



P. Smejkal

Trent at the base of the 35 m waterfall pitch in Owl Pot.

## A Bit of Cave Diving at Mt Gambier

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On our recent skiing trip to NSW, Ric and I diverted to Mt Gambier for the first and last weekends, so I could do a bit of cave diving. The following report is of three of the 10 dives I did over the two weekends. I thought these might be of some interest to club members.

Also, Alan put out a plea for copy and I am a soft touch for the desperate.

**Dive 1: Engelbrechts East. Friday 13 July.**

Divers: Adam Hair, Janine McKinnon.

Support: Lachlan Ellis.

Ric? – He bunked off into town to go shopping.

Engelbrechts Cave has an east and a west arm which are separated by a collapse feature. They are also two halves of a tourist cave, with separate entrances, both gated, and a walkway connecting them with ground level, and the entrance to the site. This entrance is conveniently through the ticket office, and more importantly, the coffee shop. Thus one can have a coffee, walk down the nice, tourist quality steps, turn on the nice tourist lights as one goes, dive, and reverse the order post-dive. Very civilised.

Oh, I forgot to mention that the attraction of the site for the tourists is the lake in each section, which leads to flooded tunnels (otherwise it's not really a cave dive, is it?). There are a couple of flood lights mounted in the lake underwater

which illuminate the crystal clear water but don't show where the tunnel is.

The really interesting thing about the operation for me was that the operators were extremely happy when we turned up to dive, and wanted us to wait for their next tour to start before we did our dive. Yes, rather than skulking in the shadows unseen, or timing visits so tourists wouldn't meet us (my usual experience with access to tourist caves as a "free" caver), they wanted us to be the main attraction.

Whether this had anything to do with the fact that they had only just taken over the lease the day before, and had never had any divers in, I don't know. Mind you, there isn't much to see other than the lakes, and they do have:

- a) A big mural of cave divers in the café and,
- b) a dummy of a fully kitted cave diver hanging from the roof in the entrance to the west arm.

So some divers actually being there adds a bit of verisimilitude to all that, I suppose – and entertainment value.

Anyway, we wandered down to the edge of the water slowly and timed it so that we were doing our final gearing up as the tourists came in. Locky was on hand to give some information whilst we did our thing getting sorted, getting in and doing final checks before heading off under the wall and off down the tunnel.

Adam laid the line and I swam behind, with us both trying not to stir up the silt from the floor.

The sump is very short, only about 30 m or so, and surfaces in a small chamber. There is a narrow side passage branching off to the right about half way through the sump, and this takes a couple of narrow twists before surfacing around the side of the same chamber, but it is too narrow to get through.

Thus the whole dive only takes about 25-30 minutes even going slowly.

We resurfaced in the main chamber after the 30 minutes and started getting out, chatting about the dive and just generally relaxing. We couldn't see anything behind us (away from the lake) as the flood lights had blinded us as we swam back across the lake. When our eyes readjusted we got a big surprise to see the tourists still standing there! They had waited for us to return.

The operator/guide was still smiling and friendly as we had a coffee together afterwards, so I guess we didn't say anything too offensive/embarrassing when we didn't know we had an audience.

### ***Dive 2: The Shaft. Sunday 5 August.***

Divers: Andreas Klocker, Adam Hooper, Janine McKinnon, Tim Payne (Guide).

Visualise a typical dairy farm paddock, but flat. Lush, long, green grass. Cows. Large irrigation system. 1 m diameter circular hole in the ground covered with a gate.

OK, so maybe the last bit isn't typical. But this is Mt Gambier, with a subterranean aquifer very, very, close to the surface. Breaking through sometimes; or the ground subsiding above it, more like.

There is an interesting story about the appearance of the entrance hole to the Shaft, involving horses and the 1960s (I think it was), but that is not for here.

The reason I have included our dive report here is somewhat tenuous. There is an 8 m drop through the circular entrance hole to the water. This is negotiated by divers via an electron ladder, hence the (already mentioned tenuous) caving connection. Of course, the dive is all underground, so maybe not a ridiculous stretch for an article in a caving mag.

To dive this site you need a guide, as well as the relevant qualifications and signed indemnity forms, forms outlining prior relevant (deep) diving experience, harness, blah blah ... Mt Gambier sure makes Mole Creek look open slather.

So, everything official in place, we turned up at 8:30 am at the rendezvous point to convoy into the hole in the paddock.

It was cold, (heavy) rain showers and WINDY. Don't let anyone tell you Tassie is Windy. It's nothing on Mt Gambier.

We put all our gear into Tim's Landcruiser as they have had a lot of rain and we didn't think Adam's 2WD would get the 200 m across the flat paddock to the entrance. (Spoiler alert! We were right, as Tim got his Landcruiser seriously bogged when he tried to leave at the end of the day.)

We started getting the A frame erected over the hole in a gale, with downpour showers, and got our gear on, all in similar weather.

It took 1.5 hours to have everything ready. Tim uses his car as a primary anchor for the belay rope, and also anchors the A frame to it. There is no secondary anchor point as there is nothing suitable around. I would have thought that the CDAA would have placed bolts into the ground around the hole (in the solid, half metre thick, rock that makes the hole) as mounting points for the three legged A frame, but they haven't. It all seems to work this way though so maybe it isn't necessary (but I'd do it). [*Surely any passing cows would suffice – Ed.*]

Tim actually lowered us all into the hole, rather than abseil, with a pulley and brake. This saved wearing more junk (like descenders) that would be a nuisance on the dive. We used a tape as a harness and recycled it for each of us.

Adam had been there before, so he went down first, as he knew the layout of the entry chamber. There are lines strung around the walls to attach lowered dive gear to. Thus, tanks were lowered down and slung on these lines. The divers were lowered wearing the suits, masks, fins, and BC (buoyancy compensator) (in the case of we sidemounters).

All went smoothly with the entry and putting gear on. The dive itself (first of two) was spectacular. Gin-clear water where you could see forever (if you had the light). Deep. Big passage. Big rock pile (where the farmer tried to fill in the hole when it first appeared. A very determined but hopeless effort.)

We swam down to 40 m depth and looked below at the bottom more than 20 m away. Tunnels running off to right and left, and big ... Tim had a couple of very powerful lights so we had amazing visibility.

After we surfaced from that dive the plan was to go back up for lunch and then return for another dive. Adam and I had twin, 7 litre tanks and we had enough air to go again without a refill. Adam also had an extra 12 L tank, which helped with that! The others had much bigger tanks (twin 12 L) so we didn't have to go get refills.

Tim went up first, followed by me. And this is where it gets REALLY embarrassing for a vertical caver, folks. I took off my tanks and left them behind on the line. I thought I would climb up the paltry (free hang) 8 m ladder with my (very heavy – the excuses start ...) buoyancy compensator still on, and my fins attached by a crab.

I huffed, and I puffed, and I puffed about ... and I couldn't climb up! I just didn't have the strength and was having real trouble getting vertical with my feet underneath me. Embarrassing indeed. Tim ended up by hauling me up on the pulley system he had set up for the belay.

I rarely climb ladders but ...

In hindsight, my wet BC probably weighed about 8 kg (it's a big, heavy-duty technical BC for carrying many tanks), and the fins another couple, and it was all on my back (yeah, I know, excuses, excuses).

It was still blowing a gale across the open paddocks, with horizontal hail at times, so we huddled in the lee of his car for lunch, which was surprisingly enjoyable and convivial.

After a 1.5 hour break (for surface decompression of dissolved gases) we started in for the second dive.

We had another brilliant dive, only slightly marred by the fact that three out of four of us had leaking dry suits. We

got a little cold (water temperature 15°C) but nothing drastic.

When it came time to climb out I was a bit less cavalier than in the morning. I left my BC and fins behind and climbed just in my drysuit. It was a snak! Reputation, if not redeemed, then not altogether lost, I hope.

It took about one hour to get all the gear up, changed into dry clothes, and the A-frame de-rigged. In the gale.

The three of us then wandered across the paddock to Adam's car, as Tim finished packing the Landcruiser and started to drive out. Or, not drive out. After about 10 minutes we noticed that his car wasn't getting any closer to us at the gate. I started walking back, with the others following. To cut a long(ish) story short, an hour later, and the farmer's tractor enlisted, Tim was out of the paddock.

***Dive 3: Engelbrechts East. Tuesday 7 August.***

Divers: Andreas Klocker, Janine McKinnon

Support: Ric this time.

So, I was back for a second go at this one, with Andreas as my buddy this time. So it was really an STC trip, right?

The manager remembered me from three weeks previously and we all had a lovely chat before getting organised to dive. The length of the chat was partly determined by his

desire for us to align our dive with his 10 am tour. No worries for us, anything for good relationships with the locals. Although I must say, I don't really feel comfortable with a lot of people watching me get geared up and start a dive (or a caving trip for that matter, but that doesn't happen).

So, off we went again, with our audience watching and Ric giving them some background on it all this time. Andreas laid the line out and then gave me the reel and I (did the easy bit and) reeled us home, half an hour later. We did spend more time looking in nooks and crannies than last dive, but it is still a pretty short dive.

This time we were prepared for the tourists to still be there. Not that we necessarily behaved any differently, it's just that we knew we had an audience, which made a difference. Claro? I could never go on Big Brother.

Ric helped carry my gear back up and also spent a few minutes answering questions and explaining stuff to the tourists. [*Ric in his element ... poor bloody tourists – Ed.*] This was good. Andreas and I could just go and get changed and sort our gear.

We had another coffee with the manager/guide/leasee (all the same person) and his wife, before heading for home.

All very civilised. Did I say that already?



*Andreas emerging from Engelbrechts East.*

*R. Tunney*