
THE DEEP END

BY DEBORAH JOHNSTON

Participants: Deborah Johnston, Rod Obrien (diving), John Wooden, Jessica Circosta, Hayden Hall, Hannah Mugford, Kati Stuart



***Jess in Mammoth cave.
Photo by Deborah Johnston***

This was the first Jenolan trip after O-Week (the university orientation for new students) so we had seven new student members eagerly arrive to see all that SUSS had to offer. Unfortunately, due to a range of circumstances we had only a couple of trip leaders turning up to do the entertaining!

Rod and I explained in detail what to expect from a cave diving trip, and were lucky enough to have a group of four who were maladjusted enough to think that sounded like a fun way to spend a Saturday. The trip was to Upstream Lower River in Mammoth Cave, where we had been pushing and surveying in a frantic series of trips, taking advantage of the historically low water levels which allowed penetration far deeper into the cave than had previously been possible.

We were a bit concerned about the amount of rain Jenolan had received in the weeks before this trip, but when we arrived at the river we saw that it had dropped to even lower than the level seen the month before.

There was even a new cascade having appeared where the water ran down across exposed rocks that were previously under a fair bit of underwater.

We decked out Jess, Hayden, Kat and Hannah with overalls and gloves, but unfortunately we didn't have spare kneepads to smooth over their introduction to the area. We piled the back of Rod's ute with his 5 gear bags and the 5 extra helpers to carry them, then drove down the hill to Mammoth Flat which is only a few minutes walk to the entrance of the cave. This few minutes was plenty of time for everyone to accrue a collection of leeches which were disposed of before entering the cave (or so we thought... *dramatic music here*).

We were in the cave just after 11am and made our way down to the jug handle climb where the shorter members of the party were relieved to see the sneaky wombat hole bypass to the climb. We passed the gear in a chain down to the top of the 40ft drop where Rod and John lowered packs down while the rest of us made our way through the rockpile.

There were some tense moments where I could see our new crew wrestling with the strange new emotion of something being hard and uncomfortable, but also equally thrilling and enjoyable! Everyone popped out the bottom of the rockpile in one piece and were surprised to see the rope hanging down from the ceiling where the bags were dropped down. We chained them through the next tight section with everyone moving themselves through the various corners like they'd been caving for years. Even more impressive was the ease with which the group lifted, passed, and carried the various caving packs which weighed between 4 and 15kg. My initial fears of having to do three times as much work to take pressure of the group disappeared and were replaced with a new fear of not being able to keep up with this group of dynamos!

After just over an hour we reached Lower River with all the bags, and found the stowaway leech that had come along for the ride. As Rod prepared for his dive, the leech met a gruesome end. Jess and Hayden both tucked into their elaborate cave lunches while the rest of us had a more traditional combination of muesli bars and mars bars.

1.5hrs after we'd entered the cave Rod was dressed in his two-piece 7mm wetsuit with his basic webbing harness over the top. With no weights or fins, he grabbed his three dive tanks (a 12l and 7l of air for the main dive, and a 5l of nitrox for decompression), silently handed me his watch, and then crawled into the hole to get to work on the dive.

We weren't expecting him back for 90minutes, so after lunch we head up to Oolite Cavern. Most of the group had very slippery soled shoes which made the climb up a bit of a challenge, but they all made it up and admired the pretties. As I came out of the top of the climb I had forgotten about my injured elbow from the SUSS NZ trip the week before, and extended myself out weighting that arm on just the wrong angle then promptly collapsed into a hefty faceplant for added group amusement.



***Kat emerges from a low crawl.
Photo by Deborah Johnston***

Unfortunately there had been recent damage to the track-marking in Oolite Cavern and the formation outside the path including big muddy boot prints in the otherwise pristine crystal pools (perhaps the result of an overseas film crew that had visited the chamber the month before). I had noticed some of this damage the month before, but was certain it had been added to in the weeks in between, and made a mental note to return with cleaning gear.



Kat enters the keyhole.

Photo by Deborah Johnston

without scraping a surface for the first time in the dive.

This excitement was short lived as the passage was soon choked up again, although this time not with cobblestones but with sand! Finding sand in such high flow was really unexpected, and it was a giant bank which was more or less filling the entire passage save for a small section across the top. Rod began digging his way along here and was briefly horrified when one section began slumping in on him. He retreated back up the passage before kicking the subsided sand down the slope and continued down to -50m. At this point he had reached his turn around point for the dive but could see it continuing further down the slope at the same angle for at least another 5m. This made it the second deepest cave dive in NSW, not so far from Slug Lake where Rod had previously dived one passage down to -96m where he could see it continuing past the -100m mark.

While this sounds cool, it is basically just another unexpected find in the dive that seems hellbent on doing exactly the opposite of what we want by getting deeper, tighter and harder with each push. We weren't going to have enough helpers to do the second dive the next day as planned, so all the gear was packed up again and we started making our way back up out of the cave.

On the way out Jess was coming through one low belly crawl and was basically through when Hayden grabbed her ankles and pulled her back again. He was also brave enough to repeat this a second time. It wasn't until it was his turn to attempt the crawl with her ahead of him before he realised his mistake, which was driven home with a bit of a friendly boot to the head.

The group were impressive with their strength and fitness as they moved the bags along with efficient ease. They were also quick to learn the art of timing bag passing to land yourself with one of the lighter packs when it was time to carry! John and I stayed at the base of the 40-footer to send back up while Rod lead the others through the rockpile. I'm not sure exactly what happened in there but for far longer than expected we could hear nothing but shrieks, groans, and giggles!

Eventually Rod was up the top ready to receive and we hauled the bags up using a rope doubled over through a pulley and yanked on from the bottom which is very quick and efficient. The group still had plenty of energy left so we did a detour to see Horseshoe aven, Railway Tunnel and Skull and Crossbones. Back at the hut we bribed them with donuts and praise, begging them to return so we didn't cop the blame for scaring off such naturally talented cavers and promising them that next time there would be kneepads and no heavy packs! One of the group had picked up a hitchhiking leech, which was far less scary than the shriek it elicited from its host.

This excursion didn't kill as much time as I'd planned, so John and I ummed and ahed about trying to get everyone across lower river (risking them getting far too cold in cotton overalls if they fell in) of a rumble in some nearby bits of cave that I really didn't know at all. Erring on the side of caution, we chose plan B and went for a little explore in nearby passages that were mostly uninspiring dead ends! I had been to a chamber of pretties somewhere in that area before, but I had zero success relocating it off my half a memory from the distant past. Before we knew it, 90minutes was up and it was time to return to Lower River to greet Rod and hear if he'd made any more progress in this notoriously difficult dive.

We excitedly returned, then sat and waiting a long extra 10 minutes before the tell-tale eruption of bubbles and light disrupted the peace and Rod crawled back out of the water, utterly frozen after 102 minutes in the fast flowing 14-degree water. It took him a while to be able to talk, so we just helped him free of his gear while waiting for the news. The good news was that he'd broken through the next restriction, and had found himself in a passage that had widened enough that he could not only turn around, he could clip on both tanks and swim down the passage



Thumbs up.

Photo by Deborah Johnston.

Diving Upstream Imperial (an evening interlude)

Participants: Deborah Johnston, John Wooden (diving), Rob Jones, Jacob, Hannah Mugford, Kati Stuart

John had been a right-hand man for Rod and I on the Lower River diving project, faithfully turning up to lump those damn heavy bags week after week. We'd decided it was time for him to get some time in the water himself for recreation, but also to prepare for the difficult advanced cave diving training he had booked in the coming months. Unfortunately it was a busy time of year for Jenolan and we had been requested to only enter the tourist caves after the final tour was over at 6pm.

As we were unloading gear near the cave a frantic tourist approached us asking for a tire jack. Rob had one back in the hut and returned to grab it to get the fellow and his family back on their way. Meanwhile, John and I slowly geared up in our wetsuits outside the cave and organised our tanks and other bits and pieces into a couple of bags. Then we waited... and waited... and waited. After all this waited we were seriously overheating and I was even beginning to feel sick!

Taking the wetsuit back off would be the obvious answer, but struggling in and out of a fitted 7mm is no easy feat. Eventually I walked back up to the guides office from the grand arch with hoping and praying that no one saw me in my red wetsuit looking like a freak out of context. I saw the guys milling around and did the universal "what are you doooooiiiiinnnnngggg?!!!!?!!!" combination of raised hands and eyebrows... and the quickly followed back to the entrance. Luckily no one witnessed this freakshow before we all reconvened at the bottom of the entrance stairs.

It ended up being a good thing that we had killed this extra time as the guide running the last tour for the day decided to extend it for about 20minutes longer than normal, so we did not disrupt them on their way back out of the cave. We finally entered the cave at 6:30 and made our way down to the bridge, pointing out the woolshed and some other features along the way. Everyone was suitable impressed with the beautiful chamber, and began chatting about physics and rocket science while John and I quickly put on our tanks and flopped into the water.

We lay there for a minute dropping those extra degrees of heat and then head off towards the first upstream sump. We were expecting to be for an hour and so arranged that Rob would lead the group back out when ready rather than getting too cold and hungry waiting for us. The first sump is relatively short and shallow but the water was clear so we took our time cruising through looking around as John tried out his new video and light combination.

As soon as we got out of the water, I realised how tired I was from the gear hauling done previously in the day, and knew that I was not going to make it to the final sump on that dive. I wasn't too worried about being the first to want to turn back though, as I had two light little 3L tanks clipped to each side while poor John was clanging down the long dry passages with big 7l tanks weighing him down. Between the first two sumps I pointed out the high aven that Tom Short and Phil Maynard had bravely climbed (using scaling poles and then laborious hand bolting) that unfortunately did not go in the end. We then reached the second sump which is



***John ready to receive some more heavy bags.
Photo by Deborah Johnston.***

often done as a scary breath-hold freedive by dry cavers, and convinced John to go through holding his fins instead of taking the time to put them on and off again for such a short section. This was a strange feeling as you quickly get used to relying on fins for all movement through the water so then kicking without them makes you feel essentially useless.

Conversation on these trips is always attempted in the dry passages between sumps, but seldom satisfactorily achieved as we both had thick hoods which were the equivalent of a finger in each ear. This was highlighted well when later watching John's video of these sections where each of us would holla out a comment or question to the other, then receive a completely unrelated reply in return. A couple of obligatory faceplants occurred, and as we were approaching sump four and I was lying on the ground mustering up the energy to stand up from one stack before John rounded the corner with his camera rolling, I realised I was too tired and hungry and wanted to head back.

Luckily, we were bang on our predetermined turnaround time anyway so we both happily cruised back out of the cave before we got too cold. Heat was quickly regained as we walked out of the caves with all of our gear still attached and just empty gear packs in our hands exiting the cave at 8:40pm.

Where is Ice Pick Lake? (aka how to lose friends and destroy beginners) - March 9, 2014

Participants: Denis Stojanovic, Deborah Johnston, Rod Obrien, Rod Obrien, Hannah Mugford, Kati Stuart, Jacob Hacker, Theodora Yip

Overnight in the hut Rod and I had discussed the previous Ice Pick Lake trip attempted by some other club members that had become a 11 hour gear hauling epic. Rod had done these trips many times in the 90s and remembered being able to carry three divers gear with a small group who reached the water with minimal trauma. Unfortunately the exact route details had become a bit rusty over the years, so Denis offered to take us there and back via both typical routes so we could compare them and pick the optimum route for our own planned trips in the coming months.

Jess and Hayden had to head off, but Hanna and Kat were raring to go again. . . and without kneepads! We were also joined by Jacob and Theo who were also new club members.

Hannah and Kat were delighted to see the difference it made moving through the bag without dive packs, and were flying through the cave despite their various aches and bruises from the day before.

We went up Railway Tunnel with a quick stop at Skull and Crossbones, carefully picking our way across the muddier sections at the back with our precious new members who had terrible grip on their shoes. We reached Hell Hole first to decide whether it was easier to pull bags up the tightish slope versus the lofty freeclimb bypass nearby. We then made our way back to Skull and Crossbones and climbed down to the Sugar Cubes with Rod offering a tape handline via body belay which was much appreciated by those who were still slipping and sliding with non cave friendly shoes. What followed was a fun two hour rumble through the cave taking a varied through trip back to Railway Tunnel but never reaching Ice Pick Lake as we'd taken a wrong turn early on then committed to our choice. No one minded as despite some "oh my god am I going to die?!" and "how the hell am I supposed to climb up/down/through/under this?!" moments, the new members were in one piece when back at Railway Tunnel and all with big smiles on their faces promising to return with knee pads and gumboots for round two in the future.



***Denis Stojanovic, "It was really huge!!"
Photo by Deborah Johnston***