

100 m below

By Catherine Duffett

We surveyed our surroundings, and what we saw took our breath away. There were knobbly columns of white stalactites that hung from the cave ceiling like oversized chandeliers, glittering like jewels in the light from our head torches. Some were like giant icicles, others were thin straws, and others looked like rippled blankets of stone. Of equal beauty were the stalagmites that rose from the ground. It was as if we were in a secret underground palace.

I realised that it was such a rare privilege to see such wonders. We were about 100 metres below the surface in one of the most beautiful limestone caves in the world. I could faintly hear the dripping of water in the cave that had formed these stalactites and stalagmites over hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

As acidic water slowly seeped through the rocks above, it carried dissolved minerals. When it reached the open air of the cave, the minerals formed calcite deposits, gradually creating the stalactites that surrounded us. As the water dripped onto the cave floor, the majestic stalagmites slowly grew upwards towards the stalactites above.

To our left was an underground waterfall, with water cascading over rocks into a narrow stream below. The stream was surrounded on either side by high rock walls.

We turned our torches off, and there were audible gasps from my friends. It was as if there were thousands of twinkling lights set into the roof of the underground castle. These tiny lights were glowworms, the larvae of an unremarkable insect, the flying gnat, which is only found in Australia and New Zealand.

The larvae build sticky webs to catch other insects. Attracted to the light the glowworms give off, insects of all sorts become trapped in the sticky webs, becoming food for the larvae.

We began wading through the stream, the water lapping against the tops of our legs. Pressing our hands against the roof of the cave to help balance ourselves against the rushing water, we slowly made our way through the underground river. At times, the roof of the cave was so low that we had to crouch down, lowering our bodies further into the water. We snaked along the narrow passageway.

Suddenly, there was a splash, followed by urgent shouting. My companion, Claire, had used a stalactite to support herself, but it broke off in her hand. She shrieked as she tumbled backwards and was swept downstream, her arms desperately trying to grab onto something. The blackness of the cave seemed to swallow her up.

Frantically, we quickened our pace, following her shouts for help. We charged towards her. She was struggling in the water, and her head was barely bobbing above the surface.

“I can’t move,” she shouted.

It soon became clear that Claire’s foot had become wedged under a boulder in the river. A few of us desperately tried to lift the boulder, but after multiple attempts, we gave up. The boulder wasn’t budging.

The enormity of the situation was just dawning on me. With the narrow spaces that we were still to pass through, there was no hope of us being able to get her out or even being rescued if her foot was broken. We were panicking. How could we help her?

Then someone shouted, “What if we attach a rope to a harness and loop it around the boulder? We can hopefully pull the boulder off her foot.”

To enter the cave, we had climbed down ropes, and each of us had a harness around our waist to help us safely descend into the cave. It seemed like our only viable option.

Quickly, we formed a human chain along the length of the rope and placed the harness around the boulder. We tightened our grip on the rope and pulled. The boulder moved slightly, but Claire’s foot was still firmly wedged underneath.

We pulled again. This time, I felt the jolt from the boulder shifting. In the dim light of my head torch, I could see relief spread across Claire’s face. She wobbled to her feet and gingerly put weight on her foot. She winced, but she was OK.

In that moment of relief, I realised how different that day could have been if Claire’s foot had been broken.

