THE CONFERENCE IS COMING!!!

- Val Speedie

Australia is an ancient land of incredible contrasts. The contrast between Chilligoe limestone caves and the lava tubes of Undara is a perfect example. Both have caves, BUT limestone caves are formed slowly as holes develop in cold solid rock, whereas lava caves are formed as molten rock solidifies around a hole. They are complete opposites, each fascinating in their own way!

Talk about contrasts; from the steamy lush rainforest of Cairns to the cool dry inland of Undara and Chilligoe; from the tropical beaches and the spectacular reef of the coast to the open arid savannah of the interior; from the incredible sculptured towers of the limestone to the awesome hidden world below the ancient lava flows. Come and see and experience this dichotomy for yourselves at the 15th Australasian Conference on Cave and Karst Management (5 – 12 May 2003) – barely 12 months away!!

LET'S LOOK AT UNDARA

Australia is not thought of as a volcanic area; however there are over 500 volcanoes in N.Q., ranging from the very old of the Malanda crater to the surprisingly young eruptions near Atherton and Charters Towers. Areas of volcanic activity are known as Provinces. The Undara lava tubes are in the McBride Volcanic Province; an area of 5500 km2 which has been active for about 7 to 8 million years and has evidence of about 164 craters, vents and cones that scar the landscape. The oldest erupted some 7 million years ago, the youngest, Kinrara, may be as young as 30000 years old. These volcanoes are not over a hot spot, nor are they on the edge of tectonic plates. Most of the eruptions are monogenic, rather like periodic boils erupting on the skin of the land to die away then pop up nearby some time later.

Undara was a very small volcano with very big ideas that appeared about 190000ya. From this tiny hole welled an incredible volume of lava that flooded an area of...with molten rock. Valleys, dry-river beds, gulleys were filled and the lava levelled the land like a flood that does not recede. In some of the flooded valleys, rivers the molten lava formed insulated underground pipelines (lava tubes) that acted like arteries taking the lava further and further from the heart of the volcano. Over time the roof of the lava tube collapsed in places forming a series of lava caves in what was once a continuous lava tube, Remnants of these still survive today hidden below the surface of the land, often camophlages by dense pockets of dry rainforest (how is that for a contradiction in terms?)

Those of you who went on the 1999 post conference tour will remember clambering down and around the lava caves at Hamilton and Mt. Eccles in Victoria. Those caves were about 7,000 year old – Undara's lava caves are 190,000 year old, 27 times older. Because of the rough rocky landscape and the fact there is almost no surface water on the volcanic country the local indigenous people mostly left the area alone. So did the Europeans. No water, no minerals, so no use. A couple of pieces of the lava tube have been known for about 80 years; Barkers tube was names after a local grazier Eaglesfield Barker; I guess with a name like that you need to leave something behind! Road Tube or Collins Road Cave or Mailman's cave; depending on to whom you speak was known because it contained a semi-permanent spring.

A comprehensive mapping of the Undara lava tube system was not carried out till 1989 although people had investigated individual sections prior to this. Best and White recognised the system first in 1960. In the early 70s Anne Atkinson did extensive exploration and research on some of the caves, the Chilligoe Caving Club explored others.

Ken Grimes did his bit in 1977 and some of the Nation Parks people expanded the research in 1988. The resort opened and began tours to the caves in 1990. In 1991 the Australian Geographic Magazine published an article about Undara; informing Australians of this world class phenomenon for the first time. In 1992 the area came under the mantle of the National Parks. For something this old, the recognition of its importance is very new.

I loved a comment by Mick Goodwin when discussing intrusive actions by people on cave systems "....expanded be lithological rearrangement to accommodate the human torso". Nothing so crass as digging!