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## Tours probe an amazing, sunken world of glistening caverns and fantastic formations

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SPECIAL TO THE P-I

The cavern stretched up at least three stories high. Without our headlamps, we would have been in utter blackness. Yet with a dozen of us training our lights on the glistening surface, we could easily illuminate impressive sights: rippling flow stones, soda straws, popcorn rock and other colorfully named formations, all made out of creamy white calcite.

Stalactites and stalagmites may be the best-known formations found in caves, but if you want to see firsthand what can arise from the constant dripping -- over hundreds of thousands of years -- of water saturated with dissolved calcium carbonate, head to Horne Lake Caves Provincial Park on Vancouver Island.

Bacon strips, draperies, coral rock, brain, rock, ice cream flows -- these are some of the other descriptive names of the many formations found in the linked network of caves, recently named one of Canada's best natural attractions and situated just northwest of Qualicum Beach, about 2 1/2 hours by car from Victoria on the east side of Vancouver Island.

One looked like a wolf, others resembled an open-mouthed alligator, a monster's gaping teeth or even a laughing Buddha by a lake.

I confess, however, to having misgivings about this trip.

The idea of scrambling through a network of cold, dark, subterranean passages left me slightly apprehensive. I'd never been spelunking before. What if claustrophobia struck when I was deep inside the mountainside caverns?



 ZOOM

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Anne Mullens, right, and her daughter Kate Baldrey look into the mouth of the "monster" in the 1,270-foot-long Riverbend Cave, which lies in a limestone belt between 475 and 820 feet above sea level.

Ah, but a full life -- and a memorable getaway -- sometimes requires pushing your comfort zone. Besides Sandra Caron, office clerk at Horne Lake Provincial Park, assured me when I booked the family cave tour, the easiest and shortest of the touring options available: "If anyone gets uncomfortable, a guide can have you out in minutes."

Still, when six of us -- a 5-year-old, three teenagers, and two adults -- recently embarked from Victoria on a day trip to the caves, I had no idea how I'd respond.

"Are you going to be OK?" my friend asked as we were about to enter a 2-foot by 2-foot metal entrance that marks the opening of 1,270-foot-long Riverbend Cave and were about to descend a narrow steel rebar ladder about 20 feet to the floor of the cave.

In fact, I was more than all right. Like everyone in our group, I was enchanted and fascinated by this lucky fluke of geology.



zoom

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A close-up view.

Put underground limestone together with dripping water over millennia and you have the geological combo needed to produce some pretty interesting cave formations. Rainy, twice-glaciated, limestone-rich and mountainous Vancouver Island has an estimated 1,400 cave systems, but only Horne Lake allows the public to get a safe and controlled taste of troglodyte life.

Horne Lake Caves consist of seven cave systems in the Beaufort Mountain range of central Vancouver Island, lying in a limestone belt between 475 and 820 feet above sea level. Laid down as an ancient seabed some 300 million years ago, it was upthrust and faulted through seismic activity, formed into marble and worked upon for eons by rain and glacial water. The Coast Salish people evidently knew about some of the caves but avoided them for fear of evil spirits. Settlers and loggers around 1900 began discovering and exploring the first two caves, the 450-foot-long main cave and the 132-foot-long lower main cave.

Heavy tourist traffic in the 1940s and 1950s -- and too many hands touching or stealing souvenirs of the delicate crystals -- stripped the first two caves of their unique calcite features, although they remain open for self-guided exploration. When other caves in the system were found in the 1960s, they were at first kept secret and then gated and locked for controlled access. All the caves have caverns at least three stories tall and Riverbend Cave has a waterfall seven stories high. The whole area became a provincial park in 1971 to protect it. Apart from Riverbend and the two main caves, the other caves in the system are not open to the public and are locked for scientific or safety concerns.

The drive up from Victoria on Highway 19 was surprisingly fast and easy. Yet next time, instead of a day trip, we would plan a weekend camping trip at the park because the campsites on beautiful Horne Lake are so lovely. You can even spend a night in a teepee by the lake. An adventure "ropes" course is at the park and rappel courses are available.

Access to the park, after leaving Highway 19 at Qualicum Bay, is by a winding, gravel-road drive of 10 miles along the lake. We were glad of frequent signs that said: "Horne Lake, keep going." Once we reached the final, upper parking lot, on the hill above the campsites, a springy suspension bridge over the Qualicum River leads to the small cabin from where all the cave tours leave. The 90-minute family tour runs every hour in the summer from 1 to 5 p.m., and is the easiest of four possible tours.

We were outfitted with hard hats and headlamps. The day was hot, but the caves are always a steady 47 degrees, like a walk-in refrigerator, and often are wet and slippery, so making sure we had layers to keep warm and good footwear was essential. When we were all set, two guides, Lindsay Luke and Andrew Munoz, took a dozen of us up the trail.

It was a 20-minute hike straight uphill to get to the cave mouth, punctuated by short stops as the guides discussed the region's natural history and important cave etiquette. The most important rule is not to touch the calcite formations -- but a lumpy knob of brain rock, near the entrance of the cave, is the one exception.

Children have to be at least 5 years old to be allowed into the caves. Our group's 5-year-old handled the terrain, the darkness and the "no touching" rules very well. At one point, we all sat down and turned off our headlamps to experience the absolute lack of light. "That's when I felt a little bit scared," he said.

With sharp drops, uneven, scabbly footing and slippery wet stones, the cave's terrain would be a challenge to anyone with limited mobility or frailty.

But for the rest of us, the towering caverns and glistening calcite was a unique and captivating experience. "It was soooo cool," said my 13-year old who is at the age where little seems to impress.


The family tour took us about 200 feet into the Riverbend Cave, to a calcite feature called the "Buddha." From there it is a belly crawl through a siphon to reach the next set of caverns.

It was enough to whet my appetite for more caving. I'm thinking of coming back for the five-hour Extreme Rappel Cave Tour to explore the full 1,270 feet of Riverbend, complete with crawling through twisting passages and a rappel down its seven-story waterfall.

## IF YOU GO

- Horne Lake Caves Provincial Park and campground are 47 miles north of Nanaimo off Highway 19. Take exit No. 75, turning left, and following the signs for 10 miles along a gravel road.
- From June 24 until Sept. 5, tours run every day. Family tours are \$17 for adults and \$15 for children (all figures in Canadian funds). Family tours run every hour 10 a.m.-5 p.m. and are on a first-come basis. The three-, four- and five-hour tours range from \$49 to \$139 per adult and reservations are required.
- The park and caves are open year-round, but reservations are required for all tours outside the summer season. Conditions, particularly in winter and early spring, can be very wet. Call 250-248-8687 or visit [www.hornelake.com](http://www.hornelake.com)



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Mullens gets a feel for the brain rock, the only calcite formation tourists are allowed to touch, near the entrance to Riverbend Cave.

- Accommodations: More than 100 campsites are available in the park, with lakeside sites \$22 a night. You can reserve online at the park Web site listed above. There are a wide variety of B&Bs, hotels and motels are in the nearby seaside communities of Qualicum Beach and Parksville. Call 888-799-3222 or see [www.oceansidetourism.com](http://www.oceansidetourism.com). **Anne Mullens is a freelance writer based in Victoria, B.C. She can be reached at [akmullens@telus.net](mailto:akmullens@telus.net).**