

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Who turned out the lights?; [Final Edition]

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British Columbia is full of established treasures and unexpected pleasures. Every Saturday during the summer, we will be visiting one of a variety of special places we have discovered that showcase B.C.'s human, geological or ecological diversity. We hope you come along for the ride.

WHAT:

HORNE LAKE CAVES

WHY:

Aren't there days when you'd like to just crawl into a cave? Well, you're in luck, because with more than 1,000 caves, Vancouver Island is considered by many to be the Mecca 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 that is 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, melt-water 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 and it can be. 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.

WHERE:

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. Maps are available at the park office. There, you can also rent a miner's helmet and headlamp. 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 on these.

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.

Our previous cave experiences had been in a couple of the developed "tourist" caves we had encountered on long-ago road trips. These included paved walkways that inevitably led to a large gallery where everyone oohed and aahed over the stalactites and stalagmites, but could never keep the names straight afterward.

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.

MISCELLANY:

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.

ACCESS:

From Vancouver, take a B.C. Ferry to Nanaimo. Take the Island Freeway (Hwy 19) about 60 km north and look for the Provincial Park signs at the **Horne Lake** Exit #75. Turn left off the highway and follow the signs for 12 km along a gravel road. The first parking lot is the Campground and Adventure Camp where you will meet your guides. The **cave** parking lot is one km further.

CONTACT INFO:

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