

MORE ABOUT CANGO CAVES

- John Dunkley

A view inside the Interpretation Centre
– Cango Caves. Photo: Kent Henderson



TO CANGO

It's a stunningly beautiful country, South Africa. Twice the population in one-sixth the area, yet just as varied in its climate and scenery as Australia, and far more diverse culturally.

Avoiding the main highway to Cape Town you can follow an excellent road south from booming Johannesburg across the high veldt to Bloemfontein, then through a series of once prosperous, now deprived struggle-towns like Middelburg where you will be besieged by many of the hundreds of unemployed people trying to sell identical model windmills of all sizes, made out of scrap metal. Sadly, there's not much more to the local economy these days.

Pause and reflect in Graaf Reinet, an important stepping stone on the Great Trek 170 years ago where you'll meet bonneted Boer ladies re-enacting for tourists a not-too-distant past that disappeared less than 20 years ago.

Further south you cross the Little Karoo, a sparsely settled stony semi-desert of low scrub and sheep. It looks like the Nullarbor or western New South Wales, and very much like our Kimberley. All that reminds you that this is South Africa are the horizon-circling Baviaanskloof, Witte and Kammanassie ranges just over there, always in sight. In spring the profusion of wildflowers might distract you as you pass through Dysseldorp: it sounds like and is a depressed dorp where the unemployment rate hovers around 60%. Less than an hour later you approach Oudtshoorn, sunniest town in the land and tourist capital of the Little Karoo.

BONGOLETHU & OUDTSHOORN

Oudtshoorn for tourists is orderly and attractive. Struggling, sure, but better off than most of those out in the Karoo. Those big birds standing around are ostriches, not emus, and they still contribute to the economy. Of the total population of 87,000 whites comprise only 15%, but they hold 76% of the senior level posts on Oudtshoorn Council. Only one of the 16 senior positions there is held by a black South African, and none by women.

This, let me assure you, in 2007, not the bad old days of 1977.

A few kilometres from Oudtshoorn you probably will not notice the turn off to the suburb or 'township' of Bongoletu. You're not likely to find it on your road map anyway, certainly not if the map was printed more than 20 years ago when, as far as the government of the day was concerned, it didn't exist. Oh, the people were there alright - they were removed there from Oudtshoorn during the apartheid era. They just weren't on the map. They're still there. No white faces in Bongoletu. This is the stark face of the real Oudtshoorn. 15,000 people live in Bongoletu and the government estimates the overall unemployment rate to be 93%, but 'only' 54% among those who have had a primary education. 40% have had no schooling at all. The average income is about \$3 a day. There is, of course, no unemployment welfare.

And so, let's travel the last 25km to Oudtshoorn's main claim to fame, Cango Caves, the most famous in Africa.

AT CANGO

The last issue of this Journal (pp. 21/22) characterised (most of) the Cango guides and other staff as *'unemployed (often unemployable / uneducated) black youth... analogous to appointing a gutter sweeper as chairman of a stock exchange... as a result, the cave guides and other staff seem very largely an unmotivated lot ... did not feel overwhelmed by their enthusiasm'*. All this was attributed to the policy of the owner and employer, Oudtshoorn Council (although the non-cave facilities are actually privately leased).

Well, perhaps that is the policy, but it has to comply with national requirements under legislation such as the Employment Equity Act and the Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment Act. Unlike Australia, South Africa has affirmative action legislation, reserving 80% of new jobs for people of colour. Not to put too fine a point on it, the comment above recalls a South Africa which was supposed to disappear over 15 years ago. In those days black people were excluded from skilled jobs in the public service.

After parking your car and walking to the impressive 3-storey building dominating the entrance to Cango Cave, perhaps you'd like time to reflect. So, buy a Coke and some biltong, pause to read the last five paragraphs again, and meet your cave guide.

I recently had a couple of lengthy conversations with one of these guides, trying to understand the perception conveyed above. He attended the Cave & Karst Presenters' Workshop at Jenolan in February and was an excellent advertisement for his caves. He was quite overwhelmed when I disclosed some knowledge and understanding about Bongoletu, and as I expected, he'd been born there.



If he was one of the 'cave guides and other staff (who) seem an unmotivated lot', it certainly did not show, and the other guides have skills not in the repertoire of the average Australian cave guide. Where in Australia, for example, is there a team of 10 or so guides who between them can offer tours in any of seven languages? Where is our Rwandan refugee who can present tours in French? Or the guide who lived some time in Belgium and can speak Dutch and Flemish as well as English and goodness knows what else? There's not much call for Xhosa in Australia, but the Cango guides can do that, in German as well as English and Afrikaans.

If the perception conveyed about Cango in the last ACKMA Journal is correct, surely the pertinent question to be addressed is why staff feel and act that way and what might be done to redress the issue. So, if Cango staff really are unmotivated, unenthusiastic and unskilled, why are they? Several reasons. First, they are largely members of groups that for decades were carefully hidden in places not on road maps, living in families that were dispossessed, disillusioned and sometimes desperate. Many still are. During the apartheid years these jobs were not open to them. It's too easy to dismiss them as members of dysfunctional communities, write them off as unemployable and pass blame to the employer. In fact they are also individuals whose beliefs, confidence and self-esteem may be at such a low ebb that it is going to take a generation to rekindle the kind of inner spirit that drives most people. Giving them a job is a start.

Sociologist, academic and former head of Corrections in NSW Tony Vinson often writes of the triangle of crime, social disadvantage and lack of education that characterises dispossessed black people in Australia. Much the same applies in South Africa – perhaps Oudtshoorn Council is simply playing its part in gradually redressing the problem.

And why is the obvious passion of management for Cango apparently not shared by staff and thereby conveyed to visitors? Well, I sense a dissociation between the physical beauty of the caves, and the human element. Management seems focused narrowly on the physical facilities, not the human. The interdependence of people and place just doesn't seem to be recognised. Staff do not even live on or near the site – every day a bus takes them from Oudtshoorn to the

cave and back, a 50km journey. Opportunities for training and advancement are almost nil. There is no real career structure, and it's notable that the senior cave management positions are still occupied by white people.

Perhaps the people selling Coke, or tickets, or guiding at Cango Caves come from Bongoletu. Perhaps they don't do those jobs as effectively as we would expect in Australia, but then they are paid much less to do it, and they are the fortunate ones. They at least have a job. Meanwhile, back in Bongoletu, most don't. Some make a few of their average daily 3 or 4 dollars from labour-intensive manufacturing of post-boxes, pots and other arts and crafts.

AFTER CANGO

Reminiscing about your journey to Cango, consider that you could as easily have been driving from, let's say, Broome through Halls Creek and Kununurra to Katherine, and down to Cutta Cutta Cave. Many aboriginal communities just off that highway are every bit as depressing as those struggling dorps and desperate shantytowns in the Karoo, though thankfully not as poverty-stricken. How would we react if Cutta Cutta Cave had Australian Aboriginal guides described by this Journal as uneducated, unemployable and analogous to employing a gutter sweeper as the CEO? Would we recommend better visitor facilities and improved lighting? Wouldn't we ask why is it so? Wouldn't we suggest some cultural sensitivity training for management? Perhaps we would ask if there are lessons to be learnt from cave tourism initiatives just across the border in WA that are owned and operated by local aboriginal communities.

I don't know any analogous indigenous cave operations in South Africa, but I have experienced black African owned and operated tours of places like Soweto and Kayelitsha, and on our visit the operation of Wonderwerk Cave (a significant archaeological site between Kimberly and Kuruman) was entirely in the hands of a knowledgeable and passionate but very poorly remunerated black South African.

The separate entrances for blacks entering Cango may have gone, but in other institutions of what is hailed as the New South Africa the '*lunacy of apartheid*' referred to in the article has *not* long since gone. The legacy it bequeathed will take another 20 to 50 years of goodwill to overcome. In the meantime, the black and coloured people of South Africa will continue to be disadvantaged.

My key point is, let's not judge others through a prism of our own Eurocentric or western-centric standards. South Africa is not a first world country like Australia, it's a dual or triple economy and multi-cultured rainbow of first next third or even fourth world conditions. But neither money, nor education nor infrastructure correlates closely with morale, enthusiasm and passion. I have visited caves in developing countries in Asia and Africa where staff were much more welcoming, motivated and dedicated than what is described here, indeed more so than several I have encountered in the USA or

occasionally in Australia. We had an excellent black guide at Sterkfontein, for example, and enthusiasts at Mulu and Gua Tempurung in Malaysia in 2006 who were really proud of 'their' cave, relished showing visitors through it, and were overwhelmed when we wanted to see it a second time. They were masters and stewards of their realm - proud and passionate, not patronised or put down, and it showed.

CONCLUSION

I am firmly of the view that the key to successful cave management lies at the front line, with guides who exhibit emotional commitment, stewardship, passion, dedication and enthusiasm. Managers can build their achievements over a period, but a guide has only an hour or two to establish a rapport with guests that will exceed their expectations, enrich their experience and leave them with positive feelings.

I am equally firmly of the view that offering and encouraging training and development is *the* core responsibility of management. Here is not the place to develop that theme, nor enter semantic discussions about guides, hosts, presenters, interpretation or competencies. But if a manager characterises staff as unemployable and treats them accordingly, or impugns their integrity or sense of self-worth, that's a reflection on management, not staff. And guides chided for doing the very job they were told to do are unlikely to exude warmth or enthusiasm. Everyone who's been in a managerial position remembers the occasional dud. That's life. A good manager works with the resources she has while still striving to improve them. Learning on the job is largely a social and team activity. The manager is part of that team, not separate from it. The environment has to be one of mutual trust, respect and openness, not of blaming others for shortfalls in physical and human resources.

Driving home from the Cave Presenters' Conference this week I thought how alike and yet how different Jenolan and Cango are. Each iconic caves, the most famous and most visited on their respective continent. Indeed, almost the same levels of annual visitation with little or no growth. Each relatively remote, each at times having had its share of dispirited staff and unsympathetic management. But dedicated guides and supportive management have rebuilt Jenolan as one of the world's leading caves.

I recognise that the previous article leading to this riposte (or rant, if you prefer!) was based on a visit of a day or two with very limited opportunity for interaction with non-management staff. I've travelled widely through South Africa several times & I won't pretend that the path of structural change is easy. You will meet many whites who bemoan the difficulty of landing a job since the end of the good old days, and quite a few black and coloured people who complain about the slow pace of job expansion for them. It is worth visiting South Africa just to experience the vibrancy and contrast the admixture of European with African, far more satisfying than just a busman's holiday visiting caves.



A view of the karst from the Cango Visitor's Centre. Photo: Kent Henderson

Permit me a brief digression. As professional, para-professional and special interest organisations grow, their practitioners tend to accumulate a holy writ. Organisations and, like this one, their Journals face the problem of goal displacement i.e. over time the goals of the organisation can become displaced by the goals of members and by the exclusion of other valuable and legitimate viewpoints.

The pages of this Journal have occasionally carried thoughtless and insensitive but no doubt well-intended remarks about activities or characteristics of groups which do not quite fit the prevailing orthodoxy regarding what constitutes 'good' cave management. On at least a couple of occasions, these remarks served to turn a mirror on the subject, a commentary on shortcomings of management than the matters complained of. The Journal has seldom challenges the conventional narrative of how caves 'should' be owned and managed, the content becoming dominated by stuff about the physical environment and corporate ethos.

I felt moved to write this plea for more consideration and sensitivity partly because an anonymous, remote and powerless group of people had been maligned, partly because I happen to have met some of them recently and on past visits, but also because it happens to be the very week when nation-wide discussion centred on a public apology for the way many black people in our own country were treated not that long ago.

Indeed, I finished this on the very day that Parliament issued that apology. So forgive me if it sounds unduly emotional.

The article concluded: '*Cango deserves much, much better than that to which it is currently subjected*'. It certainly does, and I venture to suggest that much, much more is needed than an update on multiple karstification or a few dichroic lights. Managers note: it's the guides who make or break the visitor experience.

MORE READING

Dunkley, J, (2001): Don't Forget the Guide: Observations on developing a culture of excellence in visitor experience. ACKMA Jnl. 45: 23-29