



THE LURE OF THE SUBTERRANEAN WORLD

For thousands of years, humans have had a deep primal connection with caves. Where once they provided shelter to our ancestors, they are now visited and explored for a variety of reasons. Caves attract those who are keen to discover unmapped terrain. In a cave, you can test your own courage and push your sense of adventure to the limits. For specialists, there are fossils to unearth and primitive paintings to analyse. For the casual visitor, there is amusement – and sometimes danger – as indeed the young Thai football team who became trapped in the Tham Luang Nang Non cave in 2018 found out. If the rescuers hadn't risked their own lives to save them, the boys almost certainly wouldn't be alive today. Before that incident, I suspect I took my safety for granted. Now I'll give greater thought to the potential hazards before heading into a cave that's off the beaten track.

Earlier this year I had the chance to visit the popular Ruakuri cave in the Waitomo district of New Zealand. As my group stood admiring the rock formations, the guide ordered us to turn off our headlamps. We obeyed, and instantly we were plunged into darkness. I literally couldn't make out my own hands, let alone my companions standing around me. But then we became aware of a faint glow from the cave ceiling overhead. As we looked up, it seemed as if we were looking at distant stars, twinkling in the blackest night sky. It was a truly mesmerising sight; and the longer we looked, the more each tiny pinprick of light grew brighter. '*Arachnocampa luminosa*,' the guide explained. 'More commonly known as the glow-worm'.

Ruakuri is in fact an extensive series of caverns, notable for its incredible limestone formations and subterranean waterfalls. But if it hadn't been for the observation skills of a hunter about 400 years ago, we probably wouldn't know that the cave exists.

According to local Māori legend, a hunter stumbled upon the cave while looking for food and reported this to his chief. It wasn't until 1904, however, that the cave was opened to tourists. Due to a dispute over ownership, it was then closed to public access from 1986 to 2004, before re-opening in 2005 with the addition of a cleverly engineered spiral staircase. This takes visitors to the lowest levels of the cave system, avoiding the main entrance, which is a Māori burial ground and therefore off limits to any visitors. The tour itself lasts approximately 1.5 hours, ample time to admire all the intriguing geological features that Ruakuri offers. Should you ever visit New Zealand, make sure it's on your itinerary.

Quite a different experience is the Barton Creek Cave in Belize – home to a Mayan ceremonial site. It requires a rather bumpy 4x4 journey over farmland to get to this remote location, but it is well worth the bruises. Visiting a few years ago, we paddled behind our guide's canoe as he led us down an ancient Mayan waterway deep beneath a mountain, our headlamps casting flickering shadows on the passage walls. Some of those passages were a tight squeeze, but once through, we were treated to some stunning other-worldly scenery; glistening stalactites and stalagmites millions of years old. Photographs rarely do justice to these natural wonders, and, to my dismay, my own blurry shots turned out to be no exception. But I'll never forget the experience of climbing up to a ledge and viewing pottery that had been made by Mayan hands thousands of years ago, and the skulls that had been placed there.

For cave enthusiasts who wish to stay dry, Cueva de las Manos (Cave of the Hands) in the Pinturas river valley in Argentina is also truly memorable. Although similar ochre handprints can be found in other caves around the world, the main panel at Cueva de las Manos contains over 800, making it the largest and most visually-impressive display of this kind of prehistoric art anywhere. Various theories have been put forward by archaeologists about what the hands signify – they could have been part of a ritual carried out for religious purposes, for example – but no consensus has been reached. Again, it's a bit of a mission to get there (going by horseback is an option!) and it's advisable to leave before dusk begins to fall – unless you want to lose your way in the desert.

When I was in my twenties, I was talked into exploring the Fantastic Pit in Georgia, in the US. It's not a place that's on the usual tourist trail because the only way to descend to the murky bottom is to abseil down, using a series of ropes. If I wasn't so competitive, I probably wouldn't have agreed to go with my friend and fellow caver, Marcel – but I couldn't let him get one up on me. I knew we had weeks of preparation ahead of us if we were to survive the 178-metre descent. And then the day eventually came when we found ourselves hanging over the top of the pit. It was at this point that Marcel said it was supposed to take a full eight seconds for a stone to reach the bottom. Had I been feeling more at ease, I might have tested this out. As it was, I was focused purely on the equipment and overcoming my nerves. Were I to visit again, I'd try to be a little braver.