

“Around the show caves”

Peter Chandler, Spellbound and Glowworm Cave tours, reports on “*Waitomo Caves in COVID-19 Lockdown at 20 May 2020*”

By government decree, between 25 March and 15 May 2020, Waitomo, the home of glowworm tourism, has been non-operational - with various companies adopting some additional days before and after.

On Saturday 21 March 2020, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern asked people 70 years' old and older, and people with compromised immune systems, to stay at home as much as possible. She asked people who could work from home to do so and said people should limit travel within the country. The government also introduced a four-level alert system to help combat COVID-19.

Prime Minister Ardern said the country was at Level 2, which meant the risk of community transmission was growing. On the following Monday 23 March we moved to Level 3, essential travel only - getting people home and no large gatherings. At midnight on Wednesday 25 March, the New Zealand Government declared a state of emergency and put its five-million inhabitants into Level 4 lockdown. Many of the cave operators had shut down before this, as the social distancing rules were onerous.

Spellbound did its last tours on Sunday 22 March and Glowing Adventures had stopped earlier. The Waitomo Glowworm Cave did its last tours on 25 March.

Throughout this time, the Waitomo village was very quiet! Forestry operations were deemed non-essential in Level 4, so the weekday disruption of up to 100 heavy vehicle movements per day disappeared.

The Taharoa iron sand mining on the west coast remained open, as did the Graymont limestone quarry, their burnt lime is used for pH control in municipal water supplies. Farming operations continued as normal, so a certain number of stock, fertiliser and lime trucks continued to operate.

There is plenty of accommodation normally at Waitomo village, especially with some local people choosing to list their extra accommodation on Airbnb in recent years.

As far as we could tell, apart from private arrangements, there were only around 10 backpackers staying at Juno Hall; most took the mercy flights arranged by Germany over this time. At the Waitomo turnoff, Caves Motor Inn had people in for the Level 4 lockdown.

New Zealand reverted to Level 3 on 28 April, Kiwis seemingly excited about being able to order takeaways. The Waitomo general store and café was able to take advantage of this, having been open daily through Level 4 as a grocery shop (and takeaway coffees!).

Interestingly, cave operators have been slower to reopen, when we reverted to Level 2 on Thursday 14 May, than they were to close when Level 3 was imposed. This was undoubtedly due to the lack of visitors. There has now

been a campaign for domestic visitors to see their country, with this likely to ramp up over the summer. Level 2 meant restaurants and hairdressers could open, as could cave tours with appropriate anti-COVID-19 precautions.

Simon and Maria Hall of Kiwi Cave Rafting were first to open on the Friday, just for the weekend, for overseas travellers who had been locked down in New Zealand.

But no show caves opened last weekend. The Waitomo Glowworm Cave is about to open as this is written, perhaps 21 or 22 May. Their Discover Waitomo website advertises specials - adult prices down from \$55 to \$38 and children's prices lowered too. The legendary Black Water Rafting is likely to remain closed till Level 1, but weekly there are “tweaks” to the rules - today, 20 May, in New Zealand bars have opened again.

Ruakuri Cave tours will open sooner, but just three tours per day. Spellbound will open for weekends, plus as required from 29 May. Our guiding staff have accepted the change to casual contracts. Glowing Adventures reopened but just for groups - rather than free independent travellers. A three-hour adventure cave tour, for between two and eight people at a price of \$800.

Reported on television today was that \$9 billion was spent by Kiwis going overseas and around \$40 billion per annum income came into New Zealand from tourism. There will certainly need to be a change in mindset for Kiwis with some discretionary income to travel. Waitomo could be well-placed for this behind iconic destinations of Queenstown or the Bay of Islands.

I haven't mentioned Waitomo Adventures, with their Lost World Abseil, and the predominance of top-end international visitors - they hope to reopen in October. Cave World/Footwhistle Glowworm Cave remains uncertain about a reopening date, but for now have vacated their office space in the Old Post Office beside the Museum of Caves.

Bridget Mosely, director at the Museum, has cut back staffing levels. The 12-week government subsidy runs out on 9 June. This may unfortunately result in large numbers of redundancies or casualisation of cave staff. A second round of wage subsidies, for businesses with less than 50% of turnover from 10 May to 9 June is available, but some careful thought is required to decide whether to take advantage of this.

There has been some local uptake of the ACKMA-sponsored cave climate study. The largest operator (Glowworm, Ruakuri and Aranui caves) already monitors climate. However, the smaller operators will get some useful data, but time will tell whether the instruments are sensitive enough to measure human visitors in small numbers.

And right now, our fine and frosty May weather continues, the perfect opportunity to get out and look for undiscovered cave entrances in the cold morning air! Some underemployed cave guides have even been out on some energetic wild cave trips!