



Cango Caves: The Discovery of a New Section

Description

In 1973 the Atlantic Underwater Club, of which I was a member, was approached by the South African Speleological Society (SASA) to explore a water filled sump at the then explored end of the famous Cango Tourist Caves near Oudtshoorn, South Africa. This sump had recently been discovered by a team of cavers with no diving experience.



The exploration team

So, in early June, I arrived at the sump with a small team of divers and cavers. We had travelled through the well-trodden tourist section and the beautiful, newly discovered section called Cango 2 that had access restricted to a handful of cavers. The sump was situated on a lower level of the main cave. It was a small and unimpressive pool of water flowing from beneath a rock wall and on down a stream passage, into the blackness.

Our goal was to ascertain whether the sump led to a further section of unexplored cave passages. It was decided that Peter Breedt from SASA and I would make the first attempt at a breakthrough. The horizontal passage was very tight and totally water filled. 6 metres in was a small chamber with an air

space and then the passage dipped below the water surface once more. While I was an experienced diver, this was totally new to me and I found these tight passages, in total blackness, claustrophobic and intimidating. I moved into the next passage. Fortunately the water was flowing towards me, thus keeping the visibility good.



The Cango Sump

While, due to the fine clay-like stream bed, the water visibility behind me was zero, I was unable to look back let alone turn around in the tight passage. I was using a small diving cylinder that I held in front of me and I bit onto the diving regulator very hard. Looking ahead, I could see the passage continuing invitingly onwards but it was partially blocked by stalactites. After a short struggle I found the passage

too restricted for further penetration so I reversed back to where Peter waited for me in the tiny chamber. He warned me that the air was getting bad and so we returned to the main cave where the rest of the team greeted us with relief as we had no method of communicating once underwater. After all the effort and much trepidation on my part, I had only penetrated about 20 metres into the stream passage.

After lengthy discussions with the Cango Cave's management, it was decided to install a pump at the sump and discharge the water downstream, in an attempt at dropping the water level sufficiently to allow access to non-divers. This, in itself, was a big undertaking as a heavy duty electrical cable had to be carefully laid through the perfectly preserved Cango 2 to the sump. Fortunately there was already a power supply in the tourist section of the cave. The pump was very heavy and required a huge effort to get it into position. This was successfully achieved, the water level was dropped and the passage was enlarged by digging down through the clay floor and removing the stalactites. As a result covers eventually broke through into a large chamber above the stream passage of unimaginable beauty and this was, without much imagination, named Cango 3.

Fast forward 5 years to 1978. The surveying of Cango 3 was progressing slowly due to the fact that the survey team lived in Cape Town, a 5 hour drive from the cave and it took up to 18 hours of backbreaking toil to travel from the cave entrance to the survey position, do a day's work and return to the entrance. It was, therefore, decided that a small survey team would camp in Cango 3 for 4 days.

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Testing Air Quality

Once the survey team and all our equipment and food was through the stream passage, the pump would be switched off, allowing the sump to flood and thereby sealing it off from the tourist cave to maintain the natural environment. At that point we were isolated from the outside world. Besides the task of completing the survey we had plenty of spare time to explore the cave and take photographs. Even the best written words and well taken photographs cannot begin to describe the feeling of awe and privilege of being part of the first cavers to explore this natural wonderland. In this world of perpetual darkness, other than for our torches, and no change in temperature or weather, we lost all concept of time and routine. The total, almost oppressive, silence was like nothing I had ever experienced before. It was like being alone in a Gothic cathedral. To quote from Jules Verne's "Journey to the Centre of the Earth", we had reached "A world within a world". Due to the relatively high concentration of carbon dioxide in the air, a common feature in a sealed cave environment, we found that our breathing rate and heart rate increased and our physical output was affected.

The calcite formations ranged from pure white to various shades of golden brown. While calcite is pure

white by nature, it can be coloured by various minerals as the surface rain water seeps into the cave, slowly dissolving the limestone in the process. These formations can take millions of years to form. They sparkled beautifully in our torch lights. Due to the high humidity in the cave, the formations were wet, creating the effect of a living cave. In some places the cave floor was perfectly flat and smooth where calcium rich water had deposited calcite over millions of years. The most amazing and delicate formations are called helictites. According to Wikipedia, a helictite is a speleothem (cave-formed mineral) found in a limestone cave that changes its axis from the vertical at one or more stages during its growth. Helictites have a curving or angular form that looks as if they were grown in zero gravity. They are most likely the result of capillary forces acting on tiny water droplets, a force often strong enough at this scale to defy gravity. I got some amazing photographs of these formations.



Stunning Calcite Formations

While the straight line distance from the tourist cave entrance to our furthest explored point where the cave was blocked by a rockfall was only 2.5 kilometres, it was a hard and very tiring trip, especially when carrying heavy equipment. This made our 4 day stay in the cave a great success from a productivity point of view.

What an unforgettable experience. I will never take such privileges for granted.



Where the team slept



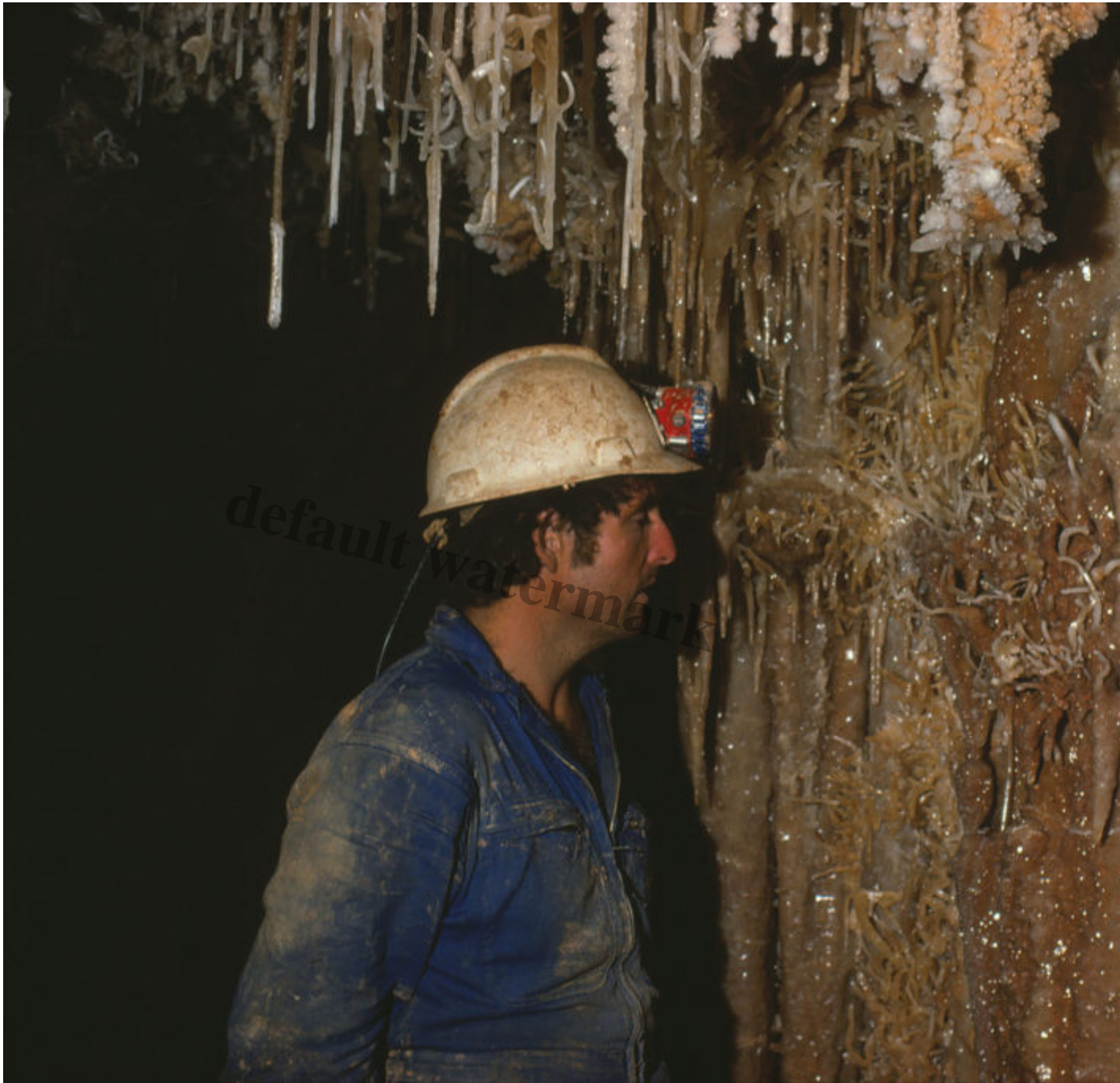
The Cango OK Stalactite



Perfectly Flat Calcite Floor



Long Delicate Calcite Formations



Charles inspects formations never previously been seen by a human



Cango 3 pure white formation



Cango 3 survey



Large Chamber



Dripping Water

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Category

1. Articles
2. Cave Diving

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Author

kerryn

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