

# DOWN UNDER

## CAVE DIVING Down Under By Agnes Milowka

**Mt Gambier** is the most popular and well-known site. It is only a 5-hour drive from Melbourne. Normally we do the drive Friday night after work, dive Saturday and Sunday and then come home Sunday afternoon. There are like a million kangaroos out on the roads so you have to duck and weave past. I think it is fair to say that the drive there is the most dangerous part of the trip. The caves themselves are, in general, easy to access. It is very reminiscent of Florida, nice carpeted stairs leading down to the water's edge. Although there are some that require a little bit of extra work... ladders and ropes and such.

Lately the water levels in the caves have dropped quite substantially. Victoria has been in drought for over 10 years and with irrigation continuing as normal, it is definitely showing. So some sites such as One Tree for example, now require a ladder to get into, and a lot of optimism as you do your jump, as it is easily a 2m drop down.

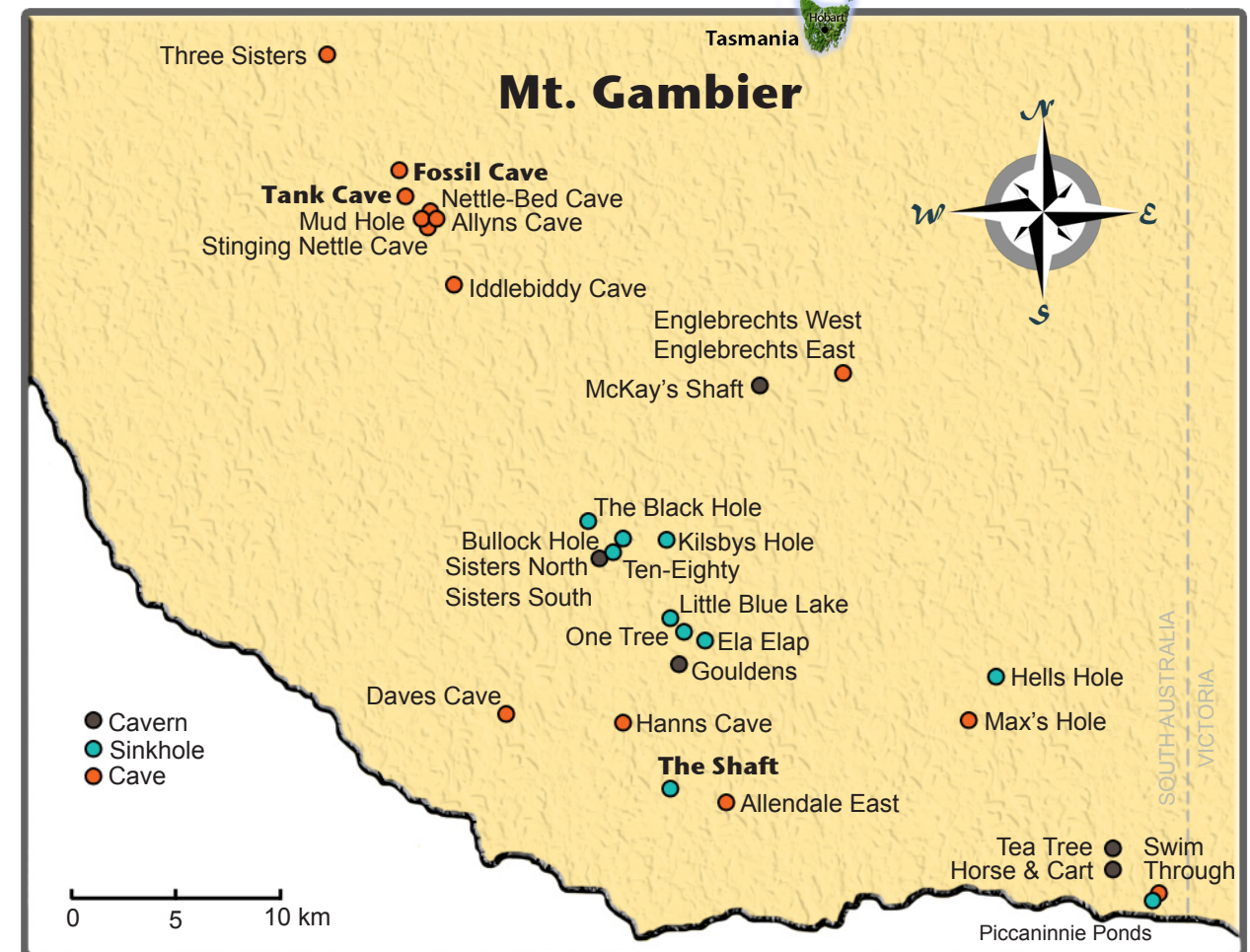
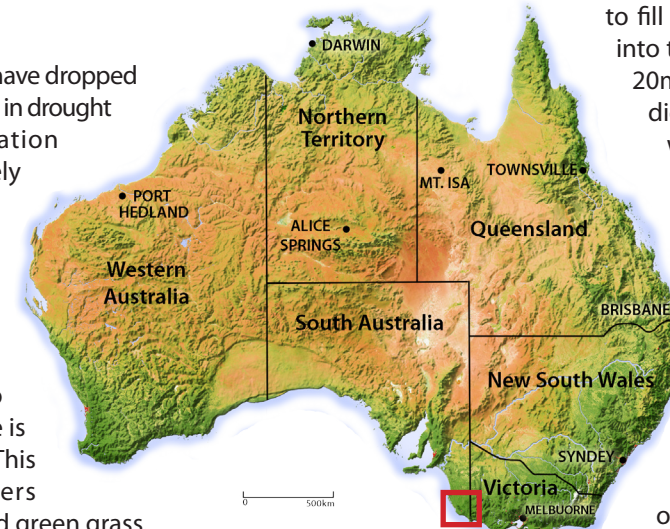
Probably the hardest site to get to in Gambier is the Shaft. This place is in the middle of a cow paddock. This hole just appeared in the farmers paddock; otherwise it is all flat and green grass.

The cars act as anchors... very useful... and up goes the A frame. Each person and each piece of gear has to be lowered, one by one, down 30 feet to the water.

Underwater it is most famous for the shaft of light, but the place opens up. It is huge. We are talking the size of Diepolder 2. And it drops down to 125m... although there is a lot of politics involved and it has only been opened up to 60m. As you can imagine, the farmer was a bit unimpressed with a hole in the middle of his paddock, so he proceeded to fill it. A huge amount of debris went into that cave... today, there is a mound 20m high under the entrance tube. He didn't realize what a huge expanse he was dealing with.

It is not unusual to find trash in the caves. Some are on private property and over the years folks have dropped all kinds of stuff into the sinkholes: street signs, cars, harvesters, and various bits of rubbish.

On the upside, a number of very important bones have been found over the years. In Fossil Cave, for ex-





ample, they have found remains of mega fauna - huge bones of giant kangaroos and wombats that roamed around Australia thousands of years ago. There are also remains of well-known animals, such as cows, that sometimes venture down to the water and then fall in to their death. And there are the remains of the early divers who had very little concern for conservation who have left their mark in some popular caves and caverns.

But there are some beautiful caves in the area. Most of them don't go particularly far. Iddlebidy, for example is gorgeous. It is very similar to Cow, in Florida, and has these beautiful and well-preserved clay blocks that kind of look like chocolate fudge.

Then there are the sinkholes. While the caves are limited in scope, the sinkholes are world class. Many of them have phenomenal visibility; from 130ft you can easily see the surface and the sky. Many a night dive you can look up and enjoy the stars.

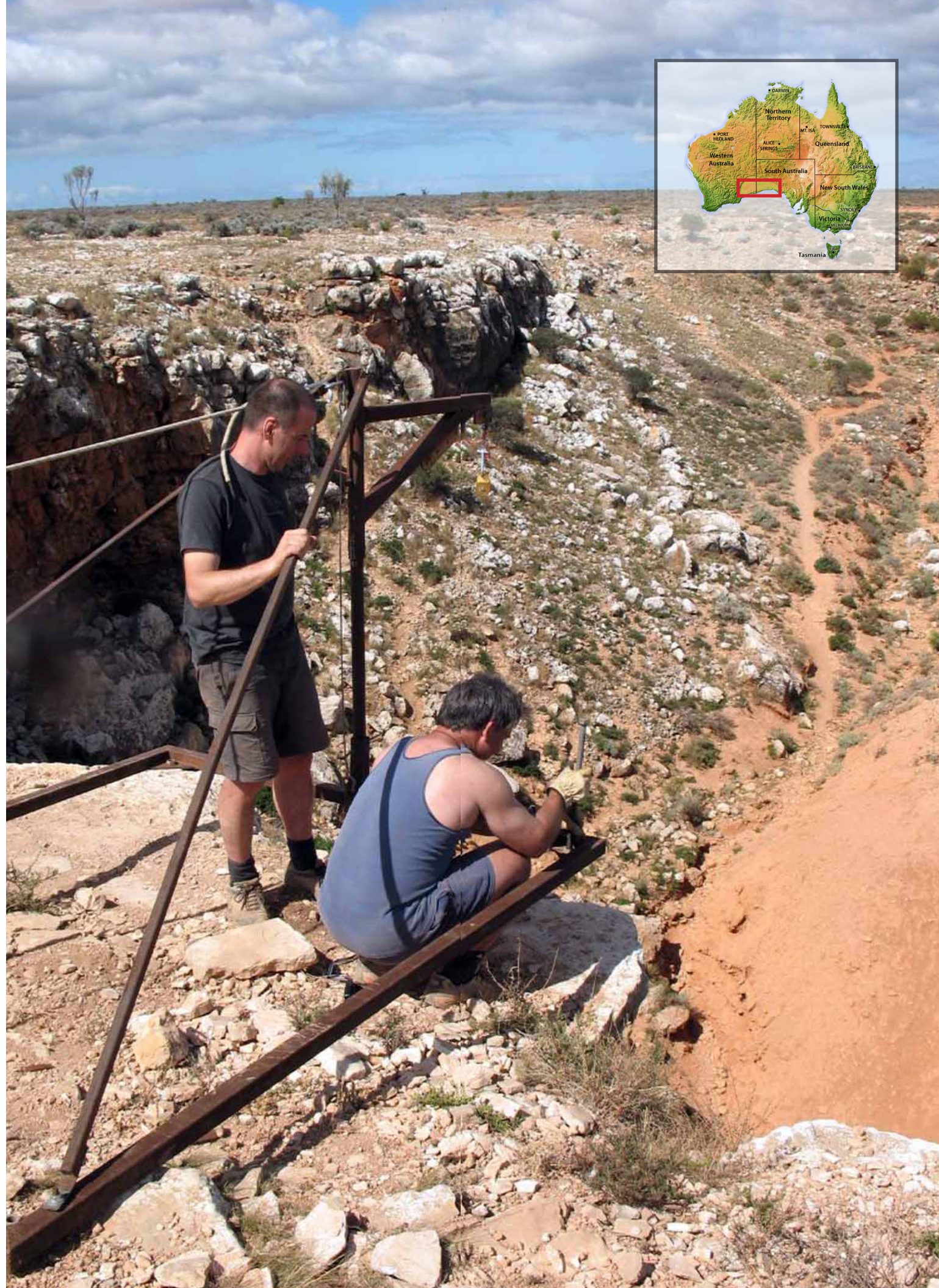
Pics is a beautiful place. Again, the politics means that 130ft is the limit for most divers venturing in there. It is only recently that a team received a scientific permit that allows them to explore the depths of the cave, all the way down to 415ft.

It is actually the place where I first came into contact with cave diving. As I snorkeled around, chasing some little turtle, I went over this lip, and just blackness falls away down to 130ft. It's like the whole floor drops off from under you. That is the moment I knew I wanted to go down there and check it out. There is a lot of fragile flora and fauna, from turtles to eels. It is a vibrant and active ecosystem up at the top, so many folks do simply snorkel it and enjoy it for the great visibility and natural life.

The jewel of Gambier cave diving is Tank Cave. It is called tank because a water tank used to rest right on top of it. It is a maze and it quite extensive...20,000ft of passage...so there is a lot to see and enjoy. Unfortunately, access is very controlled, and before you can venture in there and do what you like, you have to jump through the hoops. At each of six levels you have to do a number of dives to be allowed to penetrate further. The theory is that this will allow you to familiarize yourself with the cave. You head down a ladder to get into the cave. And then, it is beautiful. A real gem. All the effort of crossing T's and dotting I's is worth it.

Gambier is funny. Everyone assumes that everything has been found and pushed, but it quickly became apparent that is not the case, especially in this cave. As I mentioned, there is a strict system of diving this cave. My second weekend there, whilst diving level two, my buddy and I found going passage right off the end of the gold line. He couldn't actually get in, so he patiently waited for me, which was very nice. I went off with a reel and proceeded to find a whole bunch of new cave. In the end, there was nearly a 1000ft. This, of course, caused quite a stir... in the end I got banned from the Cave Divers Association of Australia. Yes, probably the only person to be banned on two continents.

**Nullarbor.** This place is what Australian cave diving is all about. It is a two-day drive from Melbourne, if you're in a hurry. You are literally heading out into the desert. Nullarbor



actually means no trees. There are a host of local characters to add flavor to the trip, from lizards to dingos (a domestic dog which has adapted to life as a wild dog), snakes, spiders and the much loved flies. Everywhere you look it is pretty flat, so it gets quite windy out there. The whole trip becomes an expedition, even though most caves have been pushed already. Everything you might need you have to bring with you. There aren't any dive shops close by, hence generators, compressors, spare parts, food, beer... everything has to come.

The longest cave out in the Nullarbor is Cocklebidy cave. It is 17,000 ft long and has two rock piles. These require dragging all the gear across them. But first you have to drop all the gear down into the hole.

So out comes the A frame, which is used to lower everything down to the top of the mound. And there is a lot of gear to go down. It usually takes most of the day just to drag everything down to the water's edge. Scooters are obviously a nice addition. Back in the day they used to swim it, but these days scooters are definitely the way to travel.

Once the gear once has been lowered down the pitch, it has to be carried one by one to the water's edge. So if you're not fit before you get out here, well, you certainly are by the time you finish the trip. Finally, after trip after trip up and down the rocks, all the gear is down and ready to be dived.

The size of this cave is phenomenal. This lake chamber is just huge. And that is just the start of it all. The cave is big, white and beautiful. It really is quite impressive. Each of the sumps is wildly different. My favorite is probably sump three, as it is much smaller and very scraggly. But sump two is just phenomenal; huge booming passage and it's gorgeous. They are separated by rock piles. The first rock pile is 300ft long, so it is a bit of a scramble up. Then across and back down to the water's edge. Everything must be carried across, including scooters.

The next chamber is called Toad Hole. It is almost 1000ft and is more than just a scramble. You negotiate huge boulder piles and really have to give it your all. The chamber is hot and humid and has a bit of co2, so it is not easy.

There is a board there where folks sign their name. There are only about 50 names on the slate. When we got there only one woman had ever dived to Toad Hole. Sandy Varin and I were the first ones to dive in sump three. And as it later turned out, I was 20m off the very end of the cave, and thus managed to get a bit of a record for distance penetration for a chick in Oz. Most of the caves out in the Nullarbor are hard to access; rope work is not a luxury but a necessity. Plus you have to be willing to live out of your car or trailer and camp out in a tent for a couple of weeks at a time.

Jenolan is up in New South Wales, another day's drive from Melbourne. It is another one of those places that requires a whole team of folks to help you get down to the water. Although that might sound easy compared to access in some of the other caves, there are thousands of steps to go up and down. It is a show cave system. There are 11 caves that are open to the public and there are daily tours to see the caves. This is nice for us;



we take the stairs straight down to where we want to dive. As we do so, we pass some of the most incredible dry cave formations. Folks come from all around the world to see these caves and they are truly impressive. It is nice to see them on our way to a cave dive. But the diving itself is far less glamorous. There isn't much space to gear up, most of the passages are quite small and tight, and if you're heading downstream, it typically gets dirty fast. Sidemounts are essential and, in this case, small 50cf tanks are sufficient to do the dive comfortably, as the dives are pretty shallow, about 50ft. As you can imagine, the fact that these are show caves has a huge impact on access for divers. The guides are very conscious of muddy water in the pools that might spoil the experience of the tourists, so getting permits to dive here is rare and quite special.



I have done a few dives in River Lethe. It turned out the upstream section needed another look. Ten years ago a guy went through this restriction and laid out about 10ft of line, gave himself a scare and hurried back out. Since then no one had been able to get in there. I got to check it out. The first couple of dives I tried to get in with a sidemount rig on, but that was just not going to happen. So, in the end, I had to improvise and put together a no-mount harness. I had some bits of bungee and hose retainers in my car, so strung those together. And finally could make it in, just. The hole is just big enough for me to fit through if I hold my breath and hold the tanks above my head as I go in. It is a feet first restriction for sure. I ended up laying a bit of line, and found myself in a room that opened up which was promising. But before I had a chance to look for leads the whole place was wiped out. There is definitely more going cave in Lethe as well as in other cave systems, but diving there takes time and patience because of the restrictions. So it is more of a life's work, or a labour of love. You gain distance in hundreds of feet, rather than thousands.

**Tassie.** You need to take a ferry to get over there if you are planning on dragging all the gear across. And it is necessary to drag all your gear, as there are no dive shops that cater to cave divers. They are all on the coast, which by the way has amazing ocean diving. So again, heading down there is a bit of an epic.

It is the most Southern part of Australia. It is a hell of a lot colder and gets a lot of rain so the cave diving there is very weather dependent. If it rains, the caves get blown out within hours. The area is beautiful; there are lots of mountains, green rolling hills, and it is most famous for its fresh produce. The dry caving is said to be the best in Australia. It has the deepest caves in

Australia with some impressive vertical caves and long pitches. Its potential for cave diving is yet to be uncovered, but realistically the water is cold, the vis is crap, the flow is strong, the rocks are sharp, making for difficult access to the water's edge. So it leaves little to be desired and hence doesn't get much traffic from the mainland cave divers. Tiger's Eye is surrounded by ferns and forest, and requires a bit of bush bashing. The water was deceptive, this beautiful cobalt blue – but it actually meant that the vis was about 2ft. So it made looking for leads quite difficult. We spent a lot of time knotting line, but also fixing the line that was in there. After a hard winter bits broke off and tie offs came loose. The only way to find anything was to tie off a reel and strike out in a random direction, hoping to find something. We found a few leads way in the upper levels. But the real cave went deep...150ft

deep...gaping darkness...perfect tunnel...and eventually a restriction. I did lay 265ft in the end, which by Florida standards seems very insignificant, but in those conditions was a good effort.

Junee was our consolation prize - 400ft of streamway to get to the first sump. The cave is the main resurgence for the area, so water gushes out of there at a great rate. It's hard to walk if the flow is up, and even then we were still stumbling. Once in, 20ft vis...nice cave. But it is the chamber 'for your eyes only' that is worthy of the effort. Just incredible formations. Really quite amazing.

There is a second sump. This one goes deep, over 200ft. With water in the 40s, it is a bit of a challenge. But it has been done. We were intending to go there, but ran out of time. It is certainly on the to-do list. It is said that the way forward is blocked by a massive rock fall with huge boulders... I'd like to think, however, that there is a way through. If there is, beyond lies the potential to find almost 30000ft of passage, as it has been die traced to a cave further upstream. So... I can't wait to go back and I have my fingers crossed.

*Incredibly well decorated caves of Jenolan. You pass the decorated rooms on your way down to the dive site. Photo by Agnes Milowka (P14)*


*Cocklebidy Cave - Rick Stanton and Mark 'Wiz' Brown setting up the A frame in order to lower gear down to the entrance of Cocklebidy cave. Photo by Agnes Milowka (P16 Center)*

*Junee cave in Tassie - Grant Pearce inside the incredibly well decorated chamber 'For Your Eye's Only' past the first sump of Junee Cave. Photo by Agnes Milowka (Above)*




WHAT TO WEAR  
WHEN YOU LEAVE  
THE GOLD LINE

THE NOMAD XT



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