

# When East Meets West

Peter Buzzacott

SFC

Janine McKinnon

SFC

## PART 1

by Peter Buzzacott

**C**AVE DIVING is not for everyone, but for me it is both exhilarating and challenging. I've wanted to visit a couple of famous caves in Tasmania for ages, so I jumped at the chance when everything fell into place.

In particular I was excited when Alan Jackson suggested an attempt to extend the line in Dwarrowdelf/Khazad-Dum. The last diver in there, Stefan Eberhard, had tied-off at depth 17 m, 30 m into the second sump. Alan was hoping we could extend that line by another 70 m and pop-up in nearby Cauldron Pot. Apparently, this might even break the Australian record for the deepest combined system, from the highest entry to the lowest depth.

I landed in Hobart and stayed with Janine McKinnon and Ric Tunney, a couple of well-known ASF members, in their house overlooking the city. The view at night was spectacular.

Soon we were hurtling through Tasmania towards Maydena, then hiking through rainforest carrying packs laden with SRT and dive gear. At the cave (Dwarrowdelf), Janine went in first to rig with the assistance of visiting NUCC member, Mark Euston, while Ric, Pat Seiser (a visiting American caver) and I followed at a leisurely pace. Pat and I stopped at the halfway mark, with 112 m of rope above us and 104 m below. Janine and Mark continued to the bottom of the pitches, both to rig the cave in preparation for my dive, and so Mark could "do" the big bottom pitch (68 m). Ric went to the top of the bottom pitch.

Now that I had seen the cave and appreciated the majesty of it, I felt confident I could make it to the bottom and back. I'd trained for this in WA in 40°C, pouring bottled water over my head while prusiking



Diving at 950 m elevation at Arthurs Lake

up a 10 m tall quarry in a full kit with a pack slung beneath me. Still, until today, my SRT skills had been of uncertain quality.

A day of rest and then it was up to Juneec Cave to test out my equipment in the cold Tasmanian waters before attempting the "Big One". We hiked through national park to reach the cave, got changed into dive gear and entered the dark zone, wading upstream, sometimes chest deep, and battling the rushing water. With Ric and Pat helping carry the gear, finally we reached the end; the beach just before the sump. Janine and I put on our masks and down we sank, into the flooded tunnel. Visibility was the length of my arm at most — basically, we were diving alone, a few minutes apart. We had tanks underneath each arm instead of on our backs because the cave was low in places. I was having a fabulous time; the gear I had been given by Fourth Element was even warmer than I'd expected and my dive gear overall was perfect in these conditions. I was ready.

A couple of days later we hiked through the dense rainforest back to Dwarrowdelf,

carrying packs filled with dive gear, including two 6 litre tanks on loan from Stefan. This time Janine, Ric and I were joined by Alan Jackson and Petr Smejkal, a keen caver from the Czech Republic living in Hobart for a while. We got dressed in trog suits, (mine was a Northern Diver dry suit that I'd cut the feet off so I could wear it over my new gumboots), put our SRT gear on and in we went.

Inside, the cave was about 10°C and we were planning a long day, alternating between resting while waiting for the ropes to clear or working hard, so I'd chosen to wear two Capilene undergarments inside my trog suit, a short-sleeved top over a long-sleeved top. That way I could take one off if hot but, in reality, I never got hot enough to strip down and take one off.

Down I went, into the dark, abseiling on a 9.5 mm rope, pitch after pitch. The rope was stiff and creaked a lot, plus I bounced around more than I was used to on the 10 m pitches back home; all-in-all it was marvelous fun. Between my weight and the pack underneath me I was sure the rope





*Exhausted but happy to have made it up and out*

was going to snap. One pitch in particular stood out — we had to squeeze through a short narrow passage and reach out over empty space to pull the rope over to clip onto it. Then, we swung out over the biggest drop I have ever seen — 67 m straight down, dripping water all around, and the void big enough to fit an apartment block into. All up, we abseiled 216 m down, my gear divided among the team of five. After that there was a 30 m handline down the final rockpile in the huge chamber where Khazad-Dum (KD) joins in on the other side.

At the far end of this chamber we entered the “Depths of Moria” and then

crawled on our stomachs through a low conduit high above a fast flowing stream, squeezed between rock walls in another section until finally we reached almost the end of the cave. Just three constrictions to get through, and a little more streamway, and the diving pool was on the other side.

We were about -280 m underground by now, in a place relatively few people have been. I turned my helmet to the side and started squeezing through the restriction, but it was no good: my chest was too big to fit.

This was a bitter disappointment but, in the scheme of things, we all face set-backs now and then. A summit that can't be

reached, a river that can't be crossed, a hole too small for a 48 inch chest. Ho-hum.

We had lunch, emptied the dive tanks to prevent them exploding if they hit the wall on the way back up, and then up we went, hauling ourselves up, my dive gear still divided among the team, hanging underneath us as we climbed. It was gut-bustingly hard. The first 67 m pitch took me 35 minutes without a slung load and I had stomach cramps by the time I swung back into the little passage. I was pretty worn down by the time we crawled out of Dwarrowdelf hours later.

It took me a few days to recover — my legs in particular had taken more punishment than usual, but within a week I was back to normal and ready to make my first Australian high altitude dive, in the Central Highlands.

So, my sincere thanks to the team, and to Ric and Janine in particular for helping with access, guidance, ropes, rigging, packs, tanks and hospitality. The caving was unlike anything else I have attempted and I learned so many new skills during this trip. Next, it would be my turn to host a visitor, when Janine arrived in WA to go cave-diving in the Nullarbor.

#### *Dwarrowdelf statistics*

*Depth 293 m*

*Pitch lengths (in order from entrance)*

*22 m, 21 m, 55 m, 14 m, 37 m, 67 m. 30 m*

## PART 2

### *Janine McKinnon*

Party: Peter Buzzacott, Liz Rogers, Ken Smith, Mark Pardoe, Janine McKinnon.

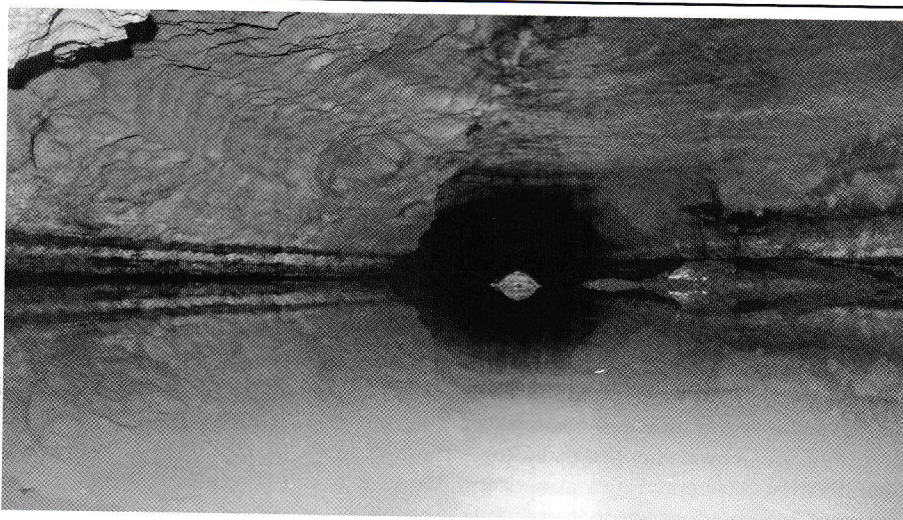
Now it was my turn to play “Stranger in a strange land”. (OK a little melodramatic but poetic licence applies, I'm sure.) I was joining Peter, and a few others, for an Easter trip to the Nullarbor, for cave diving. Cocklebiddy, Murra-el-Elevyn and Tommy Grahams were on the plan.

I had managed to get my basic dive gear packed under the 23 kg luggage limit for Virgin. This did involve a few tricks (which I won't divulge here, just in case any Virgin employees are reading) but I will just say that I looked a little over dressed for the climate as I left the plane in Perth.

Peter picked me up at the airport and we headed straight down to his place in Bunbury to do the final organising and packing for our trip.

We (by which I really mean Peter) had almost finished packing by 11 pm, when we called it quits for the night. This was 1 am by my clock and I had been up since 4 am (EST), so I was pretty tired.

We got a cracking start at 6 am, packed



*View across Cocklebiddy Lake*

some more, and got away at a not quite cracking 8 am.

Thirteen hours of driving, with very brief refuel and toilet stops, saw us setting up camp near the entrance to Murra-el-Elevyn Cave (Murra), five minutes drive from Cocklebiddy Roadhouse. This drive was a bit of a culture shock for a Tassie girl. We think one hour of driving warrants “driver reviver” stalls.

This was now Wednesday night and the

others weren't due to arrive until sometime Friday. Our plan was to do a dive in Cocklebiddy Cave, just we two, on Thursday.

We spent five hours getting our dive gear to the water in Cocklebiddy. It is quite a difficult process, as the time it took us implies. I won't bore you with the logistics, but an aluminium ladder and trips up and down a big rockpile were involved.

Once in the water, we had a 200 m swim across the lake and THEN the dive started.





JANINE MCKINNON

Entrance to Cocklebiddy Cave

It is a truly wonderful cave dive: BIG passage, clear water, a thermocline and a halocline. My first for both. The recent rains had left about 4 m of cold water (13°C) in a layer over the usual salt water (18°C) of the cave. The optical effects (different refractive indices) were fascinating.

Peter wanted to collect some water samples from the roof and the floor, but due to problems with some borrowed tanks he was off balance and found it too difficult to do the fiddly work required. No worries. He could do it the next day before we geared out.

We turned the dive after 25 minutes and retraced our route. We left the gear at the beach and got back to camp in time to drive to the roadhouse for showers before it closed.

The next day we returned. In the interests of efficiency, I started hauling my gear up the rockpile to the ladder whilst Peter went off to get his samples. This was going very well until he called to me from the far end of the lake. I was at the top of the rockpile at the time, having just deposited a load to

lift. I thought he was having problems so I rushed back down to the beach, to discover that he needed more weights.

Can you guess where the weights were? Yep. I had just taken them up the rockpile. Sometimes efficiency isn't all it's cracked up to be.

By 1:30 pm the dive was done and we had finished hauling the gear out to the car. We returned to camp and had a little break. Coffee!!

We started rigging the entrance to Murra after our rest. This required a tripod to lower the gear down to the bottom of the dry sinkhole entrance.

The gear goes down a 35 m drop on one side of the sinkhole and the divers climb down a shorter, 7 m drop, on the opposite side.

We got the tripod up and then went to set up the aluminium ladder for the climb. Unfortunately, it was 1 m too short, so I rigged it SRT. This subsequently proved a little less than ideal for our cave diving friends, but they all had the basic skills, and managed.

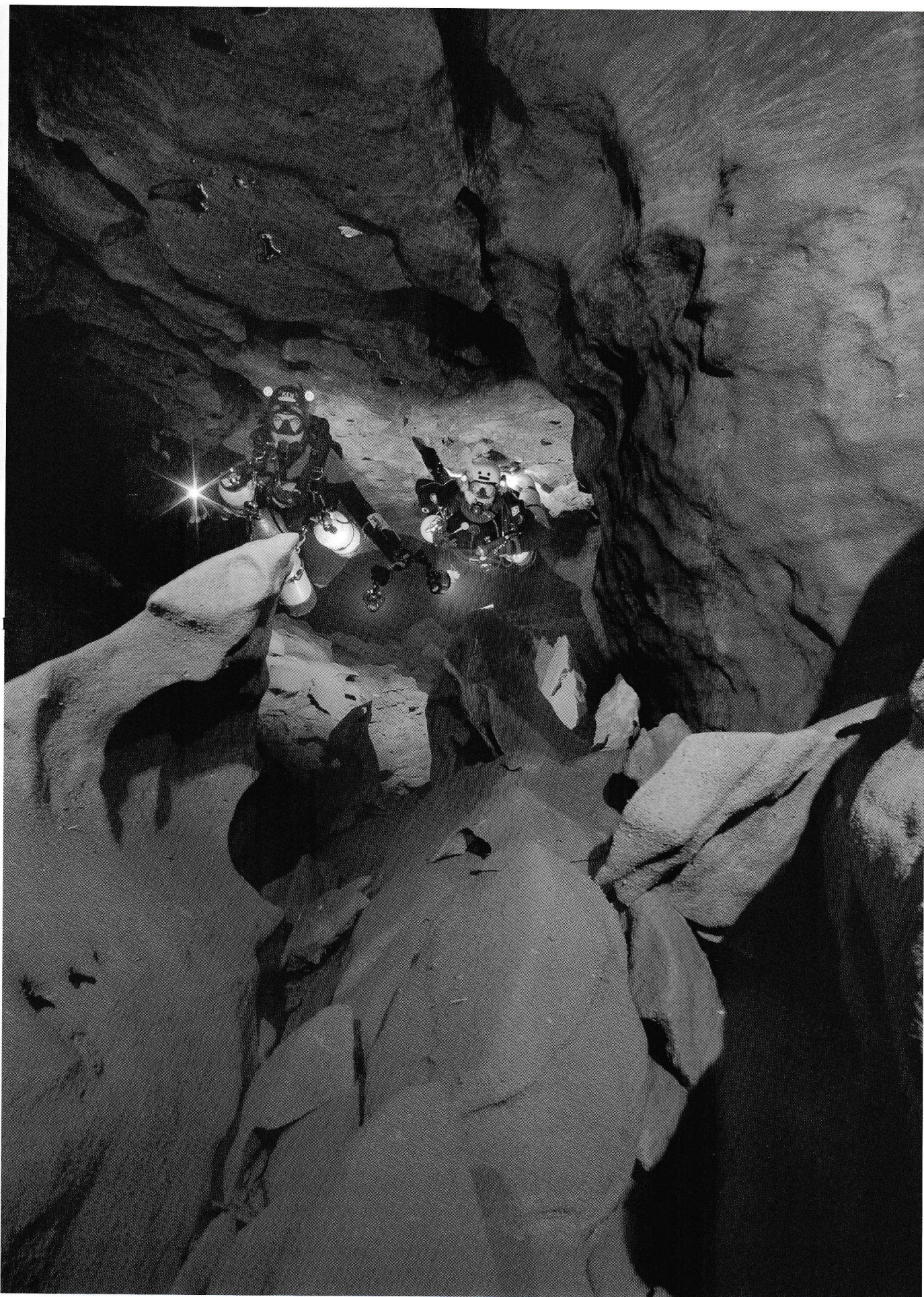
We were finished at last light and went to the roadhouse for our nightly shower. No-one else had arrived yet. We were just beginning to wonder if anyone else would.

However, our lack of faith was misplaced. We found Ken and Liz at the roadhouse having their showers. Mark arrived around 9 pm. There had been ten people on the permit and we were finally five. Ken and Liz are cave divers from the east and Mark came down from Geraldton (WA). That really did show commitment — and the WA attitude to distance.

Several hours were needed to get the diving gear to the lake in Murra on the Saturday. Co-operation and teamwork got the job done as efficiently as it could be and all went smoothly. Most of us didn't know the majority of the others and it was nice to see how quickly we all got the teamwork going. Except for Ken, who was off getting his buckled suspension fixed. He had hit a stump the previous afternoon, but that's another story ...

There were several proposals for what people wanted to do over the time we were



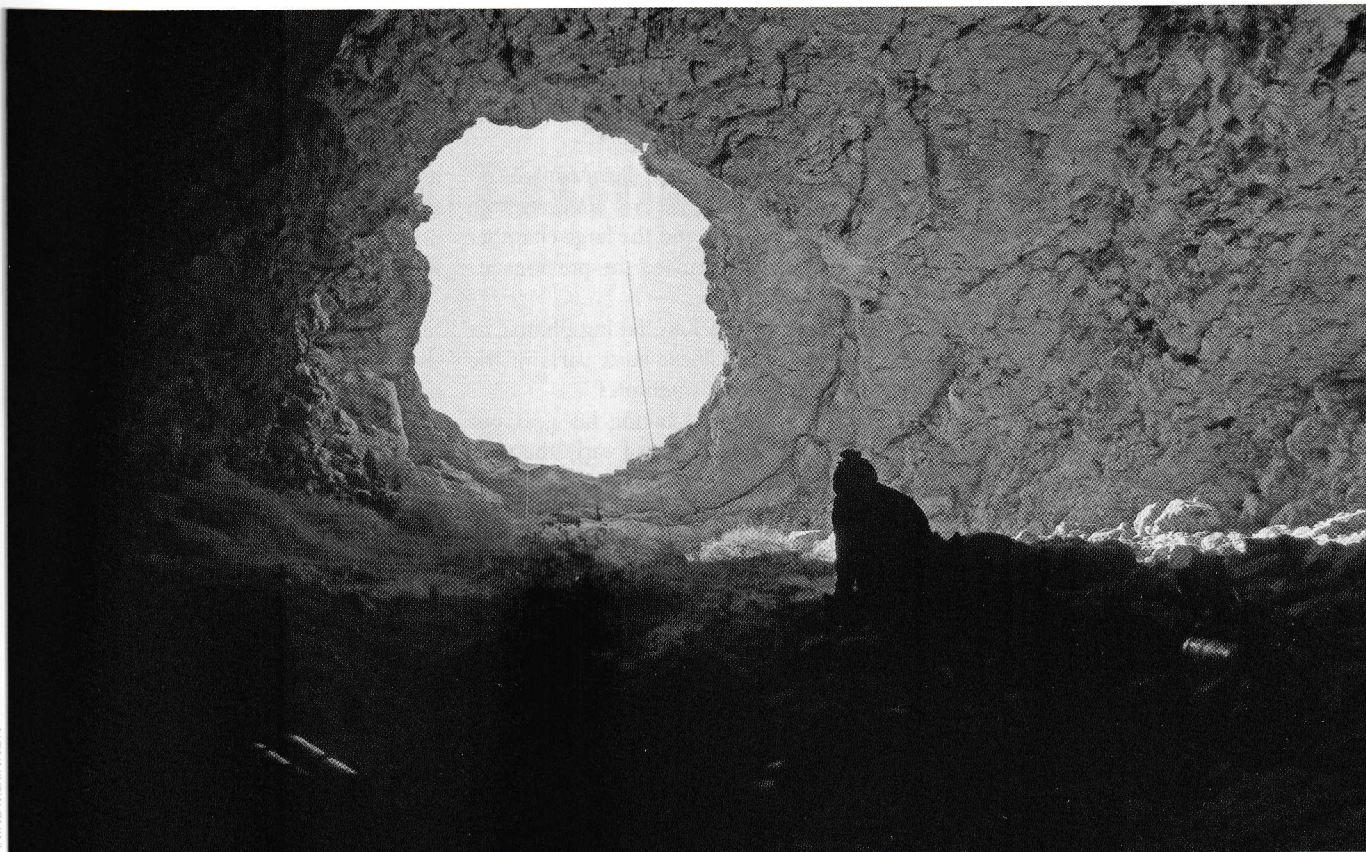


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*Ken Smith and Mark Pardoe in Murra-el-Elevyn.*



JANINE MCKINNON



*Waiting for (yet more) gear to be lowered into Murra-el-Elevyn*

in Murra. Liz and Ken were there to photograph. Liz takes amazing photos and Ken was her model and flash buddy. Anyone interested in seeing what she does, check out her website. Peter was there to do science; Mark and I were just there to see the cave.

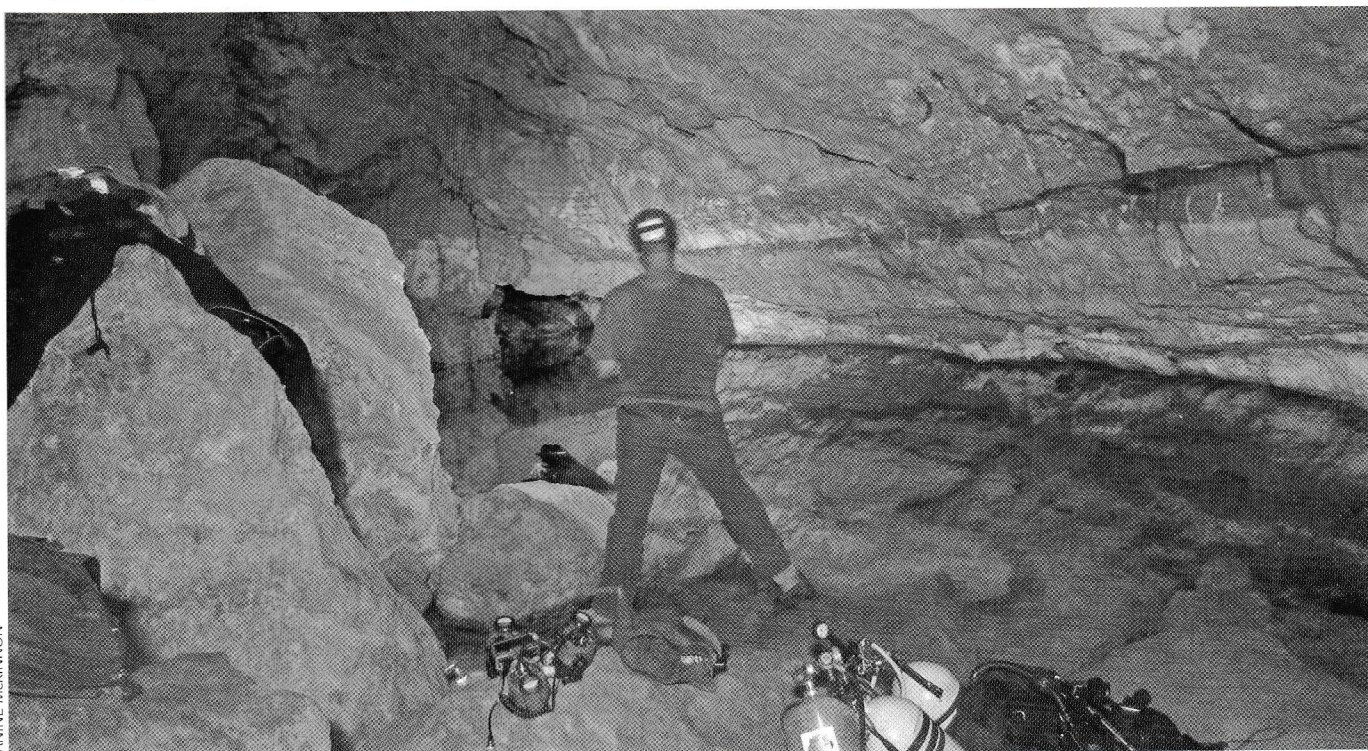
Mark and I were first into the water on Saturday afternoon and we went off to lay the primary guideline through the front

part of the cave. This cave only has permanent line in the back part of the cave, and a side passage near the entry lake. After we returned from this job Mark went off with Liz and Ken (who had arrived after successfully fixing his car) to be a second flash slave and get into some of the photos if he could! This he achieved very successfully.

Peter was planning to put some tem-

perature loggers into the back part of the cave, and leave them overnight. This cave is 18°C but there are anecdotal reports that it was 23°C in the past, also, that there are "warm patches" of water in a back chamber on the eastern arm of the system. Tommy Grahams Cave is nearby (20 km to the east), and has a temperature throughout of 23°C. You can join the dots yourself.

JANINE MCKINNON



*Mark at the lake in Murra-el-Elevyn. The dive starts under the right-hand wall*



## WHEN EAST MEETS WEST

It would be very exciting if the warm water in the far end of Murra is reliably recorded to be heterogeneous.

Unfortunately Peter was having trouble with a back mount harness (for tanks) that he had borrowed and was unable to dive that afternoon, so whilst he fiddled, I went for an explore.

The cave is stunningly beautiful. Gin clear water, large passage and a huge chamber with a massive rockpile in the middle, sculpted bedrock in wonderful shapes and colored pink and white, and three air bells with gypsum crystals covering the walls. It was such a joy to be diving in there.

However, I am getting ahead of myself. I only saw some of the cave on the first day. I did visit the first air bell, which is close to the entrance lake.

Not only does this air bell have gypsum crystals on the walls, it has bacterial mats. These are gossamer thin veils of bacteria (obviously) hanging from the walls and ceiling.

They are thought to feed on guano from the chocolate wattle bats living in the dry entry parts of the cave. This air bell has a dry connection to the entrance and is close enough that lots of guano could easily wash into this part of the cave. The mats are fascinating, delicate and beautiful.

We came out at 6.30 pm. Yes, in time for a shower at the roadhouse.

Sunday was a slow start but we had minimal gear to take in — just replacement

tanks for Ken, Liz and Mark.

Peter had given me two 15 litre tanks to use, and they were so huge for me that I wasn't going to need any more for the whole trip.

For the first dive today Peter took Mark and me on a tour of the cave. We visited the two remote air bells and the large chamber (which I had not reached the previous afternoon).

We met Liz and Ken, taking photos, as we returned from these back parts of the cave. The dive took 75 minutes.

Mark had to start taking his gear out after this as he was leaving early the next morning.

Peter sieved for micro life in the lake and I had a short dive. We then went to help Mark get his gear out of the entrance. I drove the car to haul the gear up the drop, Mark attached stuff to the line and Peter acted as signaler and took it off at the top. This all went very smoothly and quickly then Peter got his loggers into the cave.

Monday saw four of us left and we got some dives in before we had to start the haul out after lunch.

This was another four-hour job. The tanks seemed endless. It took each of us several trips to get the gear from the lake to the bottom of the lift system. I drove the car again once we were finally ready to lift everything. I got the last load up just on last light, at 6.30 pm Cocklebidy time (yes, they have their own little time zone). Just in

time to get to the roadhouse for a shower.

We had a small celebration to mark a successful trip and were all in bed by 10 pm. We were very tired!

Tuesday morning we were up at dawn and took a few hours to disassemble the A frame and pack everything up. After a small delay of half an hour trying to find the car keys we were off at 9 am.

Ten minutes later we were back as Peter realised he had left some gear behind. Nice to know I'm not the only person who does that. Then we were finally off again at 9.30 am. We had a tailwind most of the way home so it was only a 12 hour drive back to Bunbury.

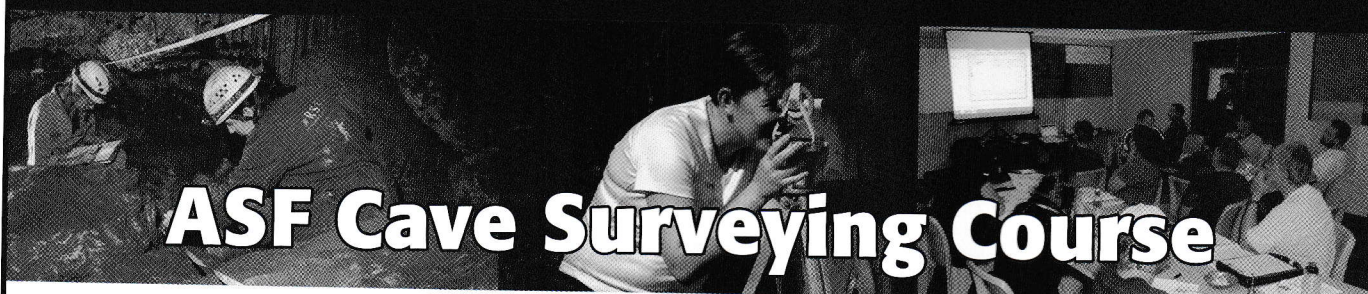
Peter provided all the camping gear, rigging gear for the cave entrances, tanks and assorted diving gear, transport and even my dinners! It was so easy to just turn up at the airport with my personal dive gear, shop for food, and go. Peter had everything else organised.

It was a wonderful experience that I will remember fondly and, maybe, repeat some time.

And what happened to Tommy Grams, you ask?

Well, much as we wanted to dive there, or even just visit it, the logistics of getting gear into, and out of, the two caves we did was very time consuming. We realised by Saturday night that we wouldn't have the time to get there, too. A pity, but it gives me more incentive to return.

## LAST CHANCE TO BOOK!



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