

Going underground

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Caves appeal to families, extreme adventurers

By Dean Bennett

You've already been crawling and walking through the crystal cathedrals of Riverbend Cave on Vancouver Island for two hours before the rock floor begins to slope sharply down, your voice echoes off the jagged walls, the ceiling soars upward and you reach the lip of the Rainbarrel.

Turn off your headlamp and it's all thick black, deep-space black, can't-see-your-hand-in-front-of-your-face black. Cock an ear and listen to the cave grow around you, one relentless drip and trickle at a time.

Carefully shuffle to the edge of the ledge -- it's a seven-storey straight drop. Far below are the helmet beams of fellow cavers, yellow pinpricks of light.

The guide adjusts the rope and motions you over. Time to rappel into the abyss.

Riverbend, part of Horne Lake Caverns, is one of the signature stops in a growing caving tourist industry.

Seniors, families, 20-somethings, visitors from the U.K., Asia and the U.S., weekenders with a passing speleological interest and extreme adventurers are finding fun this summer by going underground across Canada.

"It's more than just a **cave** tour for a lot of the folks," says Richard Varela, program director for **Horne Lake**.

"A lot of the folks come away with a changed perspective. They've beaten monkeys that they've been carrying on their backs their whole lives."

Horne Lake, near Port Alberni, B.C., offers tours for families with children as young as five right up to the extreme tours, where climbers are urged to take a quick rappelling course before heading over the Rainbarrel. Those who aren't sure can quit and get a refund, says Varela, but he added that once they're in the **cave**, few go out.

"We had 12 refunds out of 8,000 people last year."

Inside, every room is a natural multi-millennial installation exhibit of immaculate karst art: stalactites and stalagmites, as well as exotically named features like bacon strips, brain rock and moon milk, plus a nine-storey sculpture of calcite crystal.

Over the Rocky Mountains into Alberta, Chas Yonge of Canmore Caverns Ltd. has a new group of cavers ready to crawl into Rat's Nest Cave through a tiny hole punched by nature into Grotto Mountain near Canmore.

Carved and sculpted by glacier meltwater over the last million and a half years, Rat's Nest is a four-kilometre cave system of limestone rock around glacial deposits, calcite formations, clear-water pools and fossilized animal bones.

Visitors dress in full caving gear and travel in a figure-eight route through the cave. They have to rappel on ropes for 20 metres and wiggle on their backs or stomachs at a 25-degree decline through a rocky pipe dubbed "The Laundry Chute" to end up in a clear-water grotto.

"The big attraction is the exploration," says Yonge, who has caved for more than four decades around the world.

"You can actually explore something that no one has ever seen before. Apart from the deep sea, it's the one place on Earth where you can go where no one has gone before."

Besides welcoming tourists, the **Horne Lake** Caverns run school tours to teach students the importance of **caves** as underground river systems.

Canmore Caverns operates corporate team-building tours.

In Ontario, cavers can embark on a self-guided tour of Scenic Caves near Collingwood, including the ice cave, a crevasse so deep that snow and ice stick around until early summer.

At Val-des-Monts, Que., visitors can grab a headlamp and trek through the Canadian Shield's largest cave with LaFleche Adventures, where hibernating bats await in the Lyse Gallery.

Prices for cave tours across the country can range from \$20 for basic family-oriented visits to about \$140 for extreme adventure excursions. Most cave tours run during the spring and summer. Some close down over winter. Call ahead to make reservations if possible.

On the web:

www.hornelake.com

www.canadianrockies.net/wildcavetours

www.sceniccaves.com

www.aventurelafleche.ca

www.cancaver.ca