
MOUNT GAMBIER CAVE DIVING, SA - SEPTEMBER 2015

BY DEBORAH JOHNSTON

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To Mount Gambier, South Australia

I had previously presented twice for the Cave Diving Association of Australia (CDAA) members symposium in Sydney and had always been impressed by the variety of talks they rustle up each time. I had also heard amazing tales of easy and beautiful cave dives down in Mount Gambier where you can drive directly to the entrance and get from your car to the water in under two minutes! Needless to say, when I received an invitation to present at their larger CDAA AGM in Mount Gambier South Australia, I jumped at the opportunity to let them know the great progress we had made in SUSS over the previous year

Dean and I took a Friday off work and hopped on an early plane to Adelaide where we had ordered the cheapest hire car in the city. Thankfully the little rust bucket was upgraded to a 9-seater van after they saw how much luggage we were planning on cramming in it. We decided to pick up every single hitchhiker we saw to take advantage of the extra space, thus ensuring that not a single hitchhiker was seen for the whole drive.

There was a quick stop past the home of famous cave diver Dr Richard 'Harry' Harris' to pick up Dr Andy Pitkin, a British cave diving explorer based in Florida and keynote speaker for the AGM. Harry and Andy are both anaesthetists so it's fair to say that Dean and I brought the conversation down a few notches intellectually for the rest of the journey!

Andy was understandably a little tired as he'd just returned from an intense week camping on the Nullarbor where he'd done some hardcore technical dives with Harry and another world leading diver Craig Challen, reaching the furthest points of the massive and beautiful Cocklebidy Cave. To compound our jealousy, we also learned that he'd travelled from Perth to Cocklebidy via Craig's new shiny red helicopter!! By all accounts it was a magical trip and a fantastic introduction to the cave dives Australia has to offer to those with the training and willingness to 'tough it out' a little.

The 4.5 hour drive (440km) from Adelaide to Mt Gambier went quickly with only a couple of short stops at tourist attractions along the way (a park where trees have been turned into sculptures via some skilled chainsaw wielding, and a rail museum in Tailem Bend which is also home to the Giant Olive and statues of farm animals doing household chores in fancy dress). Unfortunately we arrived at the famous Naracoorte Caves too late for a tour, but that meant we arrived in town early enough to share additional tall tales over beers with the event coordinator John Dalla-Zuanna (JDZ) in the house he had booked for us all to stay in. The agenda for the trip was one day of talks for the AGM, then 3-4 days of diving kindly organised by JDZ to tourist Andy and I around the area.



*Aerial view of Cocklebidy Cave
PHOTO CREDIT: Dr Andy Pitkin*

CDAA AGM

* New Zealander Tim Crisp shared a summary of his successful and not-so-successful exploration projects across the North and South islands of NZ including dives in Blue Creek, hair raising attempts to dig fierce hot springs in pumice, and very long treks through the kiwi bush with full sets of heavy gear.

* Grahame Kilsby, the land owner of one of the most famous local sites, gave an update on his plans for further developing the site including developing infrastructure for BBQs, toilets and change rooms, encouraging divers and their guests to stay longer. There were also plans to open up the site to snorkelers and for open water diver training within the easier sections of the cavern.

* Peter Horack gave a run down on (de-identified) member characteristics and how they've changed over the years including a breakdown of ages, locations, and common progression up the various stages of training.

* John Dalla-Zuanna gave a talk showing the latest and greatest in cave mapping and modelling techniques including measuring location with flow meters on scooters, creating 3D maps using video footage of dives, and graphics developments allowing the creation of games where a user can navigate themselves through a dive from their computer.

* I presented the latest results from SUSS' dive exploration at Jenolan including the logistics of sump diving and the divers exploration in Ice Pick Lake.

* Terry Cummins shared photos and anecdotes from the early years of diving at Mt Gambier around the 70s, including sobering recollections of the fatalities leading to the creation of the CDAA and how gear and training has progressed over time.

* Keynote speaker Andy Pitkin gave two talks, the first detailing his extreme cave exploration under the Texan desert where he has been doing dives up to 12hours long travelling kilometres into the cave and reaching depths of over 150m making it the current deepest cave dive in America. Dr Pitkin's second presentation was of a dive in Florida where divers must try to descend down a tight vertical tunnel against a flow that is so strong most are not strong enough to reach the end. Those who do claw their way down are rewarded with giant open passage with water that is perfectly clear and blue extending for kilometers and still being explored.

* Key members then gathered for the AGM itself which was efficiently short, with a formal dinner following (Dean wearing a bowtie to dinner, only to find that all the staff had bowties too!).



(Left) Andy & Dean at Sister Sink Holes, (Right) Dean with warning sign, (Below) Englebrechts Under the Town
PHOTO CREDIT: Deborah Johnston



Sites around Town

The Blue Lake

The Blue Lake was formed in the crater of a volcano just on the edge of town. It would be listed as a dive except that it's the water supply for the town. The lake was a greyish green at that time, but around November each year it changes overnight to a brilliant bright blue that we were told has to be seen to be believed. JDZ and his team dived in the lake in the past reaching a maximum depth of around 80m. We are told that the blue is from the high concentration of calcite in the water which removes yellow humic substances (like tannins and dead algae) through precipitation leaving more blue on the surface which is reflected best during the summer months. The content of the water has been subject to extensive testing following findings that the rate of birth defects in this town is slightly higher than otherwise expected.

Lady Nelson Visitor Centre

Who doesn't love a visitor centre?! You have to come here to pick up and drop off some of the cave keys, so you might as well slap down a fiver and take a stroll. There was some various interesting skeletal remains from the caves, and they talk of the giant penguins and gigantic sharks that used to live in the area. There is even a full size replica of the HMS Lady Nelson which was the first to sail from Sydney to Mt Gambier in 1800.

The Cave Garden

Next to the town hall is the Cave Garden, a sinkhole that has been beautifully planted and puts on a sound and light show detailing the history of the area. This garden is said to be the original settlement spot for the first town pioneers who collected here for the easy access to fresh water.

The OK Pie Shop

Despite the advertising, the pies were rather good.



*Andy & JDZ in idlebiddy Cave
PHOTO CREDIT: Dean Coleman*

Mount Gambier Cave Dives

Kilsby's Sinkhole

Kilsby's Sinkhole is a well-developed dive site a short drive out of town. Access is arranged via an online booking system and at the required time, all the cars meet on the road near the paddock fence before driving in convoy to the sinkhole edge. The dive has a toilet, and concrete ramp and ladder to a pontoon with seats and steps down into the water itself. The land owners have plans to develop the site further with a change room shed, BBQs, and opening access to snorkelers and open water students. From the waters edge looking up to the top (around 15m) it is hard to imagine that people have jumped from there.

We were under specific instructions to go no deeper than 40m, although the bottom is far lower and with the crystal clear water it is easy to feel shallower than you are without a quick check on the computer from time to time. In my group we had around 10 divers of varied levels all sharing the giant cavern. There are a couple of smaller sections that you can reel into, however due to a miscommunication Andy and I did not follow Tom Crisp when he head down one passage to show us, but I'm assuming we didn't really miss much. This visibility in the sinkhole is perfect and there is beautiful vegetation covering the walls in the shallows.

You can see everywhere in the giant cavern so without photography to keep you occupied you more of less cover everything in the first 10 minutes and the rest is just retracing your steps for fun. At the right time of day there are stunning beams of lights that come down through the water, although I was extremely disappointed to find that this didn't translate into giant shadow puppets on the sinkhole floor.

Pincaninnie Ponds

Pincaninnie Ponds is famous for its amazingly clear visibility and well frequented by snorkelers and divers. They have an online booking system with National Parks where you can sign an indemnity form and pay for your time slot via computer. The time slots to choose from ranged from 8am to 1am so we booked in for two snorkels (night and day) and a dive, but unfortunately there was an unexpected algae bloom that ruined the visibility during our stay so we were stuck just looking at the photos for this trip.



But first, let me take a selfie
PHOTO CREDIT: Dr Andy Pitkin



Deborah being lowerd into The Shaft
PHOTO CREDIT: Dean Coleman

Idlebiddy

The entrance to Idlebiddy is a thick metal sheet on the ground with an awkward lock where you need to put your arm down into a hole and wrangle with an invisible lock to gain access. After success with the lock the sheet is removed and a 5m deep narrow hole is exposed. You can free climb the hole easily but a gantry is set up to raise and lower gear in so the divers make use of this too and abseil down. To do this you put a climbing harness on first, then BCD etc. on over the top, all staying on for the entire dive. Gearing up is made easy with the ladder and natural flat platforms, but somehow I didn't notice that Andy had his cylinder clipped onto the same loop as mine, and his 12L cylinder dropped to the floor when I was putting mine on! Whoops! Lucky the depth is only about 6m at this point.

At the bottom there is a well-built metal platform and ladder down into the water. The dive itself is short but beautiful with a white roof and walls, and gorgeous red and cream coloured stripy clay blocks on the roof. Just down from the entrance underwater is a plastic frame there to shelter the skeleton of an adolescent Aboriginal female from the distant past.

Gary Barclay and Dean volunteered their time to assist us get our gear (and selves) in and out of the water on this trip, and even filled some cylinders as well.

Sisters Sinkholes

Sisters sinkholes are a common CDAA training site, twin sinkholes just a touch further up the road from Kilsby's. You can drive right up to them with easy access to the water in each. It is a common training site for entry level CDAA divers. We didn't have time to dive here so simply admired all the local ducks and hawks quickly before heading off to Kilsby's.

Engelbrecht Cave

Engelbrechts was the local rubbish tip in town. Hundreds of tonnes of rubbish have been removed now and it's a popular tourist cave. On our trip, we were self guiding so playing with the lights figuring out which switch turned on which light, when we suddenly illuminated a life sized suspended diver, hanging from the roof just above us wearing retro gear.

The passage goes down two short paths, each ending in sumps. The dry tour itself is short but the map in the guides office that shows how the underwater sections extend in each direction and goes right under the township.



Deborah in Tank Cave
PHOTO CREDIT: Dr Andy Pitkin

Alleyns Cave

Alleyns Cave is in the forestry area and was once open access. This was before a group of four stopped by for a quick look before returning home to Adelaide. They entered with no lines and silted it out. Only one made it out and the coroner's recommendation was that it be closed permanently. Delicate negotiations by the CDAA over time mean that this cave will be able to be dived again in the not-to-distant future.

Stinging Nettle Cave, Nettlebed, and Mud Hole

These are other entrances we saw near Pines Cave. Stinging Nettle is Advanced Cave rated but I'm not sure about the other two. We didn't have time to dive in any of these but it was interesting to see so many conveniently located so close to each other.

Pines Cave

Pines cave is another one that can be driven straight up to. It has stairs to the water and a wooden shelter for gearing up. It is dual rated as Cave and Advanced Cave depending on which parts of the passage are visited. We had the option to dive this while JDZ was teaching a cave course, but decided to keep our cylinders as full as possible for Tank cave the next day.

Allendale

This is a sinkhole on the way to the Shaft that is directly in the way of where they wanted to build the main road. They attempted to fill in the hole for the road but it subsided so instead now the road splits in two and travels either side of it before re-joining and continuing on. In the early years of settlement the cave was used to water the horses and bullocks traveling between here and Port MacDonnell and it is now fenced off to stop wildlife (human and other!) wandering in.



JDZ in Tank Cave
PHOTO CREDIT: Dr Andy Pitkin

The Shaft

The Shaft starts with an unassuming little hole in a paddock. When the land owners found it they peered in and saw a small lake about 6m down so they began putting rocks in the hole to fill it up. They did this for many years before realising that perhaps the hole was bigger than anticipated, and got some divers in to investigate. It turned out to be 60m deep on one side (the shallow side!) and 124m deep on the other.

The entry was the same as Idlebiddy except the rope wasn't long enough to reach the bottom so each diver needed to freefall the last 1.5m into the water. This was fantastic for everyone that remembered to inflate their BCD! Just under the water surface the cavern widens out to massive proportions.

The walls are entirely covered with a black coating that sucks up the light and makes for a slightly spooky dive. We took a sample of the black crust to give to Ian Lewis for analysis.

The water was the same temperature as the rest of the caves we'd done, 16 degrees, but seemed to feel much colder due to how dark and still it was. Some of us clocked up a little deco exploring a bit deeper and it felt funny to be so crowded at the exit section when there was such a vast space just below. The exit is generally a short ladder, but we were lucky enough to have Gary Barclay there with the electric winch on his car to pull us all up in complete luxury.

Tank Cave

Tank is the jewel in the crown at Mount Gambier, a maze network of passages mapped at over 9km with a single small entrance. The CDAA has bought this land so owns the cave and controls all access. Recently they'd build a large shed next to the entrance with a large print out of the map, lights, and plenty of gearing up benches. The entrance is another one of the bastard hidden locks where you put your arm down in a hole but John made quick work of it. Just beneath the metal door is a ladder that extends upwards, and a switch to turn on a string of what looks a bit like fairy lights to illuminate the short path to the waters edge, complete with steps down into the dive.

After quickly taking our gear to the water, JDZ briefed Andy and I in the hut about our first dive which was to be an introductory look at the A and B tunnels near the entrance. This is the standard intro dive where you are able to get a feel for the cave, while your guide gets a feel for your diving ability! At the return junction it was clear that we all still had plenty of air remaining so we were able to tack on a little detour to the end of A line for a bit of extra caving, ending up with a total of 80minutes.

JDZ had been worried that I'd get too cold on the dives as I had taken my wetsuit down instead of drysuit, but unbeknownst to him the water was actually 2 degrees warmer than what I am used to diving in and I had a secret weapon, my new Thermalution (a battery powered waterproof heated vest) which kept me toasty warm. I strongly suspect I would have been warm even without the vest as he set a cracking pace I had to push to keep up with as I am not used to covering any real distance in caves like this (versus Jenolan where we claw for every hard fought meter of passage). Throughout the cave there are multiple sections where the guideline branches off in one to four different directions, each labelled with a marker and the guidelines each different colours also.

To assist navigation through the cave, each diver puts a person marker (usually a simple clothes peg) on the line that they had just travelled on. Using this system, when you return to a junction on the way out the exit path is obvious as it's the one marked with your peg. This system also allows others in the cave to know who is where, which is why back in the shed they have the 'Nails of Shame' where a string between two nails contains the personal pegs that people left behind!

We had a long surface interval where JDZ lowered the tone speaking of the deaths that have occurred in the cave, including one poor soul who expired only meters from the entrance lake. Our second dive was much further into the cave as we journeyed to the end of G tunnel and back. This trip covered about 1.6km and showcased much more of the cave with a wide variety of beautiful passages ranging from low flatteners, bright orange mud floors, and boulders with interesting coatings of greens reds blacks and yellows. As this was a longer dive we each took in a 7l stage cylinder that we breathed off up to a certain point in the cave before ditching that was to act as a backup on the way out as well.

Our dive was just over 100mins and I hopped in without replacing the batteries in my heated vest (I thought I'd swapped them but put the old ones back on by mistake) so at the end where we were not moving much while looking around I will admit that I started to feel the cold a bit. I wasn't bothered much by the cold but I did know that it meant I'd be using some extra air on the return journey so reached a point where I called a turn around. Frustratingly, one exiting I saw that this was only about 50m from the absolute end of that part of the cave, oh well!

After packing up we head back into town listening to one of the cool playlists that JDZ made up for passing the time when decompressing in diving habitats on his crazy deep cave dives in New Zealand. I was very surprised to see that 9hrs had passed since we arrived for our first dive, with this location definitely being an all day activity.

Just out of Town

Tantanoola Caves

This was once the coastline and now exposed dolomite cliffs containing a pretty tourist cave.

Naracoorte Caves

Naracoorte caves are also part of the ancient coastline but now over 100km from the sea. The park has one of the world's best collect of fossil deposits (over 500,000 years worth) and a selection of beautiful tourist caves.

Princess Margaret Rose Cave and Drik Drik

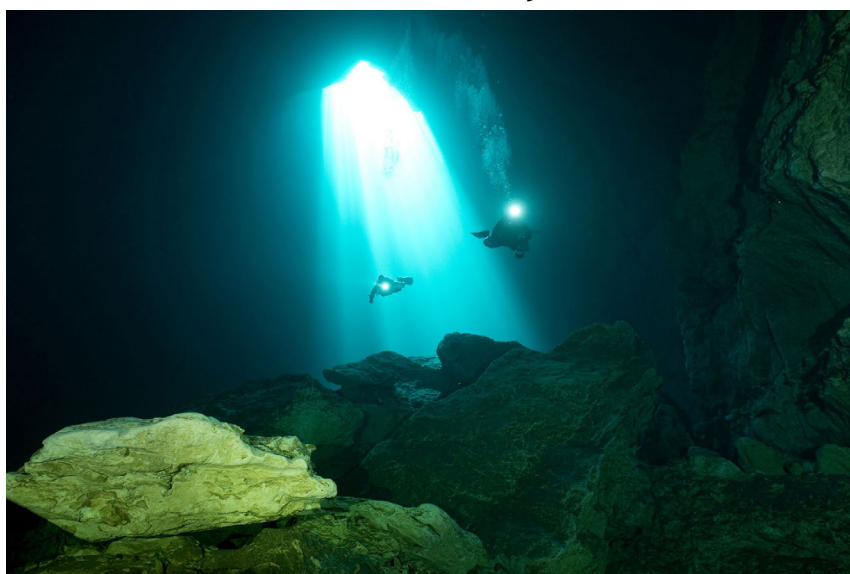
Another pretty tourist cave with exploration potential and local walking trails overlooking a gorge.

The Coast

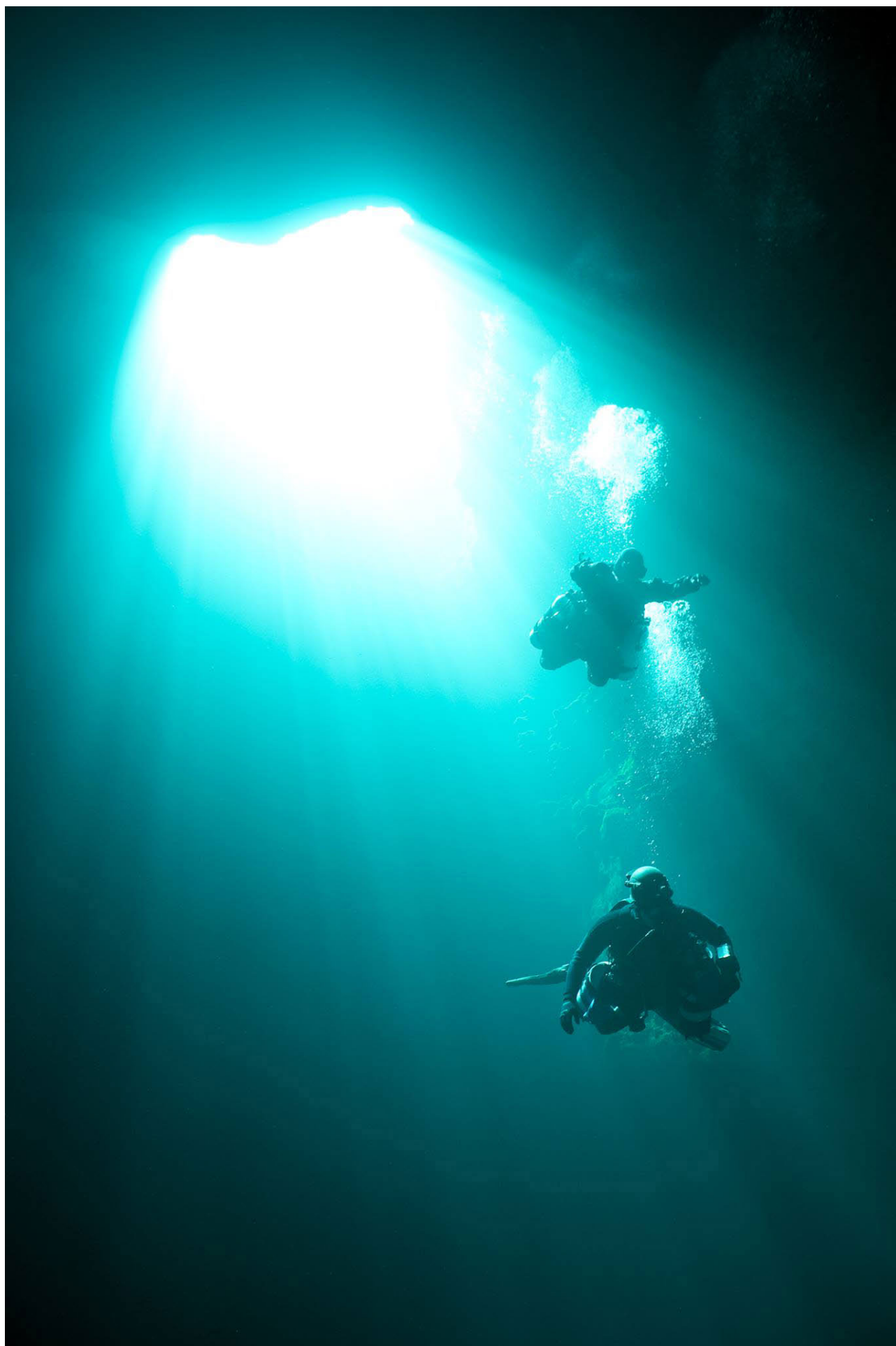
Only a short drive to the coast from Mount Gambier and you can enjoy Australia's best crayfishing at Port MacDonnell, 'The Southern Rock Lobster Capital of Australia'.



Deborah in Tank Cave
PHOTO CREDIT: Dr Andy Pitkin



Kilsbys Cave
PHOTO CREDIT: Dr Andy Pitkin



Kilsbys Cave
PHOTO CREDIT: Dr Andy Pitkin
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