

Horne Lake caves: Ice age adventure IF YOU GO:

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Climb a subterranean waterfall in the morning, strap on the snowshoes in the afternoon and then relax with a scotch by a warm crackling fire in the evening. Winter is no time to put away your adventurous spirit.

So if you need a change of scenery this winter – how about looking at the earth from the inside out?

“Where else will you get to do things like climb up an underground waterfall and see rare crystal rock formations without being some hardcore National Geographic adventurer?” says Richard Varela, manager of Island Pacific Adventures, the company that leads tours in Horne Lake Caves Provincial Park, an hour’s drive from Courtenay or Nanaimo on Vancouver Island.

The three-hour Wet and Wild Spelunking Adventure tour, available in winter & spring only, focuses on the Ice Age water forces that created one of the largest and most spectacular karst systems in North America.

“When you are standing in the caves yelling over the roaring, splashing water, it adds weight to the description of the tons of water from the melting Ice Ages that bore right through the mountains to carve these caves,” says Varela.

Interest in caving has grown in recent years along with the growth of adventure and eco-tourism. People are attracted to both the physical and mental challenges in caving, as well as the sense of exploration and discovery found in going into the unknown.

Anyone with a moderate fitness level and aged eight years or older can participate in the tour.

Whether it’s snakes from Indiana Jones, horcruxes from Harry Potter, or the predatory cave dwellers from The Cave, Hollywood loves to show cavern lurking creatures.

The worst things you might find in the Horne Lake caves in winter are daddy-long-legs (harvestman) who come inside the cave entrances to hibernate. So no bats, rats, snakes or flesh-eating monsters – just fascinating rock formations.

Bacon strips, moon milk, ice cream waterfall, flowstone and popcorn rock – what are things on a caveman’s grocery list? Not quite, they’re really the names of rock and crystal formations found in HorneLakeCaves.

“Riverbend is probably Canada’s best decorated cave in terms of its crystal formations,” says Varela. “It is festooned with crystals.”

Some unique formations have been affectionately named after characters which they resemble, such as Jabba the Hut, Piglet, Winnie the Pooh, Howling Wolf and Smiling Buddha.

Out of 123 of the longest and deepest caves in North America, 76 are on Vancouver Island. Riverbend is 387 metres (1270 feet) long and features a seven-story waterfall.

For those that prefer their adventure above ground, the Horne Lake campground & outdoor centre is open year-round. And the lake is stocked with cutthroat and rainbow trout for excellent fishing, especially in fall and spring. Island Pacific Adventures offers canoe, kayak and fishing gear rental throughout the winter.

But in winter evening comes early and after a day of subterranean adventure, you'll want to rise above it all. Perhaps a taste of heaven will do the trick, with a drop or two of what some consider nectar of the gods – Scotch whisky. With its earthy, smoky flavours, it is a natural complement to caving.

Perched over the sheltered waters of Vancouver Island's Inside Passage Parksville, Qualicum Beach and the many charming beachfront communities (referred to as the Oceanside region), welcome visitors. The area has unforgettable scenery, restaurants, accommodation from B & Bs to first-class spa resorts, and year round golf courses.

It's a rare opportunity when Mother Earth invites us deep into her home and the caves at Horne Lake remain for the most part undeveloped and in their natural state. They have no permanent lighting or man-made walkways. Recently they were named the Best Natural Outdoor Site in B.C. by Attractions Canada.

Horne Lake Caves are within easy reach and offer a uniquely West Coast wet and wild winter adventure.

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