

# *The Great Sandy Desert*

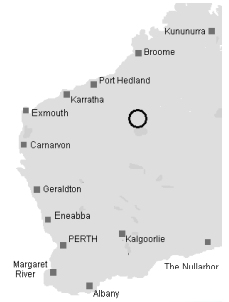
## Mujingerra Cave, Great Sandy Desert, Western Australia

By Paul Hosie

In the heart of the vast Western Australian deserts, dots on the map mark some of the points where the Aboriginal Desert People accessed the subterranean aquifer and these enabled them to survive for countless

venomous snakebite or other serious injury out in the desert 'boonies' will likely be fatal due to the time it would take you to reach medical facilities.

Mujingerra Cave had been a subject of interest to me for a



*Desert tracks*



*Mujingerra entrance*

aeons. What is truly amazing is that those remarkable people could re-locate the soaks and wells amongst the enormous areas of repetitive sand dunes. They passed this knowledge down through the generations by means of song - their lives depended on it.

Today we have GPS, Four Wheel Drives, Satphones, EPIRBs and charts of the desert tracks to get us into what was, until about only 100 years ago, the great inaccessible, impenetrable and unknown Australian interior. Make no mistake though, a

number of years. A sketched map of the cave in a published book, rumours of vast submerged cave systems beneath the desert's calcarenite substrate and the call of the unknown finally convinced me to make the trip a reality. Six weeks of long service leave from the Navy in July-August 2006 were used to run a cave diving expedition into the magnificent Kija Blue sinkhole, followed by two weeks of caving and cave diving in the Ningbing Range with wife Kym, dive buddy Ken Smith (CEGSA) and local WASG club members.

*Directions in the desert*

*Blocked crawlway - now unblocked!*





*Time to dive!*

### **A Plan Becomes Reality**

The plan to dive in Mujingerra Cave was simple – drive to the Canning Stock Route (CSR) from the closest access point in the Pilbara (town of Newman) via the Talawanna Track, spend up to four days exploring and mapping the cave before exiting via the same route. A 44 gallon (210 litres) drum of unleaded fuel had already been ordered from the Capricorn Roadhouse months before and staged at Well 23 on the CSR ahead of my arrival. After dropping off the trailer in Newman at a pre-arranged depot, the fuel drop and travel details were confirmed with the roadhouse and authorities, then the journey to the cave was begun in earnest. Heading east from town, civilisation is left behind and the land becomes distinctly flatter as the Great Sandy and Gibson Deserts are approached.

The track is rough – heavily corrugated, but otherwise sound! The Capricorn Fuel Dump is located some 450km from Newman, the appropriate drum was located and half the fuel siphoned to refill the car and jerrycans. With only 180km of the CSR between the cave and me, you wouldn't be blamed for thinking the trip was almost over, but the fact is the track is so poor that time-wise, this was only the half way point from Newman. With track washouts, extreme corrugations and many dozens of large parallel desert dunes to cross, the average speed achievable is 30kph or less. Vehicles not hardened for these conditions cop a pounding and my lightweight Mazda Bravo 4WD lost it's spotlights – they were simply vibrated to bits and shaken clean off their mounts!

Mujingerra Cave is located a few kilometres off the CSR near Well 30, in a beautiful stoney patch between parallel dunes. According to internet reports from CSR travellers in recent years, the caprock covering the entrance of the cave had collapsed in recent years, blocking the small crawlway leading to the water below. Assuming that none of the reports were by cavers, this was considered to be

questionable advice. What all previous reports had agreed on however, was the very high likelihood of there being snakes in the crawlway. Large Western Brown snakes had been sighted on several occasions and given that they are highly venomous, this was a real risk, and one that I was acutely aware of.

### **Desert Blooming – Above and Below!**

In early 2006 Western Australian deserts received heavy rainfalls from tropical cyclones crossing the North-West coast. The consequence of this, several months later in July, was a desert in full bloom – every single shrub and bush green and flowering, the scent of spinifex resin thick in the air and the sandy desert floor carpeted in white and purple everlasting flowers. A breathtaking sight not readily captured in either photos or words. The cave entrance is a small doline some 6m in diameter with a vegetated talus slope beginning 2m below the lip and leading down to a pinch 5m below the surface. It was clear from earlier descriptions that the roof of the cave had indeed collapsed, but a small, low hole was still evident at the base of the talus slope.

After rigging up the entrance with a tape ladder and rope for self belay and lowering of dive gear, I descended into the doline and headed for the blocked crawlway. Mentally prepared for an encounter with a venomous snake in the cave, I dressed in full coveralls, boots, gloves and dug out the hole with a folding army shovel which was also the first line of defence against any up-close, venomous snake encounters. The rubble was dug away until it was big enough to slide down through and I cautiously lowered myself in, making plenty of noise on the way. A small chamber big enough to sit up in leads down through a partially blocked crawlway which again had to be excavated to enable access to the lake chamber below. Finally, what a beautiful sight for a sore cave diver's eyes – a 7m long x 3m wide x 1m high room full of deep, dark, crystal clear water. Next Step: dive gear!

*Python on retreat!*

### **An Unlikely Meeting**

Making my way up through the crawlway, I encountered the first of the resident snakes in the cave. There were two of them and they were making





*Bat cave entrance*

their way slowly up and out of the cave. They looked like pythons to me, but not wanting to test this theory, I sat back and watched them slowly slither over my caving pack and out through the recently excavated crawlway. Later that night, after the light had faded from another magnificent desert sunset, a major advantage of being in the desert was revealed through the

*Phil Prust and the author meet up in the desert*

stunningly clear, bejewelled night sky. Rugged up against the chilly night, hours were passed watching shooting stars and listening to the rustling of the desert's nocturnal life – what a wonderful place!

The following morning, I headed into the cave with dive gear and set it all up at the water's edge ready to dive. A trip back out to suit up and then the dive commenced – untold kilometres of passages just waiting to be explored and mapped – fantastic! Alas, it wasn't to be and after checking every nook and cranny, approximately 60m of cave passage was explored. The entrance lake was found to cover half the area of the underwater chamber. A connecting underwater tunnel leads to a parallel chamber of similar dimensions to the entrance lake with a large airbell above it. The absolute maximum depth was -3.5m and a small dry passage was explored beyond the second chamber but did not go. After surveying the cave as far as possible, the cave was exited and the plan for the remaining desert sojourn considered.

Just after lunch, the desert silence was disturbed by the sound of several diesel 4WD's pulling into the



campsite. Out jumps a lanky, fifty-something year old fellow, inspects the array of diving gear and announces "Cave diver, eh? I heard you were out here!" Now, surprise would be a slight understatement, but this was to be the introduction I had to one of Australia's cave diving legends – Phil Prust. Phil was on a 4WD club trip heading down the CSR with his partner Rae and friends. They decided to drop into Muringerra Cave for a look. Through our mutual friend Ken Smith, Phil and I had heard much of each other and we had plenty of gasbagging to do about cave diving around Australia. The odds of meeting in the desert were pretty slim, particularly given that a day either side of this one would have prevented it from happening at all. At about 3.30pm, I extricated all my cave diving equipment from the cave with Phil and his party lending a helping hand on the surface. Tall stories of caving and cave diving resounded that evening until the dying embers of the campfire sent everyone to bed.

### **Desert Discoveries**

Early next morning, Thursday, 17/8/06, I bade farewell to my new friends and drove to Kunawarritji Community, Veever's Meteorite Crater and then to a site marked 'cave' on the map 100km east of Muringerra for investigation. To say the desert was stunningly beautiful is simply a sad understatement and really just reflects that not everything can be captured in words alone – Just Go There !!! The wide open vastness of the desert is like an intoxicant for the soul. I set my chair up in one spot to read a book - overlooking a vast panorama of waving spinifex grass, red dunes and blue sky. Magic.

Later that afternoon, the 'cave' was arrived at,

located right next to the track, the entrance at the base of a 5m high, ironstone conglomerate cliff. Donning caving gear, I found the cave to be a simple low, wide passage with a dusty floor, penetrating about 30m to back where there are several low, rounded rooms above a main sump pit. The area was a bat roosting site and several young bats were seen. Withdrawing to minimise my disturbance of the site, I later counted approximately 50+ bats exiting the cave that evening. At about one o'clock the following morning, I was rudely awoken from deep slumber by a pack of dingoes howling around and above the cave's entrance – obviously one of their favourite dens and visitors were not welcome.

The following morning, I began the long drive out of the desert and back home, only destroying one tyre and rim on the way. A bull camel decided it didn't want me to go and did its very best to block my exit along the track for over 30km. My last view and fading memory of the Great Sandy and Gibson Deserts was that of a camel's arse!

### **Recommendation**

Definitely one of the world's remotest cave diving sites and whilst not recommended as a fabulous cave diving site, a visit to the desert country is highly recommended as it is stunningly beautiful and spiritually uplifting.

