



## **THE HOSTED CAVE EXPERIENCE - TANTANOOLA CAVE**

– Steve Bourne

Tantanoola Cave is a small dolomite cave in the southeast of South Australia, 30km northwest of Mount Gambier. It contains exceptional speleothem development, but its most likely claim to fame is that it was the first wheel chair accessible cave in Australia.

Once a tourism icon of the region attracting over 40,000 visitors in 1982, visitation had fallen below 14,000 by 2006.

This equates to a decline of approximately 1,000 visitors per year over this 25 year period. With the World Heritage Naracoorte Caves National Park, Princess Margaret Rose and Engelbrecht Caves also offering cave experiences in the region and the reduced viability of the business, its viability as a tourism attraction was being questioned.

A review of the operations was undertaken when management was transferred to the Naracoorte Caves' office. New directions were sought and the following describes this process.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Tantanoola Caves Conservation Park is adjacent to the Princes Highway, with literally thousands of cars passing by each day. Being just 30 kilometres from the largest regional centre in South Australia, Mount Gambier, and on the main coastal highway, its location has many advantages. It also has disadvantages though. Most visitors are travelling past on a 110 kph highway and easily pass the site by. Most of the area around the park is pine forest or agricultural land with no other tourist attractions in the immediate vicinity. Repeat visitation is low and park visits usually lasting less than one hour.

Cave tours were the standard format; tours of 25 minutes were offered every hour throughout the day and every half hour over Easter and after Christmas. This was extremely repetitive for guides, who were often required to take 8 tours per day. Visitation is highest during school holidays, like many sites, with the maximum

group size set at 40. The quality of the experience was difficult to maintain in these circumstances not to mention presenting a challenge for maintaining the enthusiasm of staff. Despite this, Tantanoola can be proud of the fact that it was presented by some of the longest serving guides in Australia, with three chalking up 26, 24 and 22 years service respectively. All have retired with the longest serving guide now sitting at 13 years.

Interpretation was based on the standard cave interpretation that is seen in so many sites; discovery, age of limestone, cave development and speleothem deposition and some (a lot?) fantasy (see training notes below). This is not suggesting this is the wrong way to present caves, but a new direction that complemented other cave offerings in the region and would lift the tourism profile of the site were being sought.



The Tantanoola Cave Visitor's Centre

## TANTANOOLA CAVES TRAINING NOTES

The following are training notes for the site, written after the current lighting system was installed in 1995. They are not an exact transcription, but the collation of two versions with numerous spelling errors corrected, although some interesting spellings are noted.

### Outside

Ask how everyone is today. Have they had a cave experience? Provide warnings about darkness/eyes and video cameras.

### Inside-Box 1

Turn of light one. Introduce myself. Show original entrance, talk about history, how found etc. Talk about how we shouldn't touch because of oil and dirt stains and may damage, and because we want to preserve for the following generations. Pass piece around. Most caves in the region are limestone however this one is dolomite which is a little harder stone but very similar, also mention it being a sea cave and cavernous.

### Box 2

Show differences stalagmites **light 4**  
stalactites **light 8** (spelt staligtites in original!!)  
columns **light 3** (spelt colomns-repeatedly)  
straws **torch**

Head up the steps or down path **lights 2,3,5,6,7,8.**

Show grotto, talk about flowstone, white coating moonmilk, family of mites, be careful of steps and meet at bottom. **Turn off lights 1,5,7.**

### Box 3

Shawls **lights 4,5 off 1**  
Swordfish **torch**  
Colour **light 2**  
Pebbles **light 3/torch**  
Hippo **lights 1,2,4,5**  
Helictites **lights 1,2,3,5**

(spelt heligtites)

Head down path to box 4 to the left, **turn off lights 3,4,5. Leave 1,2 on.**

### Box 4

Large columns, headache rock, family of dolomites (??), column breaks, bacon/chip, water chips. Take a moment and meet you out on the left.

### Box 5

Tree roots, different shapes, broken leg **lights 1,11**

Muddy look=growth, large column, cacti garden

Magic pool

**lights 1,4,5,8,9,11**

Thousands of stalactites

(staigtites?!) **all lights**

**Turn off 1,2,3,4,6,7,8,10,11. Leave on 5,9.**

### Box 6

Cavern extension, Elton John/Friar Tuck

Majestic column/pancakes **lights 3,6**

Millions of decorations **lights 3,6**

Meet up on the ramp. **Turn off 1,2 Box 3.** Photo time.

Permission to turn of all lights. Reference as to this is how Boyce found the cave and thank God for torches and electricity.

Thank you everyone for coming. I hope you enjoyed your tour and the natural underworld of beauty and peace that the cave holds. Thank you all and have a lovely day.

Publishing this is not meant to be derogatory to those who put the notes together, but demonstrates how new guides may be given insufficient resources on a number of levels to enable them to perform their job adequately. The above notes give a roadmap through the cave and lighting system, albeit almost impossible to follow, even when you know the cave and lighting sequence well. It is poor on information, is a series of non linked features and has no theme or take home message. They are no longer in use! Note also that photo opportunities are mentioned only once.

## THE REVIEW

Visitors should not dictate interpretation, as this is the tool we use to shape visitor behaviour, but we need to ensure we are providing a relevant and interesting experience. Guided by this philosophy a review of the Tantanoola Cave experience and operation was conducted and included the following:

- A review of how and why visitors were coming to the site. There are two main groups; those who are staying in the region taking day trips exploring, and those who are travelling from the Great Ocean Road through to Kangaroo Island and vice versa.
- An acknowledgement that today's travellers are demanding, seeking instant

gratification, and have limited patience with regards waiting up to an hour for a tour. At Tantanoola, the visitor centre is basic, other attractions on the park are limited and a significant number of people who if they could not go on a tour (i.e. now) state they would simply not wait and leave the park to go off and capture some other experience on the horizon.

- The tourism industry defines today's travellers as "experience seekers" and the South Australian Tourism Commission has published experienced based promotional materials. This presents an opportunity to benefit from a state wide campaign.
- An acknowledgement that changes in technology has made it easier for the majority of visitors to own and use an image recording device of sorts. This has led to an increase in the number of visitors who feel that it is important to be able to capture memories as part of their holiday experience. Photography is regarded as a significant opportunity for the site, not just the serious photographers but for everyone who wishes to capture holiday memories.

#### THE 'NEW' WAY

The new format which was developed as a result of the review is an attempt to balance visitor needs and wants while still being able to deliver and adhere to conservation, interpretation and management objectives.

What changed .....

- The tour timetable was discarded – timed tours were outdated and counter productive at Tantanoola.
- The title 'Guides' was changed to "Hosts", with Hosts now involved in greeting each group of visitors, whether 1 or 10 and leading them straight into the cave. Introductory interpretation is provided and hosts offer visitors the opportunity to explore the cave themselves. The cave is small and their host can see all areas of the cave from a single point, ensuring visitor safety and cave conservation.
- Hosts are free to leave the cave to check for more visitors and bring them into the cave. No visitor needs to wait for a structured tour at a specific so virtually all visitors to the park visit the cave.
- Photography is encouraged. No longer do visitors feel they are imposing on the groups while they take their photos and they do not hold up the tour. Interpretation has more chance of being effective as visitors know they have all the time they need to capture their images.
- There is no time limit on how long a person may spend in the cave. Visitors appear to fall into two time groups; 15-20 minutes for those travelling through on their way to their next destination and over 40 minutes for those on day trips with a particular interest in photography. The longest visit noted so far is over one

and a half hours. The 25 minutes tours were not catering for anyone!!

- Placement of chairs in the cave.

#### SOME CHALLENGES WITH THIS STYLE OF PRESENTATION

The concept of a hosted tour where visitors have a higher degree of freedom, even to the extent that the host leaves the cave and visitors are alone in a very delicate cave, creates some challenges. At a one person site it places pressure of staff to be the salesperson, interpreter and guardian of the cave.

##### *Caring for the cave*

The new format requires all lights to be on in the cave for most of the day, especially days when visitation is continuous. This greatly increases the possibility of *lampenflora*. The cave had significant *lampenflora* issues prior to the change, which was all treated at the time. Problem lights were moved and to date, there has been no discernable increase. Ideally, the whole system would be changed to be more compatible with the presentation format.

One major obstacle to overcome was how does one person sell tickets in the visitor centre and show the cave at the same time? This especially concerned our long term guide, who has maintained a real passion for the cave over 13 years working at the site. Tantanoola cave is small; a single chamber that can all be viewed from a single point near the cave entrance. It was a huge step for staff to take to leave visitors in the cave while they checked for more visitors. They quickly learnt how to judge a group and with the introduction to the cave including conservation and safety messages, no damage to the cave has been noted. Staff have even reported *less* touching of cave decorations and visitor feedback thanking them for *trusting* them in the cave. The cave has one opening very close to the visitor centre, further reducing the likelihood of visitors taking a chance on sampling a piece of speleothem. Of course it will only take one person to ruin this so the onus is on staff to judge very carefully who can be left in the cave alone.



Shizhen in Tantanoola Cave

##### *How do staff feel about "hosting" versus guiding.*

Hosting the cave means you have close contact with *every* visitor to the site. With the old format, a visitor would purchase a ticket, and then wait for the tour, either inside the visitor centre (which

has little to inspire or hold a visitor's attention) or by taking a short cliff top walking trail. Contact would be re-instigated at the commencement of the tour and depending on the size of the group as to how much personal attention each visitor received.

The new format means engagement commences when a visitor or group arrives and is not broken unless the host has to leave the cave. Visitation to the cave is currently low, with many days of 20-30 visitors, which is relatively easy to manage in this format. One abnormally busy day of 132 visitors was extremely tiring for the host. Two staff are on duty over busy holiday periods and take turns in the cave.

Staff have found it challenging and tiring at times. Individual performance reviews revealed they have adjusted to presenting the cave in this way, with the long term staff member even saying she could not go back to doing 8 structured tours each day.



Display inside the Tantanoola Visitor's Centre

### **Staff responsibility**

The new format relies heavily on the staff to follow set guidelines. It is easy for staff to simply let visitors into the cave and then check the phone, computer and other minor duties (or nothing!) The site is 100 kilometres from my office at Naracoorte Caves, so regular checks are difficult.

It is no different however, from any cave system where once the guide enters the cave, managers are totally reliant on them to deliver the service. The responsibility falls to the management to provide staff with the necessary skills and direction through training. A two day training session with John Pastorelli (see his book *Enriching the Experience*) helped lift staff skills, especially in the area of "interpretive conversation."

### **What about thematic interpretation?**

Many authors and interpreters believe having a theme is integral to developing a meaningful interpretive experience. Can this be achieved with this format?

A statewide project within the Department for Environment and Heritage has developed a park theme for all parks used by visitors. It will be some months before static displays are completed, and until that time the cave will be almost the total Tantanoola Cave experience. The neighbouring Unimin dolomite quarry stands in

stark contrast to the protected park, but will be integrated into displays to demonstrate how the rock is used. There is no strong theme at present, the cave presentation is about enjoying the experience and developing an appreciation of cave. Any theme ultimately developed will still have this central to the experience.

### **CHANGING VISITOR PERCEPTIONS OF THE CAVE**

Tantanoola Cave was the first wheelchair accessible cave in Australia and promotion has centred on this fact ever since. It is an important difference to be noted in marketing materials, but virtually every advertisement used an image of a group of elderly visitors including a visitor in a wheel chair. This was not selling an experience, but rather showing everyone could access the cave. New images have been taken, focussing on the cave as a work of nature's art that may be enjoyed at your leisure.

### **THE FUTURE**

There is still a lot of refinement work to be undertaken to tune and tune again the product we are offering. It takes some time to change promotional materials and shape visitor expectations of the site.

Visitor centre interpretation will provide all the information normally given on a tour so the cave will be an absorbing visitor experience with minimal interpretation, unless sought by the visitor. Seating has been placed in the cave so visitors may sit and enjoy the surroundings. Interestingly, many visitors are asking if music has been considered for the cave. A trial is planned.

This new approach of facilitating the Tantanoola Cave experience presents a challenge for the hosts as they need to greet and engage (at least for awhile) with every visitor to the park. This will be a constant situation on high visitation days. To assist staff meet this challenge training has been provided and will continue so as to ensure they have the necessary skills required for their new role.

On a bigger picture (or larger canvas) scale, the hosted cave provides an excellent contrast to the Naracoorte Caves World Heritage Site just an hour away and has broadened the range of cave experiences in the region.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

A reference list of texts has not been supplied here, but I wish to acknowledge John Pastorelli, Cathie Plowman, Sam Ham, Betty Weiler, Elery Hamilton-Smith, Brian Clark and Andy Spate whose writings and discussions have shaped my thinking on cave presentation.

There may be others whose work I have read and has assisted with shaping the Tantanoola Cave experience and I apologise for their omission. Credit for success of the "re-invention" to date belongs to Fiona, Sarah, Katrina and Bec, the Tantanoola Cave hosts, who have embraced the concept and continue to refine the experience.

