such an important role in a safe and effective rescue. My personal focus has always been on the rigging skills side of things with the approach of ‘SES/Police are masters at the surface logistics and they’ll sort that out in a real rescue’ (as they did for Midnight Hole). Deb and Janice up north are keener on having more in-house skills in this area and Amy down here loves it. I’m still divided. It is at least evident that if we’re going to keep having rescue exercises which are not heavily attended by SES etc. doing that role then we need to at least

get ourselves satisfactorily proficient at it. Our surface team did a good job with limited resources and very little specific training. They certainly put on a good spread and wonderful hot tea when I popped out onto the surface for a ten-minute break.

The underground rigging and stretcher movement phases went as well as could be hoped. A few lessons were learnt the hard way. Having some 13 mm spanners in the rescue kits might come in handy in the future...



Photo: Richard Bugg

I was generally very happy with the way most teams planned their respective sections. Al and I hovered back and forth giving a few tips here and there but there were no ‘oh my God, you were going to do what?!’ moments and there were even a few times I found myself thinking ‘hmm, yeah, that’s clever’. The transitions, as ever, were where a few problems presented. Getting the rigging right to facilitate quick and easy stretcher transition is the hardest bit to do and there were a few 10-minute delays while heads were scratched. The omnipresent roar of the stream didn’t help with any of these situations. Some of these were pretty evident before the extraction started but, as mentioned earlier, participants likely learn more from experiencing the difficulties first hand rather than just being told it’s not going to work and change it beforehand.



Photo: Richard Bugg

There have been a few upgrades to the rescue kits resulting from lessons learned:

I failed to consider that the bulk of attendees were not seasoned Tasmanian cavers with a bolting history and assumed the ‘BYO 13 mm spanner’ rule was more widely known; *mea culpa*. Luckily Steve Fordyce always travels

with two impact drivers and six spanners. Each of the six rescue kits now have two 13 mm spanners in them.

Despite lots of training sessions over the past few years, there’s still a general lack of confidence and skills with regards to the basics. The fact things keep changing as we muck around with systems and fine tune them doesn’t always help. To assist with this I’ve prepared some laminated contents and rigging basics cheat sheets to include in the six rescue kits, including things like what’s in the kits, accepted bolting patterns (triangles for counterweights, linear for tyroleans), knotting out any long legs on the triple load share anchors (now more prevalent that we’re doing linear setups for tyroleans), suggestions on assessing the strengths and weaknesses of your team and assign roles appropriately, general tips and advice etc.

What next?

Once all this COVID-19 nonsense gets a bit more under control I’d like to run a small underground rigging refresher with aspiring local team leaders and other intermediate level cavers this winter. So not a total beginning from scratch exercise, but a one-day session with those already half-skilled to fine tune a few things. I was thinking a return to the scene of the crime from 2018’s Mystery Creek Cave exercise and re-rig some of the setups (using the existing bolt holes), with a particular focus on transitions, and rotating people around roles.

Then hopefully in late 2020 or early 2021 we’ll be able to get a larger crew together and do something a bit more ambitious in a new venue.



Photo: Gabriel Kinzler

Hugs and Kisses

Thanks very much to everyone who attended, particularly those from miles away.

Thanks to Serena for assistance with spreadsheet work and divvying up teams, as well as attending the site recce trip a few weeks before the event.

Thanks to Damian (Tas Police) for his general support of the club and what we do, attending the site recce trip and attending the rescue itself. And for raiding the Police equipment store for us.

Thanks to Jamie Bugg (Ambulance Tas) for taking so many amazing photos throughout the exercise and then making them available to all attendees to add to their private collections and use with articles and future promotional material.

Thanks also to Charles Wendell-Smith at Ambulance Tas for facilitating the paperwork side of things which allowed Jamie and Anna Ekdahl to attend under the AT banner.

All the Cave Rescue Squad NSW people who made it down, particularly Al Warild, who has contributed so much time and wisdom around the country over the last few years.

ASF/Australian Cave Rescue Commission/ASF Grants Commission for throwing some money at FUSSI to subsidise their attendance from Adelaide with the CaveLink setup.

The Tasmanian Community Fund for throwing all that money at us a few years ago so we could afford all that shiny gear we now get to play with.

It was epic to organise and by all accounts a bit epic to attend. Still easier and less stressful than that bloody quiz night Nat and I organised though.

IB-11 Midnight Hole

27 February 2020

Gabriel Kinzler

Party: Serena Benjamin, Gabriel Kinzler, Abdel Soudan, Emalisa White

Serena and I had long wanted to tick off a pull-down through-trip and to perfect that technique in Midnight Hole.

As simple as it looks on paper, it still requires enough faffing and critical thinking that it felt like an intimidating task. It was also the perfect occasion to take a couple of beginners: a novice (with a fair amount of experience) in Abdel, and a total rookie in Emalisa.



Innocence.

Photo: Gabriel Kinzler

Main lesson learnt: as you abseil, make sure the ropes don't get twisted. That is the main risk, which can make it impossible to pull down the rope for the rest of the descent. Asking your mates to do a quick pull-test is a good idea before the last caver comes down.

A pleasant trip, with only the sheer horror expressed by Emalisa when crossing the Chasm of Fear to punctuate it with any real excitement.

If only we knew this would be our last caving trip for several months...

Vietnam Pandemic Expedition 2020

Alan Jackson

Gabriel reckons he needs copy for the Spiel, since no one's been allowed to go caving, so here's a verbose account of my last real caving to fill some pages.

I've been frequenting Vietnam for cave exploration since 2014. The recent 2020 expedition was my fifth one. It always throws up a tantalising mix of gobsmacking cave exploration and testing emotional and physical torture; one might call it character-building. I'm quite full of character after this latest round of suffering - every expedition should have a pandemic thrown in to spice it up a bit.

Clouds on the Horizon

Mid-January 2020 and general media coverage of the strange new virus coming out of China is starting to be taken a bit more seriously. I turn to Loretta and make the observation that if this is 'the one' then it could spell disaster for my planned Vietnam 2020 expedition in February-March - just enough time for it to spiral out of control and be causing global panic. Ah well, 'control what you can control and don't stress about the rest' has served me well for 40 years, so I opted for the 'she'll be right' approach.

Late January and the World Health Organisation is starting to test out words like 'pandemic' and my travel insurance company is politely informing me that while I took out my policy before an all-important date (specified by them) and was still covered for some corona virus-related hiccups (but not reimbursement if I cancelled my trip), that I should reconsider my travel plans. A few days later they informed me that all bets were off and that nothing related to the corona virus was their problem. I was on my own. Ah, insurance companies - always there until you need them.

Mid-February and parts of China are in lockdown, Iran and Italy are looking 'problematic' and countries like the USA and Australia are finding their first few cases. Australian's evacuating from Wuhan, China are being sent to quarantine on Christmas Island and non-Australians travelling from China to Australia are told to piss off unless they've done two weeks somewhere else on the way. It was decision time on whether to go at all, considering that it could end up being a significantly longer trip than the three weeks I'd planned. In the end we decided I'd go (I'd not been to Christmas Island, so a brief holiday on the way back home could be fun; they have caves there...) but I'd take my laptop with me so I could at least make some attempt at working remotely if I got stuck somewhere.

For once our visa paperwork arrived with more than four working days before departure date; there's nothing quite like posting your passport to Sydney a few days before you're due to leave the country. Just after I posted it reports of problems started trickling in from the UK cavers heading over. The dates on the visa invitation letter matched the expedition dates but didn't allow any overlap either side for commuting to and from Phong Nha. The embassy in the UK was playing hardball and wouldn't issue a visa with dates outside those specified in the invitation and the only option was to rebook their flights to come out a day or two later than they'd already purchased. I got angry, asking myself why does there always have to be some bloody visa stuff up, then remembered the 'control what you can control' mantra

and sat back to await a response from the embassy in Sydney. I wasn't interested in forking out for new tickets so it was game over for me if I got the same news (unsurprisingly, travel insurance doesn't cover you for visa complication-related cancellations). A few days before I was due to leave my passport returned and I gingerly opened it up to check the dates on the visa. It was a relief to see they'd used the dates I'd listed on the application as my arrival and departure dates, not the narrower range on the invitation letter. Phew! 28 February came round and I was off.

Leaving on a Jet Plane

Melbourne International was quieter than normal, but still bustling. Immigration at Ho Chi Minh City was more serious than usual (which is saying something), with officials wearing face masks and gloves and hiding behind Perspex screens. My passport was thoroughly inspected and they took a good look at my old visa from China in 2011; Vietnam had shut their border with China in early January as there is no love lost between those neighbours. I was applying hand sanitiser liberally (it was still available on the shelves when I left Australia) and keeping my distance from people. As the airport doors slid open in front of me I was greeted with the usual barrage of South-East Asian sensory overload – motorbikes, humidity, pollution and pushy twats trying to get you into their taxi. As usual, I opted to walk to my hotel for the full experience; crossing the main road outside the airport on foot is easily the biggest adrenalin rush of any caving expedition to Vietnam. With an 85 litre back pack and a 45-litre day pack on my front one almost fits the 'water buffalo' category and vehicles opt to go round you rather than through you. For once I had a relaxing night in HCM, due to the lack of other cavers coming in at the same time. Usually a raucous night out is had with hangovers and seediness threatening to provide a second chance to inspect your breakfast the following morning. I awoke refreshed and rested, took my life in my own hands again crossing the road and lined up for my domestic flight to Dong Hoi, where my chauffeur awaited and whisked me away to Phong Nha, some 40 minutes away. It was nice to be back, passing familiar land marks and being reminded of good times had in the past.



Wading the river on day 2 of our first trip out
Photo: Alan Jackson

The expedition was now starting two days later than planned, to allow the guys from the UK to turn up on their new flights. This gave me plenty of time to catch up with the expedit members already in Phong Nha (working in various roles for Oxalis – the adventure tour company which runs

trips to Hang Son Doong etc.), sort my personal kit and prepare team kit for the first trips out. Normally it's turn up one day and head straight out the next.

Torture Round 1

On 2 March we headed out into the jungle. I was in a team of five cavers which headed south to Quang Ninh province, where some caving had been done back in circa 2009 but nothing since, for a six-day trip. Another team of three headed out somewhere else, with a fourth due to arrive later that day and catch up with the others the following day. Our trip presented all the usual elements of Vietnamese expeditions, from utter frustration and misery through to unmitigated cave exploration heaven. We had a reasonable commute on day one, driving a few hours then loafing about while local permissions and paperwork was sorted out (always a touch-and-go affair) then finally setting off into the jungle in front of a bunch of bemused-looking local farmers at the end of a dirt track around 2 pm. It was only a short walk of a couple of hours to a pleasant spot beside a river.

Our caving team consisted of Deb Limbert (linchpin of Vietnam caving expedit since it all started in 1990), Adam Spillane (been everywhere, done everything caver and Vietnam caver since 2009ish), Dave Ramsay (Vietnam vet since 2014 – same as me) and Paul Fairman (a Vietnam newbie). We all learnt a valuable lesson on the first evening – Paul snores terribly and was called 'the Walrus' for the rest of the expedition (and a few other ruder names). Social distancing was set to become a theme of the expedition well before it caught on globally.

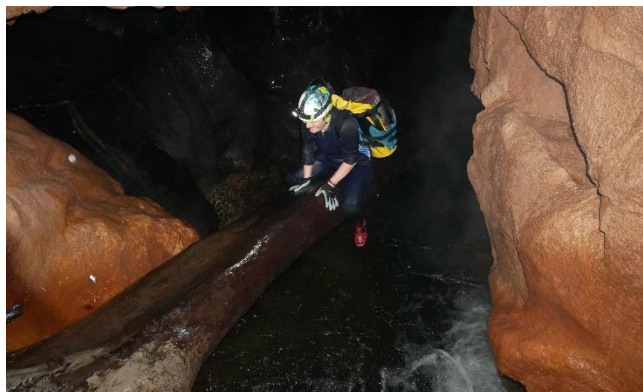


More wading the river on day 2
Photo: Alan Jackson

Day 2 began with an early rising, which is usually a sign that we had a long day of walking ahead of us. It proved to be true. We walked and walked all bloody day up and down hills and rivers. In the fading light we found ourselves wading down a large river bed with lovely limestone cliffs and towering karst landforms in the distance. Suddenly we stopped and were told we'd arrived. The river disappeared into a 40 m high entrance 100 m downstream so we went to sleep that night satisfied that tomorrow might bring some caving.

In the morning we were told that this cave was only short, with some swimming, then a bit further downstream there was another sink which they hadn't been in. The description

kind of matched that of the two caves that had been investigated in 2009, but we were hundreds of metres away from the GPS coordinates for those caves and Adam, who had been on the 2009 trip, said it had only been an easy half day to walk to the area, so we hoped all was good. Adam didn't feel the entrance was familiar.



*Deb on the slippery log up the cascade in Birthday Cave
Photo: Paul Fairman*

The first cave was fabulous and sporty with a lively water flow, plenty of cascades and swims but was only ~360 m long before it burst back out into the daylight. Adam was trying to decide if it matched his 2009 'Birthday Cave' memory but that trip had been notorious for the considerable consumption of alcohol and illicit drugs involved – it had been Andy McKenzie's 18th birthday. His memory was hazy at best. I was simply happy that I'd managed to fit the entire cave onto two A5 sheets (numbers on one, sketch on the other). Converting my brain from Tasmanian surveying mode to Vietnam mode usually takes longer than the first day.

We slipped and stumbled down the horrendous boulder river bed for close to 1 km and came across the next stream sink as promised. Alas it only went a hundred metres or so before terminating in a massive fetid sump pool which Adam realised was almost certainly the same cave as they'd explored in 2009, Rao May, making the other through trip almost certainly Birthday Cave. Bugger. Ah well. We slogged back up the river, through Birthday Cave and back into camp to while away the time.

2020: A Chert Odyssey

We really weren't sure what the plan was for the next day and if they had any good targets for us or how far away they were. We started by climbing up over the col above Birthday Cave then descending to the lower entrance back into that treacherous bastard river bed. About 150 m short of the stream sink we pulled up on a sand bank and the guides asked us if we'd checked the cave on the opposite bank. We looked a bit sheepish and admitted we'd totally failed to notice the large healthy inlet stream joining the main river. I think we'd been so bloody happy to see 40 m of easy walking on the sand bank opposite, after enduring 900 m of horror further upstream, that we'd completely failed to even glance to the other side. A bit embarrassing.

We dumped our bags, gathered the bare minimum (helmet, light, survey kit) and clambered up the slippery boulder pile guarding the hidden entrance. We didn't expect it to go as we'd already resigned ourselves to this trip out being 'one of

those' trips where you rediscover historic caves and get a nice bit of exercise and jungle suffering in between. To our surprise the cave seemed open and nice. We walked, waded and swam upstream in good-sized stream passage (generally 5-10 m wide), past an apparently lost green water dragon propped on a rock mid-stream, for about 300 m to what looked ominously like a sump. Deb swam across the pool and reported a draughting slot which she negotiated then called out that it was big and going again. Not at all appropriately dressed for this much swimming, particularly at surveying pace, we decided this was clearly a good cave and that we should pop out again, grab some lunch, put wetsuits on then return with a bit more safety gear.



*Upstream entrance to Birthday Cave
Photo: Paul Fairman*

Round 2 saw us check a few of the side passages, one of which lead to a daylight hole (maybe where that silly lizard came in?) then a good push up the main drag. It was mostly wading and swimming at a low to moderate gradient with the occasional half metre cascade. The passage then changed from wide and not overly high in very cherty rock to tall and skinny in very pure limestone. The cherty stuff proved entertaining as foot and hand holds would fail spectacularly whenever you were trying to avoid a swim or clinging to the wall trying to sketch or do instruments. The chert theme would continue in this cave and resulted in many stupid chert puns making their way onto the survey: Cherty Cherty Bang Bang, 50 Shades of Chert, 2020 – A Chert Odyssey and all nine episodes of Star Wars (from The Chert Menace through to The Rise of Chertwalker). After seemingly endless 20 + m legs we decided to call it a day at a long canal swim. The morning session had yielded about 450 m of survey and the afternoon session another 850 m. A good day's caving.



*Looking out the upstream entrance to Birthday Cave
Photo: Paul Fairman*

On the way out I took pity on the lizard, who frankly looked cold, skinny and lost. The fact that I simply walked over and picked him up without issue (try doing that with a warm, well fed 50 cm sub-tropical lizard) confirmed my suspicions. I swam him out to the entrance, holding him aloft with one hand in what I coined ‘lizard paddle’, and released him into the jungle night, hoping a snake didn’t find him before he could warm himself up in the morning sun. At least I’d given him half a chance.

Cherty Cherty Bang Bang

Day four saw us split into two. The guides had another entrance to show us which sounded like it had potential to be the main river downstream of Rao May, just below camp. Deb and Adam went there while Dave, Paul and I went back into yesterday’s cave. Our day proved to be the day of the expedition. The cave just went and went and went, constantly changing character with exciting sections sporting exposed climbs up thundering cascades, long swims, superb pretties and one section where the passage grew inexplicably massive (you know... ‘left 40 m, right 70 m, up 65 m, down 1.5 m’ kind of stuff). Eventually a few granite boulders started showing up in the river bed, then a few more bigger ones, then loads of massive 4 m diameter boulders, indicating an entrance was coming up. It all ended in a big jam of huge boulders with the stream bursting in through a narrow canal off to one side which eventually sumped. The carnival was over.

We retreated, leaving one wide-open inlet side lead and a few other minor dry side leads; not enough time in the day, or more to the point, fuel in Paul’s tank. Let’s just say he wasn’t particularly cave fit and was becoming a bit of a liability. He had an exhaustion-induced (physical and mental) near death experience in the massive section of

passage (a few kilometres from home) when he opted to traverse a slope of hanging boulders rather than a simple solid climb. The whole lot took off under his feet and he somehow managed to land in the only deep pool of water for 100 m in either direction and then have all the ensuing chaos rain down around him but none of it on him. Lucky boy. It was a frustratingly slow trip out (you know how much I like babysitting numpties) but we got there. Over 2,550 m of new passage in the book! While we were referring to it as Cherty Cave, the local lads decided they’d call it Hang Nuoc Ngam (Underground Stream Cave... catchy).



*The almost but not actually a sump in Hang Nuoc Ngam
Photo: Deb Limbert*

The others had had a successful day, too, with a sketchy climb down into new river cave, 500 m of survey in the bag and wide open passage ahead of them. A lack of rope and buoyancy had turned them off jumping into the stream down the rapid at their turnaround point – it might have been a one way trip.



*Sunrise over camp near at Hang Nuoc Ngam
Photo: Alan Jackson*

The next day was day six, so it was home day. We figured we were in for an easy day, most likely heading out the way Adam had headed in back in 2009. The GPS certainly suggested so. Later examination of maps indicated we’d taken a stupidly circuitous route on the first two days. This is the typical Vietnam experience – the guides operate on memory and gut instinct out here, without the benefits of GPS, maps and satellite imagery. Sometimes it’s hard to

contain one's frustrations when you realise you've spent 30% of your expedition time walking in directions you totally didn't need to, but it's a good test of character and my ability to deal with it has improved markedly since my early trips. With the exception of bullshit tolerance, I'm a big soft pussy cat compared to my twenties.

The only hiccup on day six was hammock failure during the night. Our campsite was on the sandy bank with only crappy vegetation around. The guides harvested stout spars from further afield and built themselves their classic braced square sleeping frame, and made a triangle one for us, but Dave and I knew we couldn't sleep within 10 m of Paul's snoring, so we'd got them to set up an alternative rig for us. After two nights the braced pole shoved in the sand we'd been sharing gave up the ghost. Not enough to void all chance of sleep but let's just say instead of staying perched tautly, like a bead of sweat on a nubile abdomen, we were hanging more like testicles in an old man's scrotum. Yeah, sorry about that sentence – a shocker, but I'm leaving it in.

The walk out proved to be quite funny (if you'd managed to swallow your *Little Book of Calm*). It was a pretty gruelling hill climb and descent, but it was only a few hours and we came out at exactly the same spot we'd left from on day 1. So our epic day 2 tour of the jungle was completely pointless. Ah well.



Josh being tested with quite an audience including local TV
Photo: Peter McNab

Coming back in to phone/internet range proved quite entertaining. The world had taken a couple of steps further toward Armageddon, but it was still laughable rather than scary. Well, laughable for our team, at least. It turned out the other team had had a horror run and they were currently unaware that it was about to get a whole lot worse. Day 1 they'd been refused permissions and had returned to Phong

Nha. This was kind of handy, as the day late arrival (Josh Bratchley of Thai soccer team rescue fame) was able to easily catch up with his team. Then they'd headed out the next day to a good lead we had lined up as a day trip space-filler, but again permissions fell through and it was two in a row for them. By now Howard Limbert had managed to rearrange a few things and got a guide and porter team together for them to head off for another target on a five-day trip. After they headed out the authorities came knocking on Howard's door trying to track down one Josh Bratchley so he, and anyone he'd come in contact with, could be quarantined, as he'd shared an international flight with a woman who'd tested positive for corona virus. Vietnam wasn't taking prisoners with their approach to tracking and tracing. He and the rest of his team were now screwed, with mandatory quarantine awaiting them upon their return. Poo.

Free the Phong Nha Five

No point all of us having no fun though, so we lined up a day trip for the next day to the second area/cave the other team had been turned away from a few days earlier up near Phu Nhieu. It was about an hour's drive north of Phong Nha and we thought it was all good to go but when we turned up to our guide's house it was pretty evident there was a wedding on! Amazingly, the guide was still prepared to take us out, but not to the good lead further up the hill, but to another cave he knew closer by. He led us there (about half an hour's walk through fields and moody water buffalo) to a resurgence then waved goodbye and went back to marry off his daughter. Good bloke!

The cave started with a sump, which didn't bode well, but a tight bypass was found and we found ourselves in delightful large stream passage. Alas, it sumped good and proper after a couple of hundred metres. On the way out, Paul managed to put his hand on a bloody great snake. It was so ridiculously well-camouflaged on the cobbled floor that you almost can't see it in the photos and videos we took of it. An online snake ID site later informed us it was a three-horned pit viper (not a friendly type). You never know when you're going to take your life (or a snake) in your hands caving in Vietnam.



The Phong Nha Five
Photo: Alan Jackson

Not the grandest day out but better than what the other team was doing when we got back to Phong Nha. They'd been met on the side of the road by the disease control squad, dressed in full PPE. They'd been poked, prodded, tested and

fumigated. It came as a bit of a surprise and was a bit of a laugh initially, but the reality of 14 days quarantine set in pretty quickly. Thankfully the authorities agreed that since they'd been out in the jungle, effectively quarantined from the rest of the world for five days already, they'd only make them do ten more days under house arrest in Phong Nha (and not in some horrid quarantine facility). Another British expat, Colin Limbert (Howard's brother) who works for Oxalis, was also put into quarantine in the same residence as he'd just got off guiding an Oxalis tour which had a suspected corona virus case on it.



Visitors to the plague house keeping their distance
Photo: Josh Bratchley

So five foreigners and a bunch of locals (porters/guides) holed up in the one house and drank themselves stupid for ten days. They were quite the local attraction; Phong Nha is a very small place and they were the talk of the town. Some people treated them like pariahs while others took pity on them and brought supplies (booze mostly), games and conversation. It is important to note that although the situation did get fairly dire emotionally for them now and again, at no point was it serious enough that they opened the Monopoly box someone supplied.

Keep Calm and Carry On

With the B team holed up in quarantine, the A team decided we'd better double down to take up the slack. We headed out for what was supposed to be five days somewhere beyond Hang Vom (Arch Cave). The Vom system is massive, explored in the mid and late '90s and a dry section is a major tourist cave (Paradise Cave). It started with an early schedule which progressively pushed out to a post-lunch departure. The guide was not one any of us had experience with and he looked a bit old and self-important. I'm not saying old guides are a problem, typically, but the Vietnam tradition of respecting elders sometimes leads to old twats being paid respect even when they're simply twats that don't deserve any. We got twatted big time on this trip.

To cut a long story short, he changed his story constantly on how far away things were and then took us to a cave right next to Hang Vom which was being used for adventure tourism day trips by Phong Nha Discovery Tours, complete with handlines. They referred to it as Hang Vom Dry. It turned out no one had ever surveyed this cave, so we bowled over ~400 m and headed home, but on the way the silly old git tried to coax us up some stupid hill very close to Phong

Nha with full camp gear and the remaining four days of food. We told him that considering his earlier effort, we didn't like our chances on this one and that maybe a day trip some other time, without tens of kilograms of unnecessary gear, would be a better approach. We returned to Phong Nha.

So a five day trip had quickly turned into an overnigher with a lot of dead time. We were a bit gobsmacked at how badly this outing had turned out to be – it was pretty bad even by Vietnam standards. The self-pity was soon put into perspective when we got back to Phong Nha and were reminded of the circumstances over at the plague house.

More Character Building

Ryan Deboodt (exceptional photographer) had arrived in town on his way to another job for the BBC nearby. Ryan is one of those strange Americans who is unassuming, quiet, intelligent and great company – a diamond in the rough. He's a bloody good photographer too. He would be joining us for our next trip out for a few days. It was a bit of a weird mission to try to find a fabled cave near Doline 2 of Hang Son Doong. The plan was to kill time re-checking some leads in a nearby cave pushed in 2010 (Loong Coong) while the lads swept the jungle for their alleged hot lead.

John Volanthen (another Thai cave rescue hero) was meant to be coming out at this stage of the exped to attempt a connection dive between HSD and Hang Thung, supported by Josh, while there were willing Sherpas about, but he decided it was all looking a bit grim and made the sensible decision to stay home.



What could possibly go wrong?
Photo: Ryan Deboodt

Our first day was short but sharp (ludicrously steep hill) with one of the most majestic camps ever – stunning jungle. It even inspired me to sketch the scene in my diary. Not a sketch of sufficient quality to reproduce here, but just the fact it got me drawing speaks volumes. Day 2 was a long slog up and down and round enclosed depressions infested with every spikey bastard plant and animal the jungle could muster. Mid-afternoon we pulled up stumps at the edge of a very large hole in the ground – Doline 2. There was no water anywhere but there was a grove of banana plants, so we set up there and started the water-harvesting process (cut down banana plant, hollow a well out of the centre of the stump and wait). The problem with banana groves is they tend to form monocultures in deep wet soils and exclude other trees. This makes swinging hammocks difficult, particularly when the banana grove is surrounded by diabolical razor karren on

steep slopes. In the end I decided to tempt fate and use a big tree for one end of my hammock and large banana plant for the other. A test weighting demonstrated the banana wasn't up to it, so I backed it up to a nearby banana and it looked like it would work. And it did... for the first night.

Heavenly Rays

The next day we headed around Doline 2 and over to Loong Coong. A 15 m wide circular hole in the forest floor plunges 70 m into a massive chamber.



Dave on rope in Loong Coong
Photo: Alan Jackson

It was a sunny day and the beams of light cutting through the steam in the cave were gobsmackingly beautiful. Lots of photos taken, including much photographer assistance activity for Ryan, posing here, posing there, lugging his kit around for him. We then left Ryan to his own devices and pushed the lead left over from 2010 in the lower end of the chamber. In the end we didn't even make it as far as the 2010 team due to general apathy and insufficient gear. From the direction it was heading and the entrance's location based on the 2010 waypoint it was clear it was just going to be another entrance into HSD. Of course the new waypoint we collected placed it on the other side of the underlying HSD passage which suddenly meant the draughting lead is heading AWAY from HSD into a tantalising blank spot on the map. ARGH!

Things That Go Bump in the Night

My banana tree failed catastrophically in the middle of the night. There was an almighty crash which sounded very close to my ears and I was bouncing up and down in my hammock. It was pretty evident what had happened but there was no tunnel with a light, so I figured I was still alive. To

my great surprise I still seemed to be suspended above the ground. I gave it five minutes so as not to let on to anyone else around camp that there'd been an incident; saving face, even in the jungle, is critical. Several people heard the tree fall in the night but since no one screamed they figured it was just a random event and didn't get up to investigate. So, face saved.



Banana plant failure method
Photo: Alan Jackson

After five minutes, I turned a light on and snuck a peek, discovering the banana was resting on my tarp, have missed me by a handful of degrees. I couldn't work out how I was still airborne though; that would have to wait till daylight. In the morning it was evident that the banana had sheered through immediately above the point where I'd tied on the back up, so I was still suspended from the remaining stump, backed up to the other stump. Everyone had a good laugh, but importantly I'd been nonchalant enough about it during the night that I'd closed the door on this becoming a ribbing point for the rest of the day.

Impenetrable Fog

The rest of that day, and most of the next, was spent flogging through the jungle to a new camp spot and swinging in camp killing leeches and time while the lads performed a fruitless search in the rain and low cloud for the fabled cave. It didn't eventuate and we headed out a day early. A bit of a nothing trip in terms of pushing new cave, but the sunbeam experience in Loong Coong will be forever etched in my memory and totally worth the five days invested in the outing, and nearly being killed by a banana.



Loong Coong vista
Photo: Alan Jackson

The news on the pandemic front had developed somewhat in our absence. The UK was going under, but Boris was still in denial. Australia was starting to sound nervous and talking about closing its borders to non-citizens. The local tourism industry was falling on its face and pretty much all Oxalis staff were being put on ice. Non-essential expats were being fired. Better get some more caving in before it goes totally pear-shaped.

Third Time Lucky

It was the Phong Nha Five's last day of quarantine, so we booked ourselves a day trip to the cave we'd already tried to get to twice this expedition (Phu Nhieu 4). No wedding today, so our man took us up and over the big hill to an unassuming entrance at the base of a small cliff. Small, no real draught but not far from a wet season channel and sink. It turned into a cracking cave. The crusty upper level dropped into a large wet season overflow passage, which in turn intersected a larger wet season overflow passage (complete with plenty of static pools to swim through) which again intersected another passage with an active river. Bonza! We pushed the river upstream a couple hundred metres to a sump being fiercely defended by an irate crab. Time was short so downstream was left for another day. A good km or so of quality cave.



*The first swim awaits in Phu Nhieu 4
Photo: Deb Limbert*

Back in town the quarantined team had all been given the once over, issued with a clean bill of health (including a certificate to prove it) and released back into the wild. A night out at the bar was clearly in order. At the bar we bumped into a group of American 'cavers' who were waxing lyrical about their ground-breaking Vietnam caving expedition plans. We found it rather amusing, as with 30 years of experience running expeds in the country, our British-led team know all the ins and outs of expedition caving in Vietnam and just how much bureaucracy, paperwork, levels of permission, blood, sweat and tears is required to be allowed to set foot off the road in search of new caves in this country. We also knew that we had the only active permit to be running expeds in this part of the country. Basically what they were really doing was going out with a local adventure tour operator, Jungle Boss, to some caves the British explored in the mid and late '90s, but they made it sound like they were off to find another world's biggest cave and redefine cave exploration in the country. When we pointed out they were kidding themselves they complained

that they'd been unable to find any good history on the area. We suggested they could have contacted Howard and Deb, or visited <http://www.vietnamcaves.com/> for comprehensive trip reports.

Panic Buying (and Flying) Starts

The news was full of Australians coming to blows in supermarket aisles over the dwindling toilet paper supplies. Things were starting to go to shit back home and toilet paper was apparently the only clear path to cleaning it up. Snablet and Martin (part of the Phong Nha Five and who'd already been in Phong Nha working for Oxalis prior to the expedition) had spent a lot of time thinking about their situation and their prospects of getting home and they chose to bail now rather than squeeze a last few days caving. Snablet almost had no choice, as he was returning to New Zealand and with Australia not allowing even transiting non-citizens into the country his options for a direct flight to Auckland from the few South East Asian ports still allowing transits themselves were few. (Snablet got home, did another two weeks quarantine upon arrival, then did four weeks of full lockdown with the rest of his compatriots. Harsh.) Martin mainly wanted to get home before the UK imposed mandatory quarantine on arrival, as he didn't think he could do another stint back to back. Ryan headed for Da Nang, where he was meant to be meeting a BBC film crew to work on some monkey project, but in the end they didn't make it out and Ryan bailed back to his home base in Tanzania, which he in turn escaped from back to the US for a full Trumpageddon experience.

Darren and Josh were prepared to risk it though. They hadn't had the luxury of joining the successful Laos exped a few months earlier like Martin and Snablet had, or working in the area in the preceding weeks, so they wanted to make every moment count they could. We split up into two teams again and headed out for another ~5 day stint. Dave, Darren and I headed north and Adam, Josh and Paul headed back to Quang Ninh to finish the river cave Adam and Deb had started on our first trip out. Dave and I were happy to take our chance with unknown leads to the north with our good mate Darren rather than an almost certain going cave to the south with the bloody Walrus (goo goo g'joob).

Bits and Pieces

We drove a few hours north, found our local guide who allegedly knew a few good cave entrances (which had been recced by another guy who works for National Parks and does a great job of ground-truthing leads and sorting permissions). As is traditional in these parts, we introduced ourselves then took over his house: commandeering his kitchen, entertaining his kids, sleeping on his table etc. His first cave, Cha Ra, wasn't far away, so we hit it that afternoon. It was a half hour walk through fields and plantations to a massive cliff with a big entrance and small stream flowing in. Well, we walked and he rode his motorbike, which had a leaky manifold, or something, and sounded like some kind of cartoon bubble blower. We scoured the large entrance and finally found a way to climb down in one corner to teetering rock pile with the sound of flowing water below (this is how far it had been recced). A handline got us down and the cave got big with a small stream. The stream then sank and the only way on was into

smaller passage which obviously rages in the wet season. The passage descended steeply, including some great climbs on steep bedding plane descents. A 15 m pitch to a chamber and a static sump was all that awaited us at the bottom though. 300 m long and 140 m deep – a nice afternoon.



Cha Ra entrance climbs
Photo: Alan Jackson

The next morning we headed up the road in the back of a local's truck for a few kilometres then set off on foot up a river. I'd been here two years previously on my way to Ruc Ma Rin (a fantastic cave which kept me, Sarah Gilbert and two others busy for four days; 4.7 km long and 200 m deep). In 2018 the walk in had taken all day, finishing on dark. Today we only walked for an hour up the first hill then set up camp beside the stream and walked 100 m to the entrance for an afternoon session.



The approach to Ma Lon
Photo: Alan Jackson

The cave, Ma Lon, was a nice, small (by Vietnam standards) flood resurgence. After 100 m it narrowed down and twisted and turned to a large side chamber and an active stream. The stream was followed up via a series of flowstone-coated climbs, becoming increasingly batty, until it sumped in a pool of panicked swimming bats (aquabats, one might say). Dave pushed a roof sniff to find a proper sump a bit further on and briefly wore a bat like a face mask. 460 m of survey in the bag, and fifteen bats each clinging to our clothes, we toddled back out to camp.

Our guide said he had another cave a couple of hours away, which he could look for in the morning, but he'd not been

there for ten years. The dude was getting on a bit, had a bung knee and was popping a lot of pills each evening so we decided we'd spare him the agony and us the tedium of waiting out what would inevitably be a classic fruitless search day. We got on the sat phone and checked with Deb (who was still based in Phong Nha solving Oxalis problems) if she thought we should move to some other potential leads in a small town on the way home and settled on that plan of action.



Ma Lon entrance passage
Photo: Dave Ramsay

Yorkshire Caving

We wandered out in the morning with a terrifyingly loud soundtrack of crashing thunder. Just keep your head lower than the water buffalos and you'll be fine, right? We sheltered from the rain (and electrocution) in the front porch of a random 95-year-old who was delighted to entertain us and supplied us with sheets of cardboard so we could place our leeches on there for him to burn with glee. We dropped off old mate at his house and relocated to Ban On village, where we did the permissions thing for the fiftieth time in three weeks then went to meet our local guide. He had two caves for us, both shafts. We had limited rope with us, having horizontal targets in the other area, but figured we'd check out the closer one which was allegedly only a 20 m pit. To our amazement it was indeed close AND a 20 m deep pit – usually the locals' estimates of time and pit depths are woefully inaccurate (time is nearly always overestimated and pitches could go either way). With no drill, some nasty rubs and only just enough rope, I set up an exciting natural rig. The current generation of STC caver would have probably deemed it impossible and gone home; the modern era of omnipresent hammer drills has severely weakened the skills and mindset of the average modern caver.

At the bottom of the pitch a spacious passage headed south back towards where we knew there was a valley with a surface river flowing. It closed down in flowstone. Dave and I were happy it was over but Darren, having suffered ten days in quarantine, wasn't going to give up so easily. He spotted some nasty tight slot in the northern wall of the entrance shaft and burrowed in. Dave and I waited impatiently for him to return emptyhanded but our hopes were dashed when he called out it was going. It was horrible. Proper Yorkshire tight and scratchy and not what we come to Vietnam for. But to Darren's credit it suddenly opened up and there was a healthy stream flowing across the floor. It, of course, sumped 20 m later...

The only other lead was reputedly a 50 m shaft a couple of hours away. With not enough rope we figured it was pointless and headed for home. We only had two caving days left, one of which we knew should be a good crack in Phu Nhieu 4.

The Exodus Begins

Back in Phong Nha operation ‘Foreigner Evacuation’ was in full swing. Flights were being cancelled faster than you could book them and it was panic stations. Everything local sources, Loretta and I could find suggested my flights were still all good, with the exception of likely changes to the Melbourne-Hobart leg, which didn’t concern me. Keen to only start throwing money at airlines when I absolutely had to, I put on my best poker face and stayed the course.

Dave and Darren discovered their Vietnamese domestic flight had been cancelled and their international flight had been pushed out two days. This meant more time to cave for them, but also meant they’d be overstaying their visa. We decided that in the current climate, the last thing the Vietnamese officialdom was going to worry about was a one day visa overstay. Foreigners were starting to be considered unwelcome as 80% of the virus cases in Vietnam had come in on foreign travellers. I experienced my first bit of racism that morning in the market, with some local shopkeepers giving me a wide birth and refusing to serve me, instead of the usual beaming smile they reserved for everyone. It was mildly upsetting but more a happy feeling I got, seeing first hand that it’s not just Asians in Australia that were getting abused but any outsider anywhere – it’s not just whites that are racist and make irrational decisions based on ignorance and stupidity, it’s all humans.

The Last Hurrah

We dragged Deb out for a final day of caving in Phu Nhieu 4. We racked up another kilometre of passage in the downstream section, which ultimately sumped in a ludicrous maze of narrow canals, only a few hundred metres shy of the upstream sump in Three Horned Pit Viper Cave/Phu Nhieu 2. We really didn’t check them all, as the plethora of question marks on the survey indicates. It was a great last day’s caving.



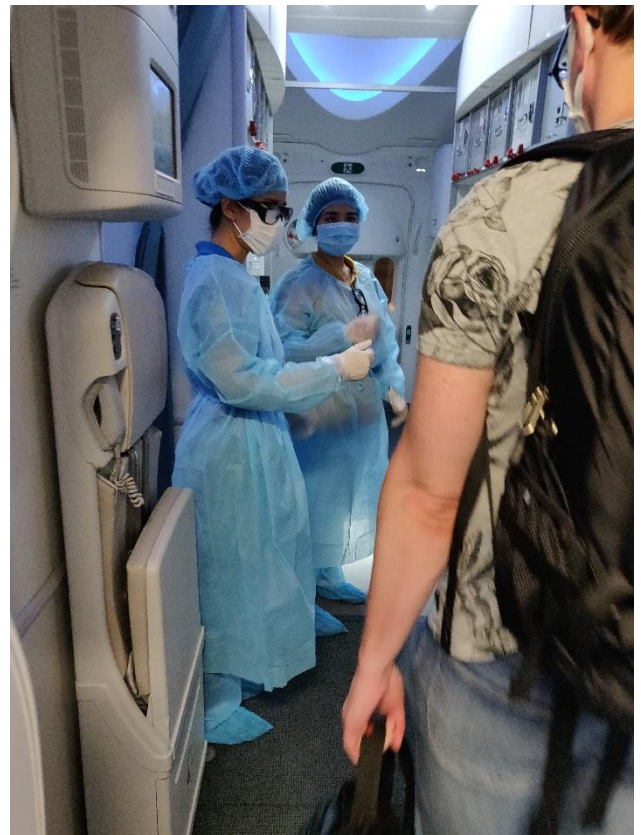
*The Vietnamese inquisition
Photo: Darren Mackenzie*

When we got back to the van our driver indicated we had to stop in at the border post on our way back. Hmm, always an ominous sign and we were intensely aware of the fact that

no one had been put in jail yet, which is a traditional component of all Vietnamese expeditions. When we pulled up we pushed Deb out to be grilled – she spoke pretty good Vietnamese and has done heaps of jail time! To our horror we were all ordered out of the van and directed into a scungy little room, given cups of cold tea (which we daren’t refuse) and given face masks to put on. Two very important-looking dudes spoke at us for a while and plenty of furtive glances were shot around the group. Then suddenly it was all smiles as we posed for photos and even had a movie made by our driver on the head border guard’s phone while the guard rolled out some long monologue. Apparently, he was just excited to have us in the area and to be able to do his job of ensuring all our paperwork was in order. Handshakes all round, some more tea and we were on our way, somewhat relieved.

Calm Before the Storm

We had a rest day to finalise data entry, clean and dry gear and prepare ourselves for the ‘sorry, your flight has been cancelled’ game. The other team were due out sometime this day and would have no idea of the significant corona virus-related developments over the last five or so days. As soon as they popped out into phone range the fun started as Paul and Josh were informed of their new itineraries. Both had about half an hour in Phong Nha to sort their shit out and then head off again. In the end Josh flew south to HCM, then back north to Hanoi, and got out safely. I’d have not liked to have been sat next to him on the plane smelling his five-day jungle aroma.



*The latest in air hostess corona virus fashion
Photo: Josh Bratchley*

Josh, Adam and Paul had had a successful trip out, with another kilometre or so of great river cave in their primary target and then a series of long marches (nearly as far as the

Laos border in one spot) to a few other caves of reasonable interest.

The dwindling stock of foreign cavers went out on the town for one last session. As seems to be standard on expedition, I had an inebriated near miss on my bicycle. I'm not entirely sure why I feel the need to engage in bike races when under the influence in Vietnam. Eye witness accounts vouch for several laws of physics being breached when my chain came off. I escaped with just a bit of skin off my knee, but it still isn't clear what my knee hit – could have been handle bars, pedal or even my face.

Home Again and an Uncertain Future

My trip home went without a hitch. I'd packed the essentials, including hand sanitiser, face masks, US\$ for bribing Vietnamese officials and toilet paper for bribing Australian officials. The flight to HCM was on schedule. The airport was eerily quiet and the flight boards used the word 'cancelled' quite a bit. I was very happy when my flight appeared on the board with the other c-word (check in). I passed the time in HCM watching Dave and Darren work the phone and manage to secure a flight home a few hours after midnight that night (and thus only overstay their visa by a few hours) and pissing myself at the Facebook reports of the Americans' fabulous discoveries with Jungle Boss.



Vietnam to Australia travel essentials
Photo: Alan Jackson

My Vietnam Airlines flight to Melbourne also went as scheduled. It was the second last Vietnam Airlines flight to Australia before they cancelled all flights. The plane was packed with lots of nervous-looking people. The cabin crew were in full PPE garb and tried to serve you the normal meals and refreshments without actually touching you or any of the things they were passing to you. It was quite comical. In Melbourne disembarking passengers were given a few extra bits of paper, but I was surprised at how blasé everyone was. It was the day all pubs and restaurants had to close (at noon) in Victoria, so I grabbed a sandwich for my last supper and watched as dejected staff packed up their chairs and tables for good (when's the next time a food business in Melbourne airport is going to be a money spinner?).

My flight to Hobart was pushed out to later in the day. Instead of four or five Virgin flights to Hobart that day there was one and it had about twenty people on it. Tasmania's two-week quarantine rule was proving a good deterrent for all but returning locals from travelling. A massively overweight dude, complete with big box of Krispy Kremes,

let out a loud double sneeze in the waiting lounge and I've never seen people move so quickly in my life. It was all a bit surreal, with suspicion and fear etched in the eyes of everyone around.

I got home a couple of days before Tasmania moved from home quarantine to hotel quarantine, so I did my two weeks in Ben's bedroom. Loretta was still having to go into work so we figured we'd best quarantine me from her as well as possible, lest I infect her with the dreaded 'rona and then have her infect half the Commonwealth public service in turn. The kids stayed home from school a week earlier than when it was officially recommended to cut off that potential vector also. It was a bit tough being home and watching Loretta and the kids milling about the house from my doorway but not being able to embrace or share meals with them. It proved a very productive period though, with heaps of reports written, the vegie garden sorted out and all the expedition surveys drawn up.

I watched the world through my window and my family through the doorway. I spent a lot of time wondering if this was perhaps my last international caving expedition. The concept of cheap and ubiquitous international air travel could be a thing of the past. What I took great comfort in was that even if I was never allowed to leave my home state again, I couldn't think of a better place to be stuck.

COVID-19 Caving / HT-1 Sherwood Court – Marion Court through trip

17 April 2020

Janine McKinnon (text and photos)

Party: Janine McKinnon, Ric Tunney

The Great Lockdown of 2020 was well underway, and our travel options were extremely limited, some might say non-existent. The annual cave diving trip to the Nullarbor had been cancelled. All other outdoor pursuits were banned. So we had no further excuses to put off the long-desired but equally long-feared epic through trip from our Sherwood Court property entrance to our Marion Court entrance.

We feared we were not caving-fit enough; after all, caving opportunities had been scarce in recent weeks and we had spent too much time playing on the yacht. We feared we were now too old for the physical demands of the trip; we should have attacked this beast several decades ago, in our prime. We feared we would get lost in the confusion of passages. There was no survey of this place.

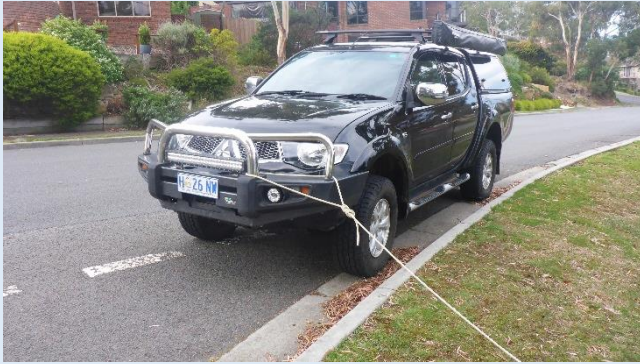
Could the through trip be done? However, it was now or never. So a date was fixed.

Due to the social distancing rules limiting party sizes to two, we were going it alone.

The trip from home to the entrance was surprisingly quick. I forgot to time it but think it was somewhere around 30 seconds from leaving the house. This made the pack carrying quite reasonable. We were off to a good start and feeling a little less intimidated by our undertaking.

We didn't have any rigging notes of course, or known number of pitches and rope lengths, as it was a first traverse, however, we had come well prepared with our drill, spare

batteries, plenty of rigging gear and a couple of hundred metres of rope. We were sure we had enough to safely make it through. We also had plenty of food, and water too, just in case it was a long trip. Be prepared... I used to be a Brownie. On that thought, of course we had an emergency call-out arranged, just in case.



After much discussion, and a paucity of good rigging points or decent rock, we decided to rig the first descent from the bull bar of our Triton. When parked correctly, it provided a solid anchor point and had the bonus benefit of partly screening our antics from the neighbourhood.

We could see the bottom of the first descent and a 30 m rope looked sufficient for the drop. We decided to leave the pitch rigged, just in case of the need to retreat. I went first. All went smoothly and Ric followed.



A short horizontal section followed through The Laundry and part-way along The Hall. The passage was narrow but we managed without too much gear passing or crawling. There was a strong draught. Good, we knew the bottom entrance was open. We just hoped we could fit through. We continued walking.

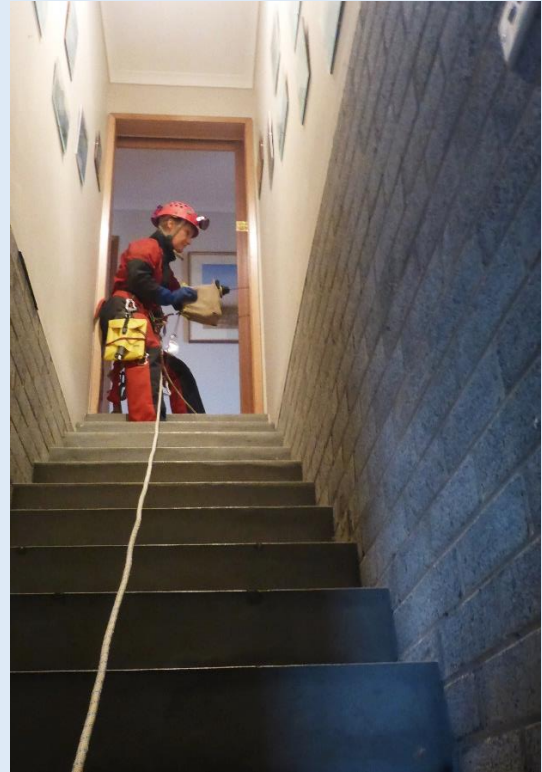
A little further along we came to a junction. A descent led down to the right through a narrow vertical section. This is called The Garage Access. The bottom was visible with our excellent Scurions on high beam and we could see there was a chamber at the bottom: The Garage. The horizontal passage straight ahead seemed to have passages running off it in several places. Damn, which way to go? We decided to explore the horizontal option first.

A short distance further on there were two side openings; one to the left and one straight ahead. Both quickly led to chambers with no further leads out of them. Blind. These must be Bedrooms Two and Three. This place was proving to be more complex than we had expected.

To the right though, there was a moderate-sized chamber with a strong draught coming from it. We surmised that this was The Entrance Hall. We ventured in and found two ways

out, but which to take? Only one had a draught so we checked that out first. It led onto a small balcony with a way on to the left. We decided to keep that in mind in case the other options failed to get us through.

The way straight ahead led to a large chamber which looped around to the right. That was The Lounge Room we thought. We followed it and found it continued to turn to the right and eventually, after much walking, we found ourselves at the original junction looking down the descent. What an interesting place to explore.



We decided to drop The Garage Access and started looking for a rigging point. They were in short supply. Solid rock was not present on the walls. We had a problem. Time to think laterally. The floor was solid, even if the walls weren't, so we decided to place the bolt in the floor and hope the pull-down would work.

Ric went first this time and shouted up that he was in a large chamber with daylight visible in the distance. This was The Garage he thought. The opening at the end was large enough to fit through. I breathed a sigh of relief.

We tested the pull-down before I descended and pulled the rope easily down after us. Then, all packed, we walked along horizontal passage and out the large entrance to the Marion Court junction. We had done it! We just needed to walk back up the hill to retrieve the rope from pitch one.

We had not found the trip as exhausting as we had expected. We must be in better caving-fitness than we had thought.

Time for a cuppa and a debrief.

Notes: Luckily, due to the lack of rain recently, we had managed to remain dry all trip. Things might be different in high rainfall times.

With several options not fully explored this trip we have plans for future adventures if our lockdown continues much longer. That Entrance Hall route looks interesting...

Rigging notes and survey to follow at a later date.

IB-9 Big Tree Pot – COVID-19 Release Caving

7 June 2020

Janine McKinnon (photos Alan Jackson)

Party: Alan Jackson, Anna Jackson, Gabriel Kinzler, Janine McKinnon, Ric Tunney

FREEEEEE!!! WOOPÉE.

To celebrate our release from boredom-incarnate Alan suggested an enjoyable wander down Big Tree Pot. This is a corker of a cave. It has 6 pitches; 26 m, 14 m, 15 m, 14 m, 90 m (that one really deserves a name), 9 m. More to the point, they are classic Tassie tubes with the pièce de résistance being the 90 m glory. Its acoustics are spectacular and its rock and shape beautiful.

Obviously, it has been too long since I have been caving, or doing anything out-of-town really.



Grimace or smile? It can be hard to tell with teenagers.

Gabriel wanted the opportunity to practice rigging, particularly as natural rigging is part of the mix. That was fine by the rest of us. Personally, I have no issues with strolling down and up a cave someone competent has rigged. So, he got to it, with advice and encouragement by the troops.

Rigging started at around 10:30 am and we were moving down the cave by 11 am. There isn't much to say about this part of the trip. It all went smoothly, and we all seemed to remember how to abseil and pass rebelayes, so that was good.

At the chamber above the 90 m pitch Ric decided to turn back. He had planned this as he was not sure how he would go on a 90 m prusik. I am sure he would have been fine but prudence never does any harm. He waited until we started down and then headed out of the cave, to be seen again back at the cars.

Meanwhile, Gabriel *[Editor: really Alan on the last pitch]* did a lovely job of rigging the pitch, with the traditional tie-back to the big column in the back of the chamber and using the 8 mm through bolts we placed some years ago as a Y-hang over the pitch.

As a good rigger does, he personally tested his rigging by being the first one down. I followed and continued my video project of trying to get decent video of Anna as she descended. Alan also took video on his phone from the top, with me as bottom lighting. I have to say that I think his video looks better than my GoPro video. You can make your own assessment if you check out my video at this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bat3ZwIVn0g>

Once we were all down there was some discussion of dropping the last 9 m and doing the wet grovel to the end of the short passage leading to the rockfall blocking the end of the cave. My part of the discussion lasted 2 nano-seconds. I have been there before, admittedly decades ago and, (can you keep a secret?) I have actually forgotten what it is like. Never-the-less I wasn't doing it again this day. I had worn my Cordura suit, not the plastic. Enough said.



Anna risking severe glare-burn

I left them discussing the issue (I don't think anyone actually went down) *[Editor: I did, needed to take a leak]* and I started back up, taking a few bits of video as I went. What a glorious pitch. Have I said that before? Yes? Well it is, and not just because I was stimulus-starved from COVID19-lockdown.

I prusiked leisurely back out of the cave and was out the entrance, around 50 minutes from starting up from the bottom.

Of course, then I had to wait in the cold for the others to appear. It was much colder than in the cave. I should have been more social and come out with them. Last out by 4 pm.

H-8 Wolf Hole

13 June 2020

Alan Jackson (text and photo)

Party: Simon Elliot, Alan Jackson, Anna Jackson, Ben Jackson, Patrick Smejkal, Petr Smejkal

Ben was badgering me to get underground so a hastily arranged permit to Wolf Hole was arranged (thanks Shane Burgess/PWS for the quick turnaround). Petr and Buddy were keen and Simon filled the last slot.



Boy bands in 2020 have had to cut costs

A very pleasant and sedate trip but with a constant source of bubbling enthusiasm and ridiculousness provided by the two young boys. Certainly the most 'dabbing' I've seen in a cave.

We toured about South Park and through to Lake Pluto and Cub Hole passages. The entrance vista from the base of the pitch was as spectacular as ever. Nice to see a ladder on it too (my first trips to this cave were exited via ladder... ah, the memories). #youknowyouregettingoldwhen

A good day out.

JF-237 Niggly Cave

18 June 2020

Alan Jackson

Party: James Barnes, Alan Jackson, Janine McKinnon

It was time to blow out the COVID-19 cobwebs with a suffer-fest in Niggly. It was a rather fresh start but the vegetation was dry (or frozen) and the walk up the hill was a moderately pleasant hour with light packs. There was a bit of snow lying about above the 650-700 m mark. Plenty of water in the cave, but not silly amounts (catchment still mostly frozen).

The first obstacle was the two bolts at the top of the first pitch – the passage wasn't wide enough to accommodate the tester... We'll just have to trust that since the other 45 bolts tested that day passed it's reasonable to assume they're good!

I tested while Janine and James swapped rigging from the concrete screws to the p-hangers and installed reflective markers on them whenever they caught me up and had a spare minute (getting about half of them done). It was a slow trip to the bottom, arriving around 2:30 pm. While James and

I flew across the tyrolean to test the bolts on the far side Janine started up again. Then James and I bombed over Mt Niggly and up to the DIY Sump to retrieve two of Steve's data loggers and place a new one.



*Alan, ready for launch
Credit: James Barnes*

At around 4:15 pm we started our ascent. My bag was uncharacteristically empty and light so I filled it with the aid climbing gear stash (which Steve wanted out of the cave if possible). I rearranged the rest of the rigging on the way up and pulled out all the concrete screws and hangers. By the time we reached the top of the 85 m pitch my bag was well and truly at normal Niggly levels. Ugh!

We dragged and swore our way through Tigertooth and finally emerged on the surface around 8 pm. Janine had already started heading down the hill and we met her snoozing in the car at about 9 pm. A successful, but exhausting mission. I was certainly lacking a little match fitness. James did well for his first real cave. He can have a proper bag next time.



*James, smiling, clearly before Tigertooth Passage.
Credit: Janine McKinnon*

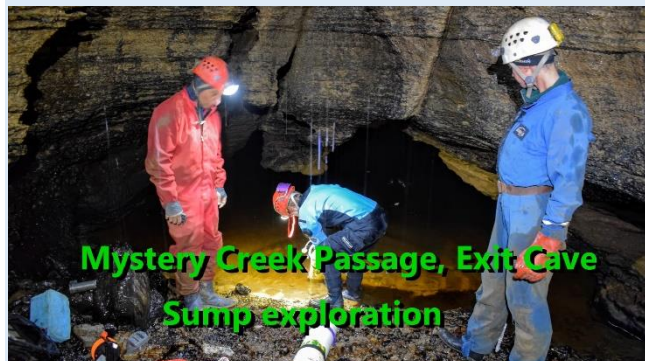
Summary of jobs done:

- All new p-hangers formally load tested (7.5 kN in tension) except for numbers 251 and 252 at the top of pitch 1.
- All rigging changed over to the new p-hangers (except the tyrolean).
- Reflective tags added to every p-hanger (new and the few old ones on P1 and P2) from pitch one to the top of the 100 m pitch. I need to buy some more for the remaining hangers.
- All old concrete screws/hangers and redundant maillons stripped and removed from cave.
- Steve's aid climbing stash removed from cave.
- Data logger swap out complete.
- Spirit crushed and will to live extinguished.

Other exciting stuff

Exploration dive in Mystery Creek Passage

Janine McKinnon



Mystery Creek Passage has been hydrologically proven to connect with Mystery Creek Cave, some 250 m away. A physical connection by cavers has never been found though. This sump pool is at the end of the passage, perfectly lined

up to connect with the end of Mystery Creek cave. It looks so promising and has never been dived. Until now.

Here's a look at the rockpile beyond the sometimes sump at the end of Mystery Creek Passage in Exit Cave, for anyone interested in it. Warning: the camera work is shaky so don't view if you have a tendency to seasickness.

Short version: <https://youtu.be/OhvGTSyb038>

Long version: <https://youtu.be/rmxWRf5ib2Y>

The sump proved to be 30 m long, ending in a chamber blocked to further progress. This is the long, and somewhat shaky, version to give a really thorough look at the prospects for getting through the rockpile - which I think are about zilch.

There are some mutterings about a look next summer with low water levels for the swim.

East Tower Karst – Observations

Adrian Slee

Permian Burnt Gully Limestone outcrops at locations on the mid slopes c. 590 – 650 m asl of East Tower to the north of Fingal. This was first recognised as a karst area by Kiernan (1995) as NE24 East Tower-Byatts Razorback. He described it as being a Category C karst with no confirmed karst landforms and limited potential for the development of karst phenomena. A brief exploration of a small area in the Grants Creek Valley was undertaken by the author in response to sinkholes being reported by a forest practices officer (FPO) as part of his assessment of a plantation for a Forest Practices Plan. Three broad depressions and a small stream sink and spring were noted by the FPO and inspected by the author, who considered that these features were probably not karst landforms but are related to shallow tunnel gully processes. However, fossiliferous Permian limestone outcrops were noted and confirmed using diluted HCl in the field. Two notable sites were located:

1) Below the Fonthill Road lies a knickpoint-retreat waterfall that forms a semicircular embayment 15 m in diameter and 3 m tall of which the northern slopes form a 10 m long by 1-2 m wide overhang; at the head of this overhang,

a tiny 2-3 m long cave contains speleothems and a roof largely formed of flowstone. Flowstone also is present on the walls of the overhang; it is clear that at this location thin limestone units sandwiched between a conglomerate cap rock and fine lamellar mudstones contains enough CaCO_3 to produce minor karst and speleothem formations.

2) Upslope, in the vicinity of an old abandoned farmhouse lies a low scarp; here an impenetrable 20 cm wide solution tube extends out of sight in poorly fossiliferous mudstone / limestone beneath 1.5 m of mudstone caprock. This feature, while small in scale, is clearly of karstic origin.

The interest in this site is that the observations of minor karst phenomena occur topographically below the extent of purer Burnt Gully Limestone shown on MRT maps. The mapped limestone area was not visited during the field inspection, but its extent suggests that minor karst landforms could occur outside the area previously mapped by Kiernan (1995, see ref.). The observations also show that there is potential for finding more small caves in the area, particularly where bedrock outcrops occur beside streams in similar settings to karst documented at Grey and Mt Nicholas.

Kiernan, Kevin 1995 An Atlas of Tasmanian Karst. *Tasmanian Forest Research Council Research Report* No. 10, Vol. 2, p. 215.



Mole Creek System Diving Projects

Stefan Eberhard

This report summarises a number of sump recce and diving trips to various caves in the Mole Creek system between December 2018 and March 2019. The caves with sumps that were scoped out for their diving prospects included Roaring Hole, Swiss Cheese, Honeycomb complex (1, 1.5 and 2), Cow Cave, Blackshawl-Spider-Pyramid complex, Westmorland, Herberts Pot and various other un-named holes in the lower Mole Creek system. Trip participants on various occasions included Bronwen Prazak, Peter Bell, Dave Bardi, Sandy Varin, David Rueda Roca, Jason Goldstein, Stephen Jacobs, David Butler, David Wools-Cobb, Janice March, Deb Hunter. Apologies if I've missed anyone else who was also on these trips.

Scotts Rising was probably first dived in May 1995. On this occasion I reached a depth of 24 m in a silty shaft jammed with logs. The poor visibility, cold water and loose logs deterred any follow up exploration until December 2018 when I returned with better equipment and more experience. The shaft continued steeply down before levelling out and after passing a narrowing in the passage I tied the line off at a depth of 39 m. These two recent dives were done in wetsuit with air-filled side-mounted tanks, which made passing the narrow point easy but narcosis and cold were factors at depth and during decompression. So on the next trip in March 2019 I used a drysuit and rebreather with trimix. Unfortunately, I was unable to pass the narrow point at the bottom wearing the back-mounted rebreather. Everything silted out very quickly so I retreated to -33 m and laid some line up an ascending side passage.

Roaring Hole was dived in March 2019. This was a great dive. A penetration of around 140 m was made upstream in a wide shallow passage. The first sump was passed after 70 m followed by a long deep lake with tree roots and a second

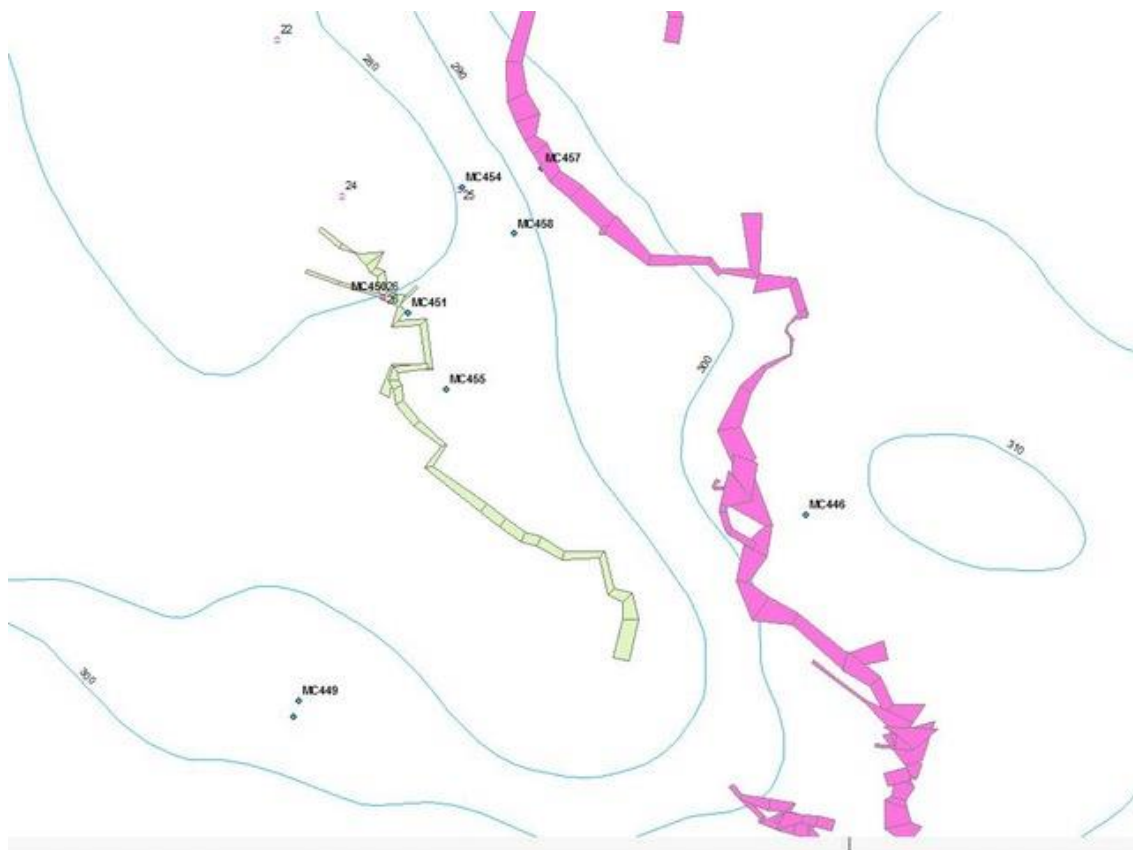
sump was explored for around 40 m before turn point was reached on air supplies. I surveyed back out. The plotted survey (see map) suggests that Roaring Hole might connect with the Blackshawl-Spider-Pyramid complex, which is mostly dry but has a couple of deep slots intersecting the water table. Roaring Hole might also run parallel with Blackshawl-Spider-Pyramid and connect with Honeycomb 2, which is one of the next diving targets. Many thanks to those who helped carry gear: David Rueda Roca, Dave Bardi, Sandy Varin, Jason Goldstein, Bronwen Prazak.

Westmorland Cave was first dived by Nick Hume and I in 1982, when a penetration of around 30 m was made in a shallow silty tube. A return trip was made with Bronwen and Pete last year, firstly for the purpose of getting a good GPS fix on the entrance for our mapping project, and also to scope out the route to the sump in preparation for an upcoming dive.

Herberts Pot has a number of sumps, all of them are a long way from the entrance and would involve quite an effort getting dive gear in. The access to some of the sumps and the potential impacts of undertaking dive trips in this cave were examined and documented as part of the CAPS assessment trips undertaken during 2019. With wetsuit and mask, Dave and Sandy did some preliminary scoping in the downstream sump and the Westmorland Passage sumps.

In March this year we were on our way to Mole Creek to continue dive exploration and mapping in Scotts, Roaring, Westmorland and Honeycomb just as the pandemic travel restrictions came in. Diving and mapping will commence again once travel restrictions are lifted.

Preliminary map of Roaring Hole (green) showing 2019 dive extensions in relation to Spider-Pyramid-Blackshawl system (pink). Spider-Pyramid-Blackshawl survey data courtesy of Bob Kershaw (ISS). Roaring Hole data courtesy of STC. Map by Peter Bell.



Great Western Tiers Sandstone Caves

November 2019

Greg Middleton (text, photos and illustrations)

In November 2019, at the invitation of Rolan Eberhard, I joined a team from Dept. of Primary Industries, Parks, Water & Environment and others, carrying out a “Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Extension Area Natural Values Survey”. The need for this arose from the major extensions to the TWWHA in 2013. The 170,000 ha extensions included large areas of old growth forests, including that along the Great Western Tiers, south of Longford, Westbury and Deloraine. Specialists were surveying birds, frogs, mammals, insects, etc; Rolan and I were to focus on recording and documenting sandstone overhangs or caves, particularly between Projection Bluff and Mother Cummings Peak. Some of these features have been known locally for many years and several are recorded as a geosite (Great Western Tiers Cliff and Cave Complexes) on DPIWE’s Natural Values Atlas (www.naturalvaluesatlas.tas.gov.au). No cave maps or published descriptions appear to exist. Some of the caves had been investigated earlier for signs of Aboriginal use or occupation. We did not try to define precisely what we would accept as a ‘cave’, leaving it to our joint judgement to decide what we would record and survey. The results of the survey will update the documentation of natural values within the TWWHA extension area and will assist the Parks and Wildlife Service by identifying values in need of protection.

The Tiers are principally composed of Jurassic dolerite, which forms the impressive bluffs evident from much of the central north of the island – but underneath this generally non-cave-bearing rock, there are massive beds of the Parmeener Supergroup which includes Triassic sandstones and Permian mudstones. Fortunately, “There are no known occurrences of metallic minerals or coal in the area” (Dept. of Resources & Energy 1990, p. 21) which ultimately is the reason the area has been able to be reserved once forestry objections were overcome. The ‘best’ that the geologists have been able to say regarding “non-metallic and fuel resources” of the Quamby Bluff and Warners Sugarloaf region of the Tiers was that the Jurassic dolerite and Triassic sandstones might be useful for “building stone” (Dept. of Resources & Energy 1990, p. 24). However, their development for such purposes has fortunately never been seriously contemplated. The massive, near-horizontal sandstone beds have produced cliffs ranging from about 20 to 60 m in height and within these (generally at their base) many overhangs/caves/rockshelters have formed.

On 12 November, at the PWS Deloraine office, Rolan and I met with Chris McMonagle (Karst Ranger) and Tony Burgess (Aboriginal Ranger) to discuss the sandstone cave recording project. It was agreed that Tony would accompany us when he was available and show us some sites he knew.

That afternoon we drove via Meander to the end of the road near Huntsmans Lake and walked what’s known as the Stone Hut Track up onto the face of the Tiers escarpment. The track took us to some impressive sandstone cliffs with a series of rockshelters/caves, some of which we agreed were worth recording.

The first large overhang we came to I later designated CN25 (Photo 1). (This locality is within the Central North Region under Tasmania’s non-karst cave numbering system (Middleton 2015) – even if these haven’t been formally adopted yet. Numbers are allocated arbitrarily within the region but number tags are generally not physically placed at entrances.) It would make quite a good shelter cave, even having its own soak as a water supply. We decided to see what other caves we could find before starting to survey.

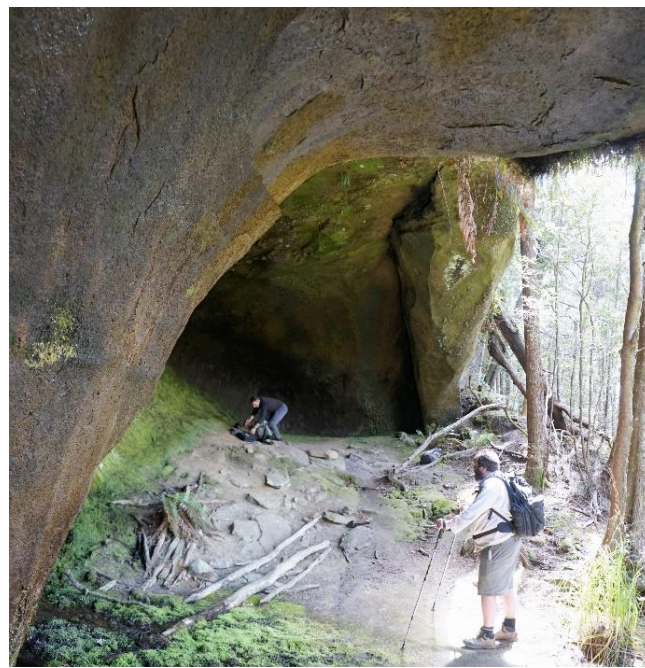


Photo 1. CN25, looking north – Rolan and Tony.



Photo 2. Small cave with old bed frame.

We continued on up to a higher level where we found a further series of overhangs, including a small one with an old bed frame (Photo 2) and another, adjacent, with rubbish obviously left by a former occupant (Photo 3). We didn’t consider either of these worth a survey or cave numbers.



Photo 3. Ferns and rubbish in small overhang adjacent to the one with bed frame.

Moving further west along the sandstone cliff line, we came to a high cave with a natural sandstone bridge (Photos 4, 5) and a dark zone passage at its northern end. This complex I have dubbed, with singular originality, Cave with Natural Bridge. In view of its three entrances (ignoring the slots in the roof which give rise to the ‘bridge’ structure but are not practical entrances) I numbered it CN22-24.



Photo 4. The massive arch of the natural bridge.

Continuing west along the same cliff line we came to what had to be the cave known as “Stone Hut”. Its narrow entrance opened into a wide ‘room’ with a steeply sloping floor.

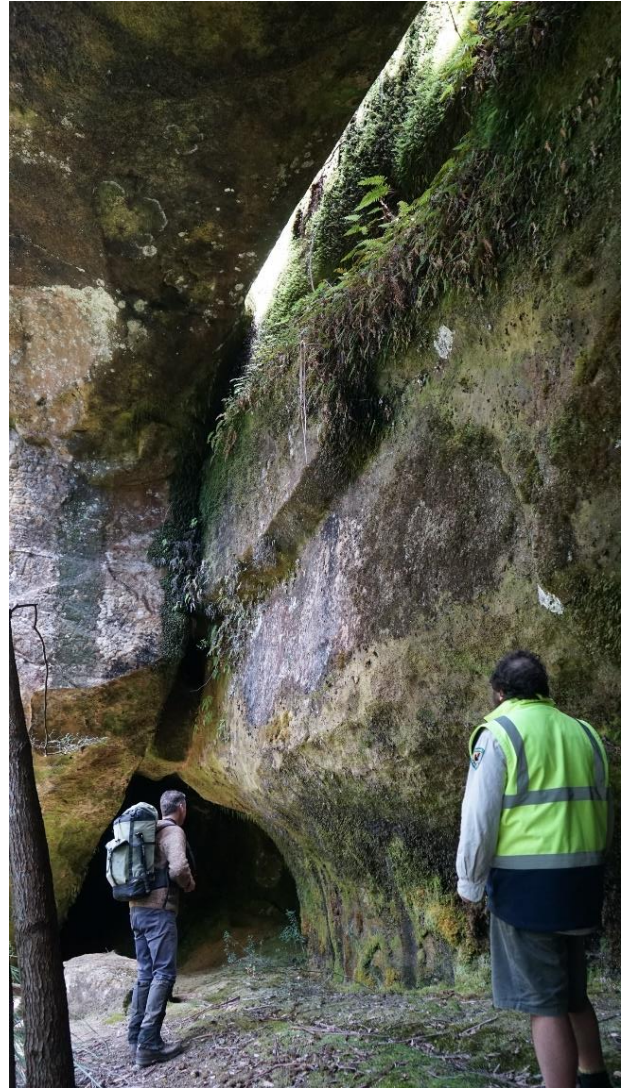


Photo 5. Under the natural bridge.



Photo 6. Looking up into Stone Hut; bush ladder, Tony on right; old wooden bed frame on left (stitched montage).

While Rolan and Terry examined the cavity (Photo 7), I carried out a survey of the cave which I numbered CN21 (Fig. 1).

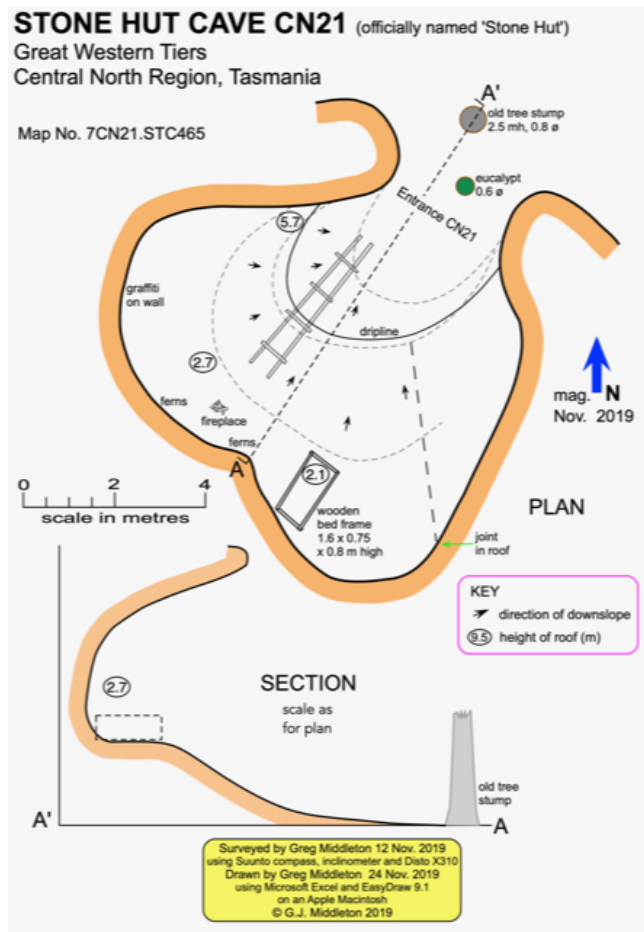


Fig. 1. CN21



Photo 7. Rolan and Tony at the back of Stone Hut, with the old bed frame.

From the back there is a good view to the narrow entrance and the forest beyond (Photo 8).

The cave, which is marked on the topo map, is obviously popular with bushwalkers. It has unfortunately suffered from some graffiti on the back walls.



Photo 8. Looking out from the rear of the Stone Hut through the narrow entrance to the forest beyond.

Having completed the survey, we returned to the previous cave, CN22-24, and I carried out a quick survey of this combined cave and natural bridge (Fig. 2).

CAVE CN22-24 Cave with Natural Bridge

Great Western Tiers
Central North Region, Tasmania

Map No. 7CN22.STC466

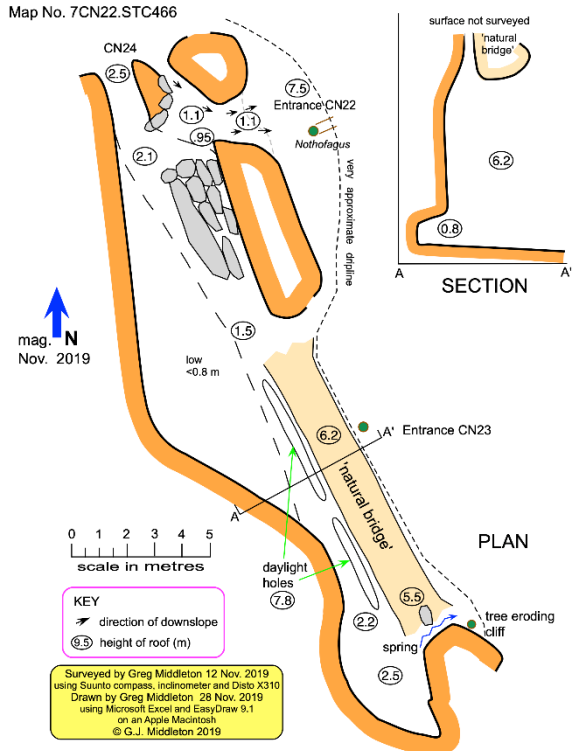


Fig. 2. CN22-24

We then walked on further (at about the same level) to check out some large sandstone blocks we had identified earlier on Google Earth images. These are apparently called The Crofts, with one part (with what appears to be a small dam of human construction) known as Crowdens Croft. (A 'croft' is "a small rented farm, especially one in Scotland, comprising a plot of arable land attached to a house and with a right of pasturage held in common with other such farms." While this didn't strike one as particularly arable land, possibly some hermit had occupied the place in the past, taking advantage of the massive overhang and water supply (Photo 9).

Despite the scale of the overhang and the possible historical significance of the site, I didn't consider it warranted a survey at this time.

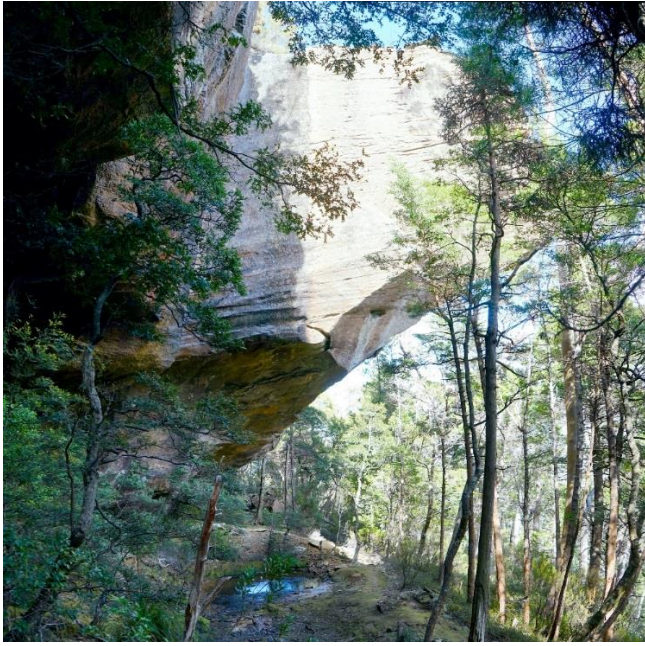


Photo 9. The massive sandstone overhang and small dam at Crowdens Croft.

We then returned to the first cave we had come across, CN25, and I surveyed it (Fig. 3).

CAVE CN25

Great Western Tiers
Central North Region, Tasmania

Map No. 7CN25.STC467

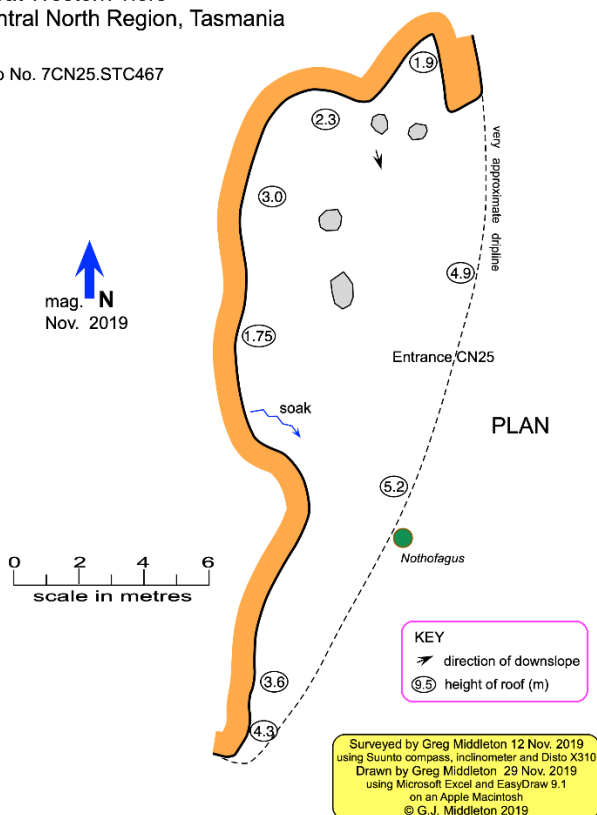


Fig. 3. CN25

We then walked back to our vehicle, having covered about 10.9 km in the day.

The following day, Rolan and I took Bessels Road from near Huntsmans Lake up the face of the Tiers almost to the top (close to 700 m asl). We then found our way down to the sandstone band. While we saw lots of broken cliffs, there were few overhangs and nothing we considered worth surveying.

On 14th, we headed off from the Lake Highway, in company with Tony Burgess and other members of the team who were primarily collecting snails and other invertebrates. Initially we followed an overgrown logging road to a point above some sandstone cliffs (Photo 10).

We were guided along this section of cliffs by Tony and then down a steep climb to their base. Here we were shown a large cave (subsequently numbered CN26) (Photo 11) which Tony advised us was occasionally used by local Aboriginal groups for social/cultural gatherings).

Quite a large pile of rocks had been arranged around a fireplace in the more western end of the cave, where it is deepest. I carried out a survey (Fig. 4).

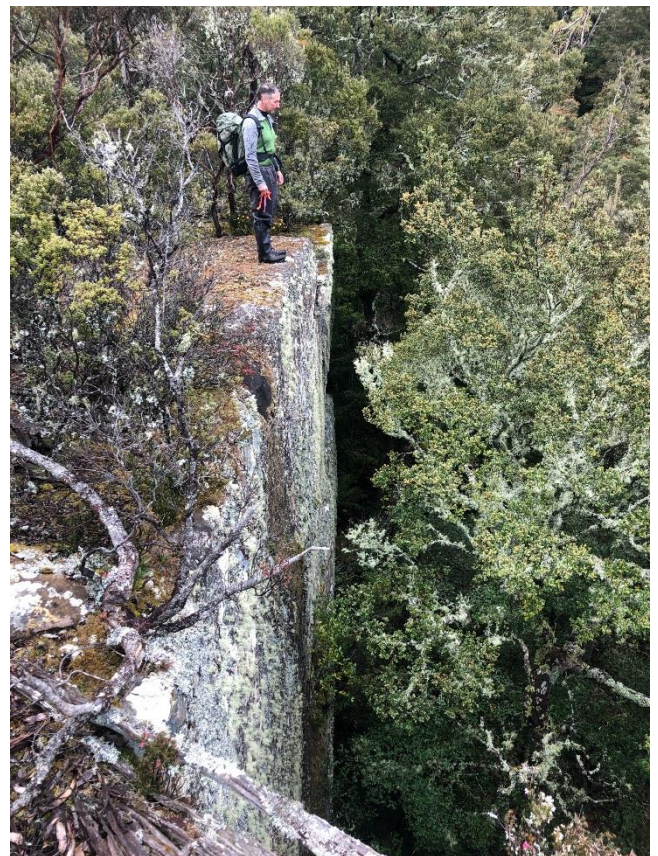


Photo 10. The dense forests of the Tiers hide some significant sandstone cliffs. Rolan admires the view.



Photo 11. Western end of CN26. Note fireplace to left of centre.

CAVE CN26

Great Western Tiers
Central North Region, Tasmania

Map No. 7CN26.STC468

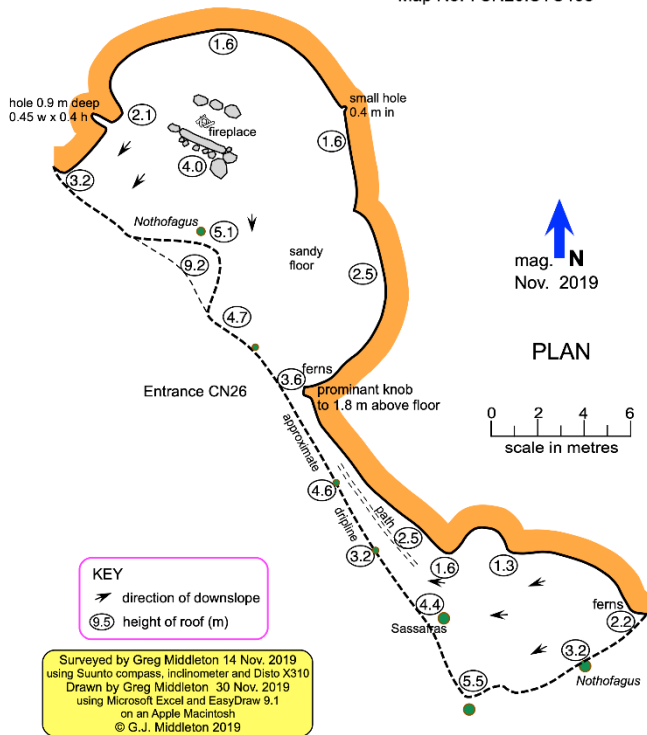


Fig. 4. CN26

CN26 is quite a spacious cave, which could shelter a large number of people if required (Photo 12).



Photo 12. The spacious interior of Cave CN26, with fireplace to right.

We then moved further west to a second, much smaller cave, in same cliffline, CN27 (Photo 13). This was also surveyed (Fig. 5).

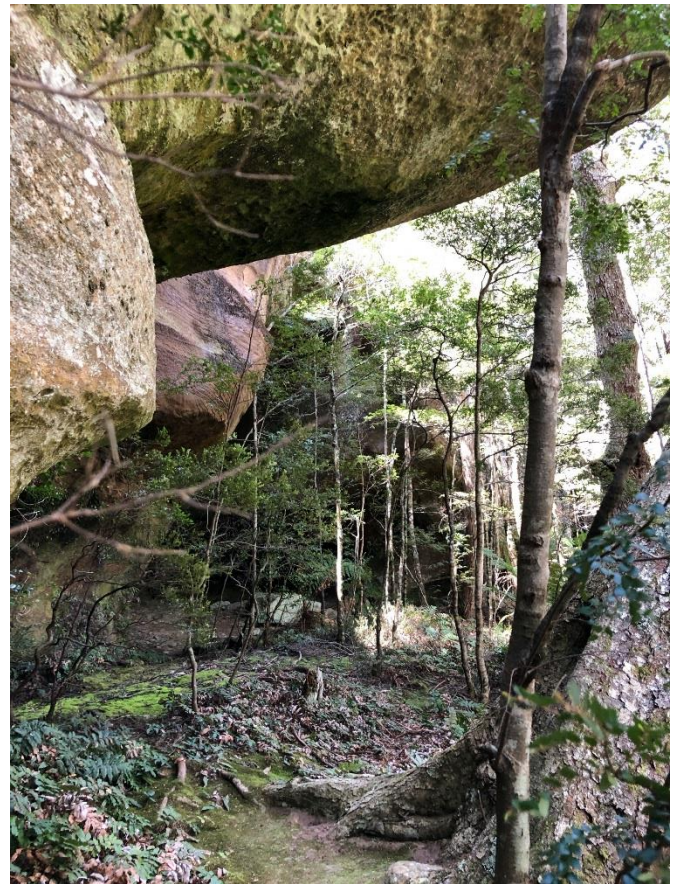


Photo 13. Cave CN27 from its western end. The opening is largely obscured by small trees.

CAVE CN27

Great Western Tiers
Central North Region, Tasmania

Map No. 7CN27.STC469

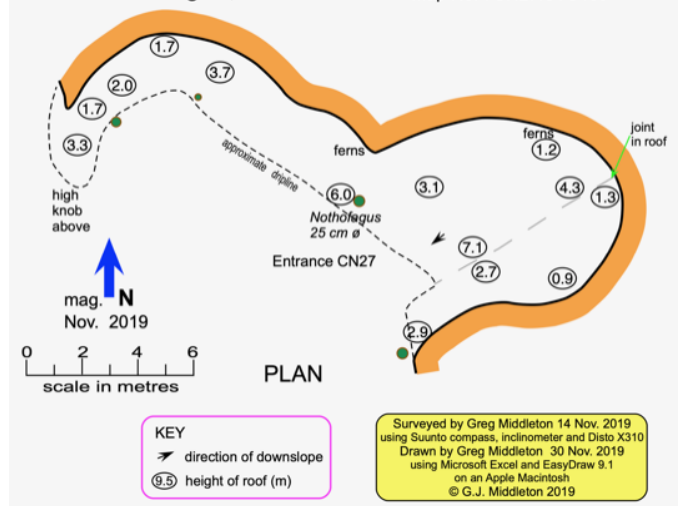


Fig. 5. CN27

Progressing further west, we found a third, smaller cave with a very wide opening (Photo 14), which was also surveyed (Fig. 6).



Photo 14. The long shelter CN28, from its eastern end.

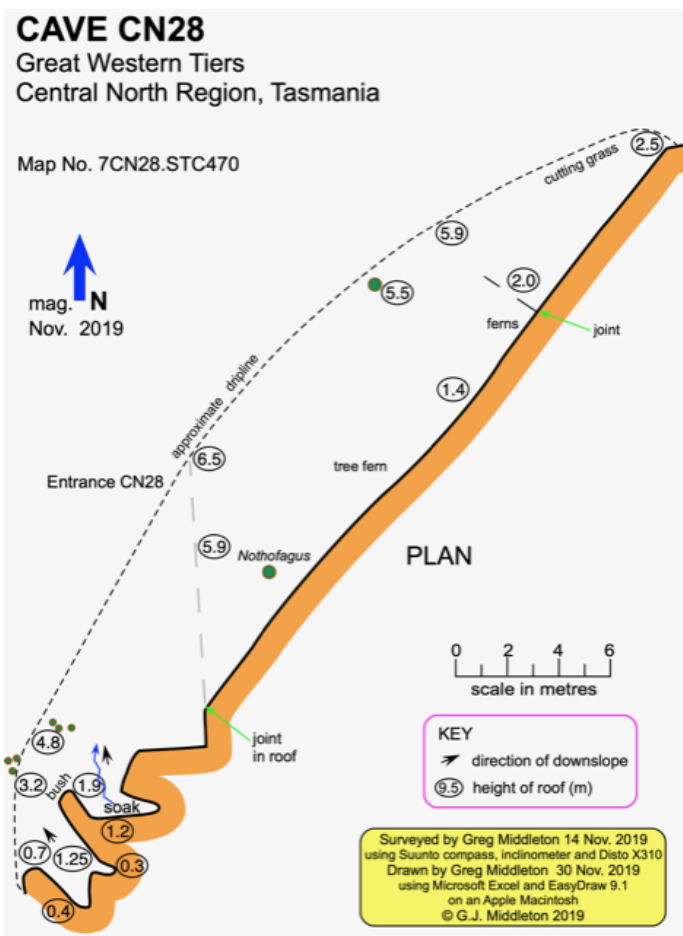


Fig. 6. CN28

We then climbed back up to the old road and walked back along it to a point where we again descended to the sandstone cliffline. There were more small shelters in this section of cliff but we did no further surveys. The most westerly that we investigated was the largest; it was distinguished by its extensive green mossy floor (Photo 15).



Photo 15. Moss-floored cave with low roof.

From there we returned to the cars, thanked Tony for his great assistance and returned to Hobart. It had been a most successful trip to document some sandstone caves of the Great Western Tiers, but doubtless many more await discovery in the forests. I am most appreciative of the opportunity afforded by Rolan and the survey team for me to contribute to this exercise. I also thank Rolan for his constructive review of this report.

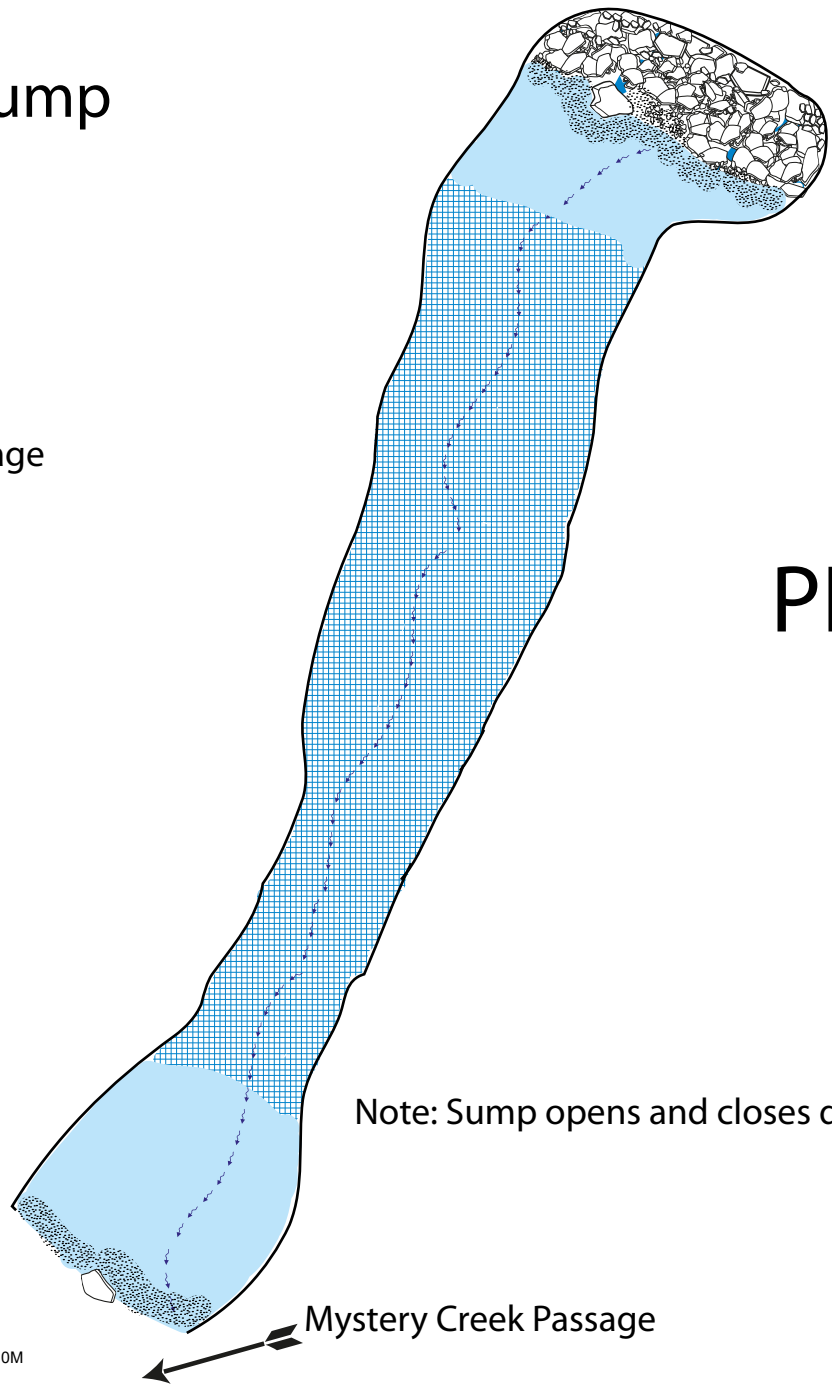
Footnote – Speleothems

In relation to speleothems, Rolan Eberhard (pers. comm.) has observed: Chalky whitish material forming patchy wall coatings was observed in several caves. Close examination revealed soft, fine-grained, porous deposit resembling tufa or travertine in karst environments. A sample from Stone Hut submitted for XRD analysis at Mineral Resources Tasmania was found to be dominantly calcite (95%) with minor quartz (2%) and kaolinite (2%). This suggests that the deposit is primarily due to carbonate leached from the sandstone matrix by pore water and deposited through evaporation on contact with the atmosphere. Cave deposits with a similar chalky aspect are common in near-entrance zones of karst caves where evaporation is a dominant driver in precipitating solutes from dripwater. Whilst it is not unusual for sandstone caves to contain minor speleothems, these are more typically composed of silica or ferruginous minerals.

References

- DEPT. OF RESOURCES & ENERGY 1990 *Mineral resources potential assessments of selected areas in the Great Western Tiers, Tasmania*. Report by Division of Mines & Mineral Resources. Retrieved from: http://www.mrt.tas.gov.au/mrtdoc/dominfo/download/MRPA_05/mrpa_05.pdf
- MIDDLETON, Greg 2015 Proposal for establishment of new ('background') regions for the recording of non-karst (and isolated karst) caves in Tasmania. *Speleo Spiel*, 408: 9-13

Mystery Creek Passage sump
IB-14 Exit Cave
Ida Bay, Tasmania
7IB14.STC471
Southern Tasmanian Caverneers
Survey Grade UISv1 3-2-A
Knotted Line, Suunto Compass, Depth Guage
Surveyed by Janine McKinnon (9/1/20)
Drawn by Janine McKinnon (5/20)
Surveyed length 40 m
Vertical range 3 m



PLAN

Note: Sump opens and closes depending on water levels

Mystery Creek Passage

Fun and Diversions



Adapted from a Tom Gauld cartoon by Janine McKinnon



Virtual attendance at the June STC GBM.

The Last Page

