

A VISIT to SMOO CAVE - the only SHOW CAVE in SCOTLAND

John Brush



Inlet from above the cave entrance

Smoo Cave is a short but spectacular limestone cave near the village of Durness on the remote northwest coast of Scotland. The first two chambers of the cave have free public access while the inner reaches are open as a show cave during the summer months and on holiday weekends.

The cave is a popular local tourist attraction and at one time, the local press billed it as “Scotland’s answer to Wookey Hole”. With a huge main entrance (40m wide and 15m high), Smoo has also been described as the largest sea cave in Britain. But that is only half the story. While the cave is located at the head of a narrow, 600m long inlet and wave action has played an important role in enlarging the entrance chamber area, Smoo is also an active karst system with a stream sink, a 25m waterfall plunging into a fresh water lake and a small side stream emerging from a sump.

Smoo Cave attracts some 40,000 visitors a year according to the Smoo Cave website. However it is not clear if this is the number of people who pay to see the inner parts of the cave or whether it is an estimate of the total number of visitors to the cave.

The Highlands Council owns the cave and has provided visitor facilities such a parking area, public toilets, access paths, a wooden viewing platform within the cave and rudimentary cave lighting. The show cave operation is leased out to Colin Coventry, a local identity and member of the Edinburgh-based Grampians Speleological Group (GSG).

Marjorie Coggan and I were fortunate to be able to visit Smoo Cave with our UK friends, Kirsty and Martin Mills, during a trip to Scotland in July this year. As Kirsty and Martin are good friends of Colin Coventry, we were given a special tour, but more of that later.

From the sealed car park right beside the (A838) highway, it is a short walk along a network of paths down to the main entrance and, optionally, past the stream sink entrance and a daylight hole. Members of the public can wander at will into the entrance chamber and along a boardwalk to a wooden viewing platform in the second or lake chamber. A roof over part of the boardwalk protects visitors from things that fall, or are thrown, in through the daylight hole. Lighting allows



Smoo Cave entrance

visitors to see the waterfall plunging into the cave on the far side of the lake.

For visitors who would like to see more, in fact all, of the cave, Colin's informative but low-key tours are just the thing. At the Smoo Cave visitor centre and ticket office – in reality a pile of loose stones and a small wooden table set up in the entrance chamber, Colin's assistant extracts £3 (about \$5) per person and issues safety helmets. A tour, normally lasting 20 or so minutes, involves a boat trip around the lake chamber, under a low natural archway and into a side stream passage. Here, everyone alights from the boat - a large inflatable rubber dinghy - and walks on wooden planks along a stream passage. It is just a short distance up the shallow streamway to a sump and terminal aven. Although the stream passage is less than 2m high in places and thus there is some risk of visitors bumping their heads, the main reason for the helmets is for protection when the boat eases under the wooden viewing platform - which it must do to access the loading steps at the beginning and end of each tour. At the time of our trip, Colin had a nasty gash on his head, suggesting that he too should wear a helmet or duck a bit faster, or perhaps both.



Smoo Cave ticket office and visitor centre



Looking out of Smoo Cave entrance

Colin was a mine of information on the local geology and on the history and formation of the cave. He was also keen to tell us about exploration activities in the cave – much to the bemusement of the two (non-speleo) members of the public who joined our somewhat extended tour. It took Colin nearly an hour to conduct the tour while regaling us with stories of his exploration efforts.

According to Colin, an attempt was made to dive the small sump pool. Unfortunately, the divers were forced to retreat after progressing just a few metres, as the water very quickly became turbid. Having observed these efforts, Colin thought there had to be a better way and so came to acquire a miniature remotely controlled submersible equipped with a video camera. As a sea faring person of some standing (he is a member of the local branch of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution), Colin decided to navigate the submersible himself. Unfortunately, this exploration effort was also unsuccessful. Even though the submersible had just a tiny propeller, it still stirred up silt and quickly obscured the view on Colin's monitor. So much so that he was unable to navigate back out of the sump pool and the sub was only retrieved by dragging it out by its communications cable.



Smoo Cave stream passage



Entrance showing daylight hole and covered walkway

A further attempt to extend the cave by climbing the terminal aven was also unsuccessful, but it did result in some wonderful stories. Colin and a fellow GSG member, Iain Greig, decided the best way to climb the terminal aven would be to use a safety-certified 10m long aluminium ladder borrowed from a local painter. As the pair carried the paint-splattered ladder into the cave, a group of American tourists couldn't resist asking what they were doing and Colin responded that he was a painter and decorator who had the task of making the drab cave walls more attractive for tourists. The mortified Americans were left shaking their heads as the 'painters' ferried the ladder across the lake and then pushed it up the shaft. Colin made the first ascent and managed to get half way up before shaking knees (or was it the ladder) forced him to retreat. Iain then had a go and gingerly climbed to the top of the ladder where he could see two small shafts continuing above, but decided the flowstone walls were too slippery to climb safely. The pair retreated in defeat, but Colin says another attempt may happen one day ...

As we headed back towards the entrance, Colin told us of the rich cultural and archaeological history of the cave. An early recorded visitor was the famous Scottish novelist and poet, Sir Walter Scott, who made note of his 19 September 1814 visit in his diaries. In 1858, the journal of Richard Charles Weld describes how locals would take visitors for a boat trip across the lake chamber for 15 shillings and more if lights were required.

In the two centuries prior to Sir Walter Scott's visit, the cave had a somewhat gruesome reputation. In the 16th Century, a highway robber named McMurdo used the blowhole entrance, according to local legend, to dispose of his enemies. In the 1720s, locals lured raiders from the Clan Gunn into the cave where all members of the raiding party were slaughtered. Two decades later, at the time of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, there was a small distillery operating in the cave. The Government, keen to stamp out illicit stills, ordered an Inland Revenue Supervisor and an Excise Officer into the area, with powers to arrest and confiscate. The officials heard rumours of a still in the cave and engaged a local to take



Colin Coventry explaining Smoo Cave geology



Colin Coventry and boat in Lake Chamber



Base of waterfall

them into the cave by boat. Unfortunately for them, the boat was manoeuvred under the waterfall where the boat capsized and the officials drowned. Shortly afterwards, the still was discreetly removed. Or so the story goes.

Earlier use of the cave is not well documented. However, excavations in and around Smoo Cave in 1904 and in the 1990s suggest a complex archaeological history dating from the Mesolithic period, through the Iron Age and into medieval times. It is thought that Norse mariners were regular visitors to the cave and may have regarded the inlet as an important natural harbour to shelter from stormy seas. In fact, it has been suggested that the name Smoo is derived from the Norse Smuga, meaning a rift, cleft or cave.

The first attempt to operate regular commercial trips into the inner parts of the cave was in 1977. However, it was not until the mid 1980s that serious efforts were made to 'develop' the cave. The Highland Council purchased land around the entrance in 1985 and set about established parking facilities, paths and picnic facilities. In 1986, the Royal Engineers helped the council by making steps down to the entrance and building the viewing platform and a bridge over the creek near where it plunges into the cave. In 1991, the cave was "modernised" (as the Smoo website quaintly puts it) with improved paths and the addition of electric lights in the lake chamber and along the inner stream passage.

With time pushing on, we eventually returned to the Visitor Centre where we thanked Colin and bid hasty farewells, as he had more people patiently waiting for their tour of the inner reaches.

A visit to Smoo Cave is thoroughly recommended. It is an impressive, albeit relatively short, cave with an interesting history. If time and circumstances allow, it is well worth doing a tour of the inner parts. At just \$5, it would have to be one of the lowest price show cave tours anywhere. Colin's yarns alone are well worth the admission price.

Sources

Information for this article was obtained from:

The Smoo Cave website (www.smoo Cave.org);
 The Bulletin of the Grampians Speleological Group, Fourth Series, Vol. 4(2):30-31, October 2009 and Vol. 4(4) March 2010;
 GSG members (Colin Coventry, Kirsty and Martin Mills); and
 The North West Territorial (newspaper), Volume 9, spring 1987.