



Mujingerra Cave, Great Sandy Desert, Western Australia

By Paul Hosie

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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 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 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 the subject of interest to Perth based cave diver Paul Hosie for 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 Paul 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.

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 litre) drum of unleaded fuel had already been ordered from the Capricornia Roadhouse months before and staged at Well 23 on the CSR ahead of 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 Capricornia Fuel Dump is located some 450 km from Newman, the appropriate drum was located and half the fuel siphoned to refill the car and jerry cans. With only 180 km of the CSR between Paul and the cave, 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 halfway point from Newman. With track washouts, extreme corrugations and many dozens of large parallel desert dunes to cross, the average speed achievable is 30 km/hr or less. Vehicles not hardened for these conditions cop a pounding and Paul’s lightweight Mazda Bravo 4WD lost its spotlights – they were simply vibrated to bits and shaken clean off their mounts!



Desert tracks

Mujingerra Cave is located a few kilometres off the CSR near Well 30, in a beautiful stony 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 crawl-way leading to the water below. Assuming that



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL HOSIE

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 crawl-way. 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 Paul was acutely aware of.



The risk of meeting large western brown snakes was high

Desert Blooming—Above and Below!

In early 2006 the 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 6 m in diameter with a vegetated talus slope beginning 2 m below the lip and leading down to a pinch 5 m 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.



The desert was in full bloom

After rigging up the entrance with a tape ladder and rope for self belay and lowering of dive gear, Paul descended into the doline and headed for the blocked crawl-way. Mentally prepared for an encounter with a venomous snake in the cave, Paul dressed in full coveralls, boots and 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 Paul cautiously lowered himself in, making plenty of noise on the way. A small chamber big enough to sit up in, leads down through a partially blocked crawl-way 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!



Mujingerra Cave entrance, a 6 m diameter doline



Snake protection and digging tool at Mujingerra cave entrance

An Unlikely Meeting

Making his way up through the crawl-way, Paul encountered the first of the resident snakes in the cave. There were two of them and they were making their way slowly up and out of the cave. They looked like pythons to Paul, but not wanting to test this theory, he sat back and watched them slowly slither over his caving pack and out through the recently excavated crawl-way. 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 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, Paul headed into the cave with his dive gear and set it all up at the waters 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 60 m 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 -3.5 m 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 was considered.



Dive gear preparation

Just after lunch, the desert silence was disturbed by the sound of several diesel 4WDs 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 Paul 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 Mujingerra Cave for a look. Through their mutual friend Ken Smith, Phil and Paul had heard much of each other and they 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 3.30 pm, Paul extricated all his 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.

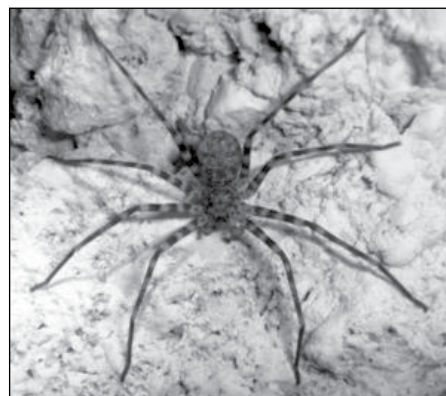


An unexpected meeting with Phil Prust

Desert Discoveries

Early next morning, Thursday 17th August, Paul bade farewell to his new friends and drove to Kunawarritji Community, Veever's Meteorite Crater and then to a site marked 'cave' on the map 100 km East of Mujingerra 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. Paul set his 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, Paul 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



Resident Arachnid

to minimise his disturbance of the site, Paul later counted approximately 50 bats exiting the cave that evening. At about one o'clock the following morning, Paul was rudely awoken from deep slumber by a pack of dingos howling around and above the cave's entrance—obviously one of their favourite dens and visitors were not welcome.



The cave

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



The final view on leaving the desert

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. ■