



CAVING CRAZE

THE LOWDOWN ON THE UNDERGROUND

BY HARRIET EDMUND

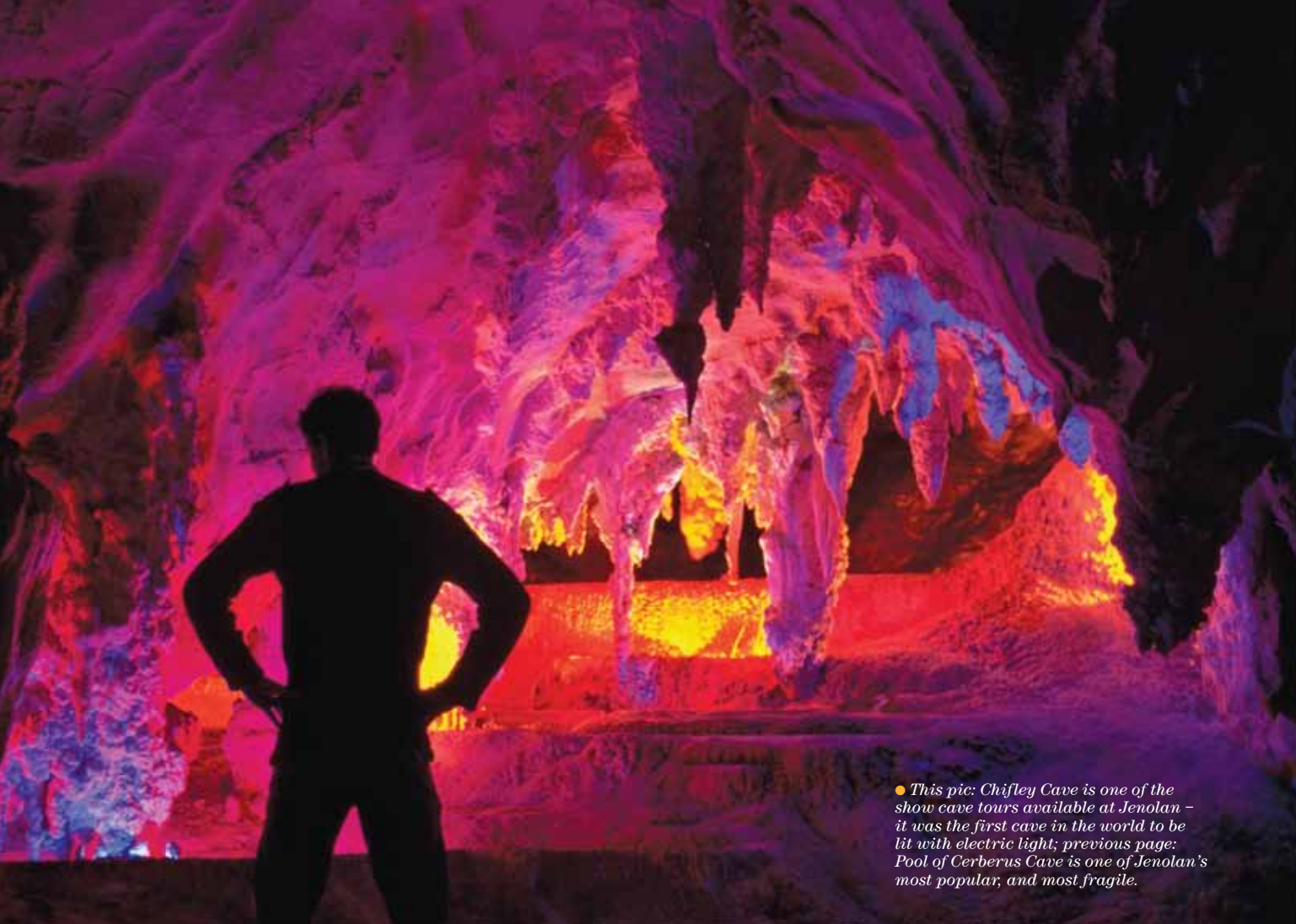
Whether you choose to bliss out under the glowworms and dripping stalactites, or delve deeper into the earth's underbelly, caving is a spectacular adventure workout. Not only are you pushing your strength, flexibility and balance capabilities, you're challenging your mind – after all, it's not normal to find yourself in a dark chamber wedged between rock

walls and waterfalls. Moving outside your comfort zone is par for the course when it comes to caving at any level, novice or pro, but it's women who are leading the charge in trying this alternate fitness pursuit. Here's why.

WONDER WOMEN

There's something empowering about caving for women, says Susan White, Melbourne geologist and caver of almost 50 years. "Women are trying

new things more than ever," says the 70-year-old, who still caves on the Nullarbor every year in search of new passages. "And caving can suit any woman regardless of age, fitness or experience." In fact, with thousands of caves across Australia ranging in difficulty from tranquil horizontal sand caves to super stimulating vertical drops almost 400-metres below the earth's surface, there's something for everyone.



● This pic: Chifley Cave is one of the show cave tours available at Jenolan – it was the first cave in the world to be lit with electric light; previous page: Pool of Cerberus Cave is one of Jenolan's most popular, and most fragile.



● Clockwise from top: taking a night-time Legends, Mysteries & Ghosts Tour; the stunning Pool of Reflections in the River Cave; tackling a narrow passage in Jersey Cave (all images from Jenolan Caves).



PERFECT MATCH

How caving helped Sil Iannello land her dream job

Always an adventurer, Sil Iannello (pictured above), 34, of Melbourne, first wriggled her way underground in 2009. Keen to try something new, her love affair with caving soon became more than a fitness pursuit – it became a journey of discovery. “There’s no better feeling than working hard to get to an opening where no one else has been,” she says.

After joining the Victorian Speleological Association five years ago, Iannello is now formalising her passion through studies in applied science (environment

management) at Federation University Australia, Vic. But it was landing her dream job as a caving tour guide for Melbourne Adventure Hub a year ago that now provides the highlight of her week. “Taking more than 30 people underground in my tours every week – most for their first time – is amazing. I hope I can be a role model for younger women, and inspire older women to push their physical boundaries, to be strong and focused and to experience fear and overcome it.”

melbourneadventurehub.com.au

ALL IMAGES FOR YOUR USE COURTESY OF JENOLAN CAVES IN THE BLUE MOUNTAINS.

incredible chambers she’s ever seen. “It was full of decorations – crystals, shawls, petals and a small river passing through. I was in awe. That incident taught me that whatever life throws up, I have the mental strength to deal with it.”

SPORT vs SCIENCE

Knowing where the sport of caving stops and science of speleology (the scientific study of caves) begins is like trying to find a fossil in a pile of sediment. The boundaries are murky because caving is one of the few pursuits where amateur scientists still exist, says White. “In cave science, although there are people with formal qualifications for mapping and finding new ground, there are plenty of weekend cavers who can be just as important in making underground discoveries.”

“I REMEMBER ONCE CROUCHING IN A TINY SPACE... MENTALLY IT TOOK ALL OF MY WILLPOWER TO GO FORWARD.”

has set her up for success above it. “I remember once crouching in a tiny space in the Buchan Caves (in East Gippsland, Victoria) knowing I could physically move through this tight tunnel ahead, but mentally it took all of my willpower to go forward. I felt anxious, claustrophobic and started to doubt myself,” she explains. But, after five minutes of meditation, Iannello, 34, wriggled into one of the most

White and many of her peers say women cavers are often more adventurous than men, willing to leave the paths and handrails behind and push themselves in the wild cave environment. This is nothing new, adds Dan Cove of Jenolan Caves in NSW’s Blue Mountains. He says women were some of the earliest explorers at Jenolan in the 1850s and ’60s and their names can still be seen etched high in the caves.

TEST YOURSELF

Taking your workout underground is guaranteed to test your whole body, including your brain. The most challenging physical aspect of caving for newbies, says White, is mastering three-dimensional movement. “Caving is different to other adventure pursuits such as bushwalking or rock climbing

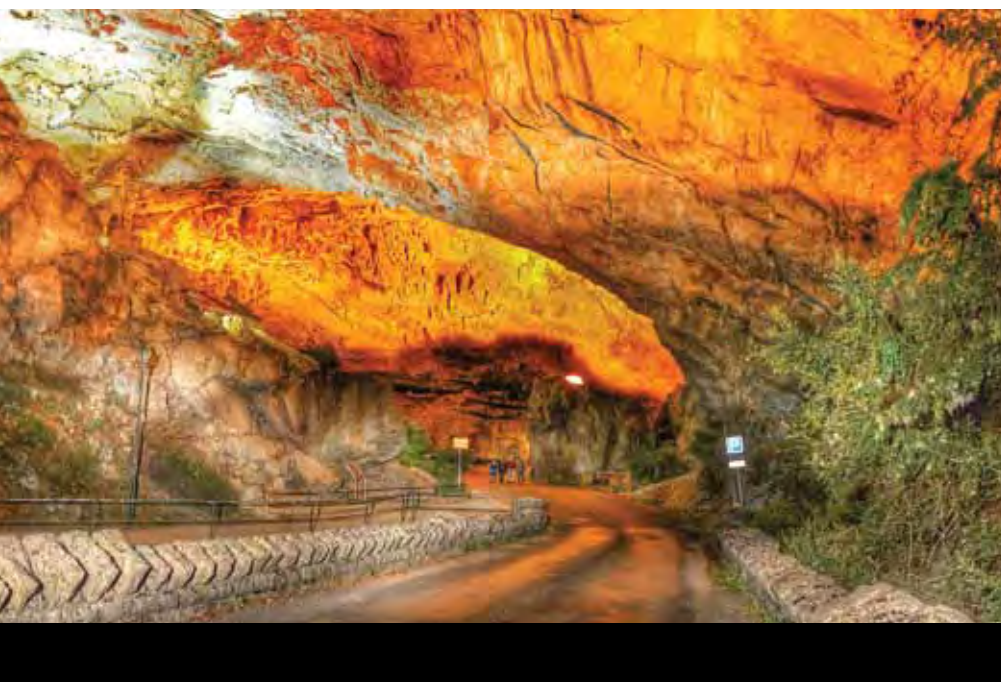
where you stay upright or move in one direction,” she points out.

Delving into a cave means you’re likely to abseil, climb, crawl, squeeze, twist and turn your way through a session – you won’t get that sort of workout in a gym, and White assures you will use muscles you never knew you had! While yoga and Pilates might help improve the flexibility needed to negotiate some of the more challenging passages, and hitting the weights is sure to boost your pulling power, cross-training for cavers is not essential. “For most, caving is our sole form of fitness,” says White. Your mental limits will also reach new ground (if you’ll pardon the pun).

Conquering a cave is sure to boost your confidence. In fact, Sil Iannello, Melbourne caver of five years, says testing her mental strength underground



● Above: Nettle Cave is a self-guided tour; top right: “The Slide” in Aladdin’s Cave’ right: taking on the Plughole; below: the glorious Grand Arch at the main entrance; other page: visitors admire Orient Cave (all images from Jenolan Caves).



No matter your motivation – sport or science – caring for the environment is a must, with Australian caves considered non-renewable resources. Once it’s damaged, it’s damaged forever – when mud is trudged over mineral deposits of calcite and not manually washed away properly, a new crust of calcite forms, leaving your boot marks there for good.

SAFETY CHECK

Caving is not simply a matter of going out and finding a hole to climb down. There are risks – chambers can flood, rocks can fall and the ground beneath your feet can suddenly give way. That’s why Australian Adventure Activity Standards should be followed and our experts advise only caving with either a commercial tour or one of Australia’s 30 caving clubs registered with the Australian Speleological Federation (go to caves.org.au to find out more).

Deb Hunter, Tasmanian caving guide, says the most common hazard is waiting for your night vision to kick in. “It’s about the challenge of the dark and the unknown,” she says. “Once you’re comfortable with moving in the semi-light, then comes trying to keep your footing in wet, slippery and uneven terrain – stumbles and spills come with the territory.”

So, before you get down and dirty always remember to:

Tell someone where you are going

Never go alone

Do a thorough gear check, particularly ensuring your helmet has a firm-fitting chinstrap and headlamp, and that you’re carrying two other sources of light.

3 GREAT CAVES WORTH DELVING INTO...

No caving experience required, just your sense of adventure (and reasonable degree of fitness)!

The Plughole,
Jenolan Caves, NSW
Popular for its challenge-by-choice caving, this two-hour tour includes abseiling, navigating an enormous root system from pine trees above and squeezing through the much-hyped S-Bend.
jenolancaves.org.au

Moondyne Cave, WA
Packed with natural heritage including some of the country’s most spectacular crystal chambers, three hours is barely long enough to navigate Moondyne in Margaret River’s Jewel Cave precinct.
margaretriver.com

Mole Creek, TAS
Deb Hunter, founder of Wild Cave Tours, says there’s no better time to cave in Tasmania than winter and spring when the wet conditions make for “thunderous waterfalls, churning white rapids and dripping stalactites – all underground.” The venture has offered personalised caving tours to anyone over the age of 14 since 1989.
wildcavetours.com