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Amateur spelunkers dig Horne Lake; Easily accessed system of caves on Vancouver Island offer variety; [Final Edition]

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With more than 1,000 caves, Vancouver Island is considered by many to be the paradise of Canadian caving.

There are two reasons for this -- geology and climate. Much of the island is an ancient limestone seabed that has been upthrust by tectonic forces. Limestone is a relatively soft rock easily dissolved by the continuous flow of water -- particularly water that has picked up carbon dioxide from the air to form weak carbonic acid.

Over tens of thousands of years, meltwater from successive ice ages and that liquid sunshine we know so well on the coast have combined to carve out elaborate cave systems while depositing dissolved calcite to create spectacular crystal formations.

Caving is often considered an extreme sport. But there are caves that can be explored on your own, with minimal but essential equipment, or with the aid of a guide. Either way, caves are amazing underground worlds that combine physical adventure with hands-on geology.

Horne Lake Caves Provincial Park on central Vancouver Island is home to one of the finest and most accessible cave systems in B.C.

It was created in 1971 to protect the karst (eroded limestone landscape) features and caves of this area that were first discovered in 1912. Recently, it was voted the Best Natural Outdoor Site in B.C. by Attractions Canada.

Two caves are open for self-guided exploration. Lower Main Cave and Main Cave range in length from 40 to 136 metres with a depth of 15 to 30 metres. Miner's helmet and headlamp are available to rent.

If you're bringing your own gear, you need a good bike helmet, a couple of light sources including a headlamp, sturdy shoes and clothes you don't mind getting a bit wet and mucky.

The park's star attraction is Riverbend Cave. It was gated in 1971 to protect the delicate calcite formations that adorn its galleries and is only accessible by guided tours (helmets and lamps are provided).

We opted for the 1 1/2-hour Family Cavern Tour. The tour begins with a 25-minute hike to the entrance along the Karst Trail.

Our lead guide, Drew, introduced us to the geology of the area and the mechanics of cave formation. According to him, Vancouver Island has more caves per square kilometre than anywhere else in the world.

At Horne Lake, the caves have not been gentrified. They are in their natural state with rocky and uneven floors and the only light comes from headlamps or flashlights.

At the entrance, a steel door about the size of a manhole cover is unlocked and we climb backwards down a steel ladder.

Once we're all down, Drew points out some of the features of the cave and what we can expect further on. Then we scramble and skitter over rocks, pausing in galleries to marvel over the variety of rock formations, such as columns, soda straws, bacon strips and flow stones.

Other formations are named after objects they resemble such as Howling Wolf and Smiling Buddha. We see fossils and hear of small creatures that live in caves.

At one point, we all turn off our lights and are plunged into total darkness while listening to running water further down the cave, eroding more rock and building new formations.

For those with a taste for more, other tours include the three- hour Wet & Wild Cave Adventure, the four-hour High Adventure and the five-hour Extreme Rappel that has cavers rappel down a seven-storey waterfall and then climb out on a cable ladder.

wNote: Due to the terrain, the tours are not for children under five, the very elderly or those with limited mobility. Warm clothes are advisable as the temperature in the caves is a cool eight degrees. Bring a camera.

For more information go to the Horne Lake website at www.hornelake.com. or Tourism Vancouver Island: www.vancouverisland.travel and B.C. Ferries: www.bcf ferries.com.