

Cave Hunting: 4th December 2010

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There are some things you just know your mother should never hear about and this is probably one of them. In fact before I go on I'd just like to make it clear that this is all James' fault – it was his idea! Anyway, during one of his slightly dodgy marathon internet sessions James came across a reference to an underground river – so clearly we had to go and investigate. And if that was all there was to it that would be fine. However, the problem was that as well as knowing the location of one of the submergences (where the river heads underground), we also knew about the resurgence (where it pops back into open air). According to the DOC website this particular resurgence is Tarawera Falls, which have a vertical drop of 65m. Not exactly an ideal dive site for exploration, but no matter, an underground river had to be looked into.



The spectacular Tarawera Falls

6.30am Saturday morning and Tom and James arrive at my house. As usual James the perpetual student scrounges breakfast. We load everything into our specially prepared expedition vehicle (Silvia's Suzuki Ignis) and head off into the middle of the north island. Three and a half hours later we arrive in Kawerau, where we stop at the information centre to get our DOC passes for the forest road. Once we had the passes (\$5 each) we grabbed some lunch and head off down the logging road towards the falls.

From the car-park at the end of the logging road the falls are only a short 10min walk away and well worth a day trip if you are ever in the area. To quote the DOC website *"water surges out of fissures in a large rock cliff-face surrounded by native bush. The cliff is the end of an ancient rhyolitic lava flow that is believed to have poured from an erupting Mt Tarawera about 11,000 years ago. An abrupt stop to the flow produced these high cliffs."* The cliffs are several hundred metres high and the waterfall erupts seemingly out of nowhere, about 65m above the ground. Clearly there would be no entry to the underground river via this resurgence – and hopefully no exit either, else something would have gone terribly wrong with the dive plan.



The first submergence we found

After taking a few pictures the three of us headed off along the path to the top of the cliff in search of the submergence James had read about. The walk to the top was a fairly comfortable 20 mins, although with the sunny weather it was hot work. Almost immediately on reaching the flat ground we found our first submergence. James was immediately into 'ferret mode', scrambling over rocks and between trees and bushes to get a better look, with Tom close behind. Unfortunately the excitement was short lived. The submergence was very small and tight, getting in with dive gear would have been hard – but worse it was only 30m from the edge of the cliff. Even if we did manage to get dive gear into the water it would be the shortest dive in history with the worst possible conclusion. We continued exploring.

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The main submergence

Continuing along the track we found the main submergence James had read about. There was no mistaking it for anything else – a reasonably sized river disappearing between rocks, with all the froth, foam and noise of the waterfall resurgence. And whilst there were no problems with getting dive gear into the hole, the white water and criss-crossed tree trunks scattered around made it quite clear that any entry into the water would be strictly a one way trip. More photos, more exploring.

We continued along the track listening for the tell-tale sounds of water splashing underground, but apart from a low rumble which told us we were walking above the river, it was looking like we were out of luck. Our initially high expectations were a little dampened and it looked like all the dive gear Tom had carried from the car was not going to be needed.

However, just when we started to think about turning round and heading back to Auckland, fortune smiled upon us. We came across a beautiful river pool with a waterfall, exactly the type of place parents would bring their children to swim – but a sign on the water's edge suggested differently.



The beautiful woodland pool, inviting you for a swim

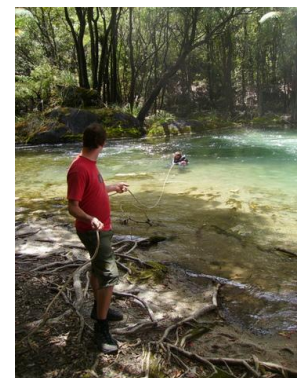


The sign which you really should pay attention to!

Which brings me back to where I started – this is all James' fault. Who needs to worry about warning signs when you are brave and intrepid cave explorers..... With a little encouragement Tom climbed into his dry-suit.

Now having remembered to bring dive gear all the way from Auckland you would have thought getting it from the car to the cliff top would have been the easy bit. Thermals – check. Dry-suit – check. Fins – check. Climbing rope – check. Mask – oops. Amazingly James who goes nowhere without his special bag (if anyone can tell me what's in it and why his has to take it everywhere, will get a prize) produced some swimming goggles – which averted disaster and created a look something like a dance club DJ – DJ Disaster it had to be.

Of course James and I are not entirely irresponsible, so before DJ Disaster entered the water, which we were clearly warned not to do, we attached the climbing rope



around him just in case.

As luck would have it this was exactly the time the first group of passers-by turned up. They read the sign. They stared at the 3 of us. They stroked their chins. I wasn't sure whether a few TDNZ T-shirts would have been a good thing or not: were we impressing them with our daring or distressing them with our jack-ass like activities. I guess we'll never know. Of course maybe it was just the sight of DJ Disaster which left them speechless.

But to cut a long story short Tom found the entrance to the underground river and it was just like the plug hole in a bath. The effect of all the water rushing into the hole was creating a small whirlpool and as Tom edged closer it was clear an unwary swimmer would have had a very bad day. Our climbing-rope precautions turned out to be a brilliant idea.



DJ Disaster – coming soon to a club near you!

So where does this leave us? The entrance in the pool might be manageable; it's certainly better than the main resurgence – but some kind of caving SRT gear for winching ourselves out of the hole is almost certainly necessary. Any takers? Maybe not here in NZ but I know a man who has done something similar to this in Australia and after a few beers at OzTEK I will definitely pose the suggestion. Look out for future news.