

Giants Cave

Giants Cave is one of only two self-guided tourist caves in Western Australia's south-west, where visitors don a helmet, headlamp and boots to explore a cave on their own—with no guide and no lights.

Story and photos
by Karla Forrest



● Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park

My day began travelling along Caves Road in the stunning Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park, an area famed for its towering karri forests and incredible beaches. The drive was punctuated by flashy signs for wineries, expensive restaurants and other tourist attractions, but my destination was a little bit different.

ADVENTURE AWAITS

About 20 kilometres south of Margaret River, I turned off the road, parked and headed toward the signposted entry hut. I was greeted with a friendly smile by Parks and Wildlife Service staff Bob and Kristy, who gave me a 10-minute briefing about the task ahead. I was about to enter Giants Cave, one of the deepest caves on the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge. Reaching 86 metres at its deepest point, the cave is as deep as a 30-storey building is tall. I would need to scramble over rocks, crawl through narrow openings and climb ladders. There would be no guide to lead me and there are no lights installed in the cave.

When Bob warned me there was a 'point of no return'—a narrow part of the cave known as the Chimney—I felt a slight sense of foreboding, coupled with excitement. I was fitted with a helmet, headlamp and back-up torch, and Kristy

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Above Giants Cave is set among towering karri trees within Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park.

Below Stairs leading into the cave. In the early days of the 20th century there was a platform installed at the base of these stairs for tourists to enjoy picnics.

Above Descending the 'rope slope', more than halfway through the cave.



checked that I had suitable footwear.

I set out along a short boardwalk surrounded by lush green forest.

Just 20 metres beyond the entry hut, the cave entrance loomed into view. Tall karri trees gave way to a spectacular 100-metre-wide sinkhole below me. Known as a doline, it is the result of a cave roof collapse that happened thousands of years ago. Dolines are a common feature of this area—the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge—due to the number of streams that once ran through here, eroding the windswept limestone and carving underground channels. Eventually, when a high dome was all that remained, it would crash in on itself and form a sinkhole. This one, adorned with phytokarst structures and filled with trees and bushes, was really quite beautiful.

THE BEAUTY BENEATH

A long series of stairs took me from the dappled light of the doline to the growing darkness of the cave. My eyes took a moment to adjust and I turned on my headlamp. Looking back, I thought of the aching legs I would surely feel tomorrow.

I entered the Twilight Chamber and the wonders of the cave unfolded before me. Ghostly, pale structures hung from the ceiling—stalactites of all shapes and sizes. Water droplets clung to the fragile structures, ever so slowly building them.

Stalagmites rose from the sandy floor. There were some good examples of shawl formations here, draping delicately from above.

Descending more stairs and edging further underground, I passed beneath Caves Road and entered the Ballroom Chamber. At 75 metres long, 45 metres wide and 18 metres high, it is the largest chamber within Giants Cave. This is where the stream that created the cave had once run, but it is not known exactly when the stream dried out. The Ballroom is also the site where bones of the extinct short-faced kangaroo (*Simosthenurus*) were found. This kangaroo was one of Australia's most common megafauna species. Aboriginal artefacts have also been found throughout the Leeuwin-Naturaliste cave system, including fire hearths, stone and bone tools, jewellery and even teeth. This highlights the Wadandi Noongar peoples' knowledge and use of the caves dating back more than 55,000 years.

QUIET CONTEMPLATION

It was a quiet day in the cave. The wet weather may have been keeping other visitors away, so I decided to stop for a while. I sat cross-legged on a wide boardwalk and switched my headlamp off. I held my hand in front of my face and saw nothing. Somewhere far above me, I heard a drip of water. I strained my ears to hear

DO IT YOURSELF

Where is it? Giants Cave is approximately 20 kilometres south of Margaret River in Western Australia's south-west.

Planning your trip Giants Cave is open between October and April from 10am until 1pm. During school holidays and public holiday weekends, the cave is open from 9.30am until 3.30pm. Other times and group bookings by prior arrangement. Entrance fees apply.

Staying safe Visitors should have a reasonable level of fitness, wear sturdy enclosed footwear, and be prepared for dark, enclosed spaces. Helmets and lights are supplied. Giants Cave is not suitable for children under six years old. However families with children under six are encouraged to visit nearby Calgardup Cave.

Contact Visit the Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park Information Centre at Calgardup Cave. Ph (08) 9757 7422 or email calgardup@dbca.wa.gov.au.

the scurrying of a mouse, the light flap of wings. Nothing. Then... another drip. The darkness and the silence somehow seemed to deepen, but in a peaceful way. Drip. What a wonderful place to practice mindfulness. I resumed my journey feeling relaxed, ready for the next part of the adventure.

CLIMBING AND CRAWLING

I reached the Chimney, the point of no return—a series of three narrow ladders. It is the smallest part of the cave system. Looking up at the first six-metre steel ladder, I saw that I'd need to keep my body close to the ladder to avoid hitting the wall behind me. A sign here tells visitors to turn back if they are reluctant to continue.

Up I went, grasping the cool metallic rungs tightly. I clambered over a huge boulder holding onto a steel chain, climbed another two ladders and crawled beneath some low-hanging rock. This was a far cry from my childhood memories of cave tours with wide, brightly-lit walkways, a confident tour guide and people chattering excitedly. I never felt unsafe, however. The 575-metre route through the cave is clearly marked. Exiting the Chimney section, I entered the Arborite Chamber, where twisted tree roots, some white



from calcification, descended from the lofty ceiling. The name of the chamber is a combination of 'arbor' (the Latin word for 'tree') and 'stalactite'. Moving on and climbing down yet more stairs, I reached a section known as the 'rope slope'. This was a low-roofed 10-metre section where I had to use a rope to guide me down a slippery rock surface. At almost the deepest point of the cave, this area once contained a small lake that had since dried due to climate change and a decrease in rainfall. A series of white reflectors directed me to the end of the cave, where there was another series of small ladders to negotiate, and more rocks to scramble across, before making a final climb through a grate into the crisp, open air of the karri forest. After a short walk through the forest and back across Caves Road—over land this time—I returned to the entry hut. Giants Cave was certainly something to remember.

Above Visitors enter Giants Cave through a large sinkhole, or doline, formed thousands of years ago when part of the cave roof collapsed.

Below Cave structures such as stalactites are formed from calcium carbonate deposits found in water droplets.



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