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Down the Tin Mine – An Adventure Beneath Devil's Peak

By Paul Smuts

22 adventurous souls, dressed like true miners, gathered for a day of exploration, adventure and a little bit of madness! Hard hats were on, gumboots were firmly in place, and spirits were high as we prepared to tackle the historic Tin Mine on the lower slopes of Devil's Peak.

Our adventure got off to a great start when Rudolf met us with his usual warm welcome and infectious enthusiasm. With such an experienced leader at the helm, we knew we were in good hands.

We headed past Murray Quarry, and what a surprise that was! Having lived in Cape Town for 60 years, I couldn't believe I had never discovered this beautiful and fascinating place before. It just goes to show that even after a lifetime in the Mother City, there are still hidden treasures waiting to be explored.

Then came the real adventure.

We reached the entrance to the Tin Mine — if you could call it an entrance! The opening was so small that it looked as though only a determined porcupine would have had an easy time squeezing through. That was when the shovels came out. Our leaders were properly equipped and ready for action, and, as always, Rudolf led from the front, getting stuck into the digging to open up the entrance. There was no standing around watching — the work began immediately.

Once the opening was big enough, Jacques volunteered as the official test pilot. If he could get through, there was hope for the rest of us! Fortunately, Jacques disappeared into the hole and emerged on the other side, giving us the all-important green light. One by one, we followed.

The initial squeeze had us lying flat on our backs, wriggling through the narrow opening before suddenly finding ourselves inside a much larger tunnel, and then came the water!

Luckily, most of us had taken the gumboot requirement seriously, because the mine had plenty of wet sections. It was dark, cold, gloomy and wonderfully atmospheric — exactly what you'd expect from an old mine hidden beneath the mountain.

The Tin Mine itself has an intriguing history. It was started in 1911 and its workings came to an end around the beginning of the First World War. Walking through those old tunnels, you couldn't help wondering about the people who had worked there more than a century ago.

And then there were our unexpected residents.

We discovered frogs and several snakes, which appeared to have somehow made their way into the mine. Rather than leave them behind, a few were carefully rescued and returned to safer surroundings.

The darkness also provided the perfect opportunity for some UV-light photography, producing some amazing and almost otherworldly images. Under the lights, the underground environment suddenly came alive in a completely different way.
But then we came across something that changed the mood. Inside the mine we discovered a hiking bag, boots and clothing that appeared to have been left behind for some time.

The obvious question immediately arose: Where was the hiker?

There was no answer.

The mystery was unsettling, particularly knowing that the belongings appeared to have been there for quite some time. I decided it was better not to speculate and reported what we had found to the Rangers, just in case it could be connected to someone who had been reported missing. It certainly added an unexpected element of mystery to an already extraordinary adventure.

After exploring the mine, we eventually made our way back into the daylight — grateful to see the sunshine again!

But the adventure wasn't over.

We walked up towards a beautiful waterfall before heading to another entrance to the mine. This entrance was securely barbed-wired off, and for very good reason. Looking down the old shaft, it was clear that there was a serious drop below.

From the inside, however, we could safely see the shaft and some of the strange history it contained. Over the years, people had apparently thrown all sorts of objects down into it. Among the discoveries were razors, shoes, wallets and even an old gold watch. It was like looking down into a time capsule — a strange collection of forgotten objects telling stories that we'll probably never know.

And then, after all the crawling, squeezing, digging, climbing, muddy boots, dark tunnels, snakes, frogs and mysterious discoveries, it was time to celebrate the way every good adventure should end: with a well-earned beer!

There was plenty of laughter and storytelling as we reflected on the day's escapades.

A huge thank you and appreciation must go to Rudolf, Jacques and the entire leadership/support team for making this experience possible. Their preparation, knowledge, equipment, encouragement and willingness to get stuck in — quite literally — made the adventure both exciting and safe.

A special thanks to everyone who participated. 22 adventurous people, one historic mine, a few tight squeezes, some unexpected wildlife, a mysterious abandoned backpack and countless memories.

Cape Town never stops surprising us. After 60 years in this beautiful city, I thought I had discovered most of what it had to offer. Clearly, I was wrong. There are still hidden tunnels beneath our mountains, forgotten stories beneath our feet and adventures waiting around the next corner.

And judging by the smiles afterwards… I think every one of us would happily do it all again!

What an adventure. What an experience. What a memorable day underground!

Photos from the tin mine – 25 July 2026






‘n lekker uitstappie na Tripot grot : Deur Johan Uys

Ek was lanklaas in Tripot grot, om die waarheid te sê 19 jaar laas, en ek het dus al heelwat vergeet van hoe dit daar binne lyk. Ek kon wel onthou van die abseil deur ‘n nou gleuf en ook van die boom wortels wat vanaf die dak tot die vloer strek, ‘n hele 17m na onder.

Ons groepie het bestaan uit Sinead, Rudolf, Dylan en ek self. Ons moes nogals vir ‘n tydjie soek voor ons die ingang van die grot bo-op die koppie gevind het. Gewoonlik is dit my taak om die abseil-toue op te stel en dit was dus lekker om dit in Rudolf se bekwame hande te los.

Ek geniet grotte waarin ge-abseil moet word en hierdie een, alhoewel die gleuf waardeur ons moes abseil taamlik knap was, was dit tog relatief maklik. Die toegang deur die hoof ingang na onder sou makliker wees maar as gevolg van ‘n bye-nes in die ingang, kon ons nie daar af abseil nie.

Onder gekom, het ek my weereens verkyk aan die groot boomwortels wat so mooi van die plafon af hang, pragtig verlig met die son wat deur die hoof ingang skyn. Hierdie grot bestaan uit talle gangetjies wat in verskillende rigtings gaan en op verskille vlakke of hoogtes is, en dit maak die grot baie interessant. Ons het elke hoekie en draaitjie gaan verken en in die proses ook die klein derde ingang gevind. Daar is nie veel nou plekkies waardeur ons moes kruip nie en meestal was die vloer ook bedek met sagte sand, wat dit dus makliker op die knieë maak.

Na ‘n besonderse lekker tyd onder in die grot saam met lekker vriende het ons die tou na bo geklim. Die laaste stukkie deur die nou gleuf uit na buite, was darem ook nie te moeilik nie. Wat ‘n voorreg is dit nie om sulke pragtige grotte in ons omgewing te kan hê nie en dit ook te kan verken nie! Wonderlik gewees!

Photos from Tripot cave – 23 May 2026





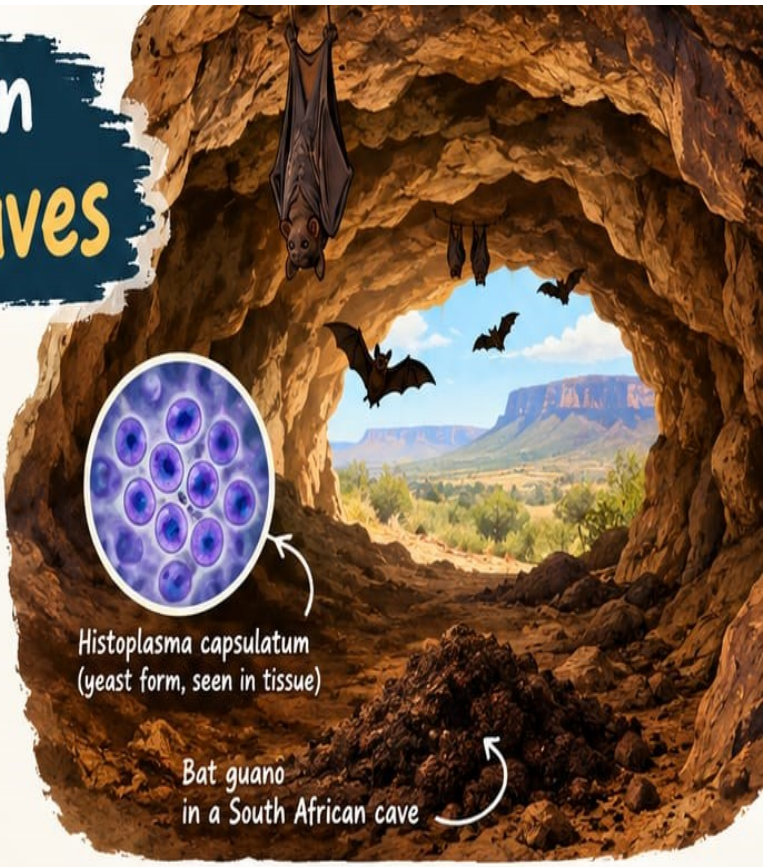




A Hidden Fungus in South Africa's Caves

Small spores. Big impact.

Histoplasmosis is a fungal infection caused by *Histoplasma capsulatum*, a fungus that lives in soil rich in bird or bat droppings. In South Africa, it has been found in caves – especially those with large bat colonies. The fungus grows in the guano (aged droppings) and can become airborne when cave dust is disturbed, allowing people to breathe in the spores.



How it affects people

Most people who breathe in the spores have mild symptoms or none at all. But in some cases, histoplasmosis can cause flu-like illness – fever, chills, cough and fatigue. It can be more serious for people with weakened immune systems, leading to lung or even widespread infection.


Cough


Fever


Fatigue


Lung involvement
(in severe cases)

Key facts



Where it's found
In caves across South Africa, especially those with bat colonies and guano deposits.



The culprit
Histoplasma capsulatum (a dimorphic fungus).



How it spreads
By inhaling airborne spores from disturbed cave dust or guano.



Why it matters
It highlights the hidden health risks of caves and the importance of protective gear for researchers, cavers and guides.



The takeaway: Caves are incredible natural places – but they can also harbour hidden fungi. Understanding histoplasmosis– helps keep explorers, conservationists and local communities safer while protecting these unique ecosystems.

Where the Cave Still Glitters

By Teunis Schlebusch

Four hours inside a limestone cave outside Oudtshoorn, with the Cape Peninsula Spelaeological Society (CPSS), some very old rock, a fair amount of mud, and the kind of company that made it a very worthwhile trip.

THE WALK IN:

A friend and I had driven up from Cape Town the day before with our two sons, both ten, to meet this group of strangers on the road near where we had set out to hike to the Glittering Grotto. All of them are members of the Cape Peninsula Spelaeological Society. Our hike took us through bushveld and in under cliffs that fold and buckle in the way rock does up here, and simply doesn't back home in Cape Town, where the sandstone sits in flat, obedient layers.

FIGURES IN OCHRE:

Before we reached the entrance there were rock paintings. San figures in ochre, faded but unmistakable, and among what looks like mermaids and fish, which is a strange and wonderful thing to find this far into the Karoo, in a landscape that reads as dry as anywhere in the country. A climbing route runs close to the paintings, and every chalked hand or foot brushes past and takes a little more of the pictures away. Nothing here is protected or preserved. It is simply accessible, and that is a problem, and quite sad.

Our boys got their first lesson before we were even underground, standing in front of a painting older than anything they had been told about at school, being shown why nobody was to lean on the wall. Just to see these paintings was well worth the walk to get there on its own.

WHERE THE LIGHT STOPS:

The San lived in the mouth of this cave, and you can still see the deep grooves where they sharpened their tools and spear points, but they never went deeper. The practical reason is light, a technology so ordinary now that I had not thought about it once all morning. Fire smokes, burns out, and occupies a hand you need for climbing. The battery is barely two centuries old, and the lamp on my helmet descends from miners' lamps of a little over a hundred years ago. There may also be a second reason. San cosmology describes a tiered world with a spirit realm below the ground, reached by shamans in trance through waterholes and openings in the earth, with the rock face itself acting as a veil between this world and that one.

AN OBSTACLE COURSE IN THE DARK:

What followed was somewhere between an obstacle course and a very long yoga or Pilates class. A chimney you descend on your stomach, which delivers you to a tight gap you then have to squeeze through standing upright. A mud ladder you climb roughly a storey. A large and genuinely impressive chamber. A water crossing along a cable, with a sling under your backside. Another tight crawl, then another chamber where you pick your way around something that might be quicksand, or might just be an incredibly old mud pit, and nobody was in a hurry to find out which. As someone who never has a requirement to bend twenty degrees in any direction, I was now required to fold myself into shapes I did not know existed, usually while lying in mud. The two ten-year-olds, being half our size and twice as bendy, went through the gaps that had us grunting as if they had been built for them, and then waited on the other side with their lamps pointed back at us, which is its own kind of humbling. Time behaves oddly down there. With no sun there is no sky shadow, and with no shadow there is no clock. Four hours felt like one and, strangely, also like a week.

WHAT THE CAVE PAYS BACK:

Then the cave pays you back. Stalactites hang from the ceiling and stalagmites rise to meet them, built drop by drop as water seeping through the limestone leaves a thin film of calcite behind with every drip. Each one still carries a bead of water at its tip, and when your light finds them the whole ceiling scatters it back at you. That is where the name comes from: the cave glitters because it is still being made.

At the rear of the cave you find rimstone pools, called gours, terraced basins with low stone walls, each one big enough for an adult to sit inside. They are built by water trickling over the rim and leaving a fraction of itself behind, and they have been building for longer than most of recorded history.

MILLIMETRES PER CENTURY:

We were not allowed to touch anything, and we had enough time to stay and properly take it in. The club members gave the boys a proper education in the dark. Not a lecture, just a running commentary of what to look at and why, delivered by people who plainly loved the place and not just the sport.

The formations have names as good as they look. Thin hollow tubes are soda straws. The twisting, worm-like ones that grow sideways and upward in defiance of gravity are helictites. The knobbly cauliflower clusters are coralloids, better known, I was to learn, as cave popcorn. All of it grows at a pace of millimetres per century, which means some of what I was looking at is hundreds of thousands of years old.

We were told what a single fingerprint of skin oil does to a growing surface, and why the one thing you may not do in here is the thing every ten-year-old most wants to do, which is touch it. To their credit, they kept their hands to themselves for four hours, and by the end they were the ones pointing out to us where not to put a boot.

DEEP TIME, AND A GAP ON YOUR STOMACH:

My mind really could not get hold of the deep time this cave represented; the idea kept sliding off. So I reached for something I could make sense of. When Vesuvius buried Pompeii, nearly two thousand years ago, this cave was already ancient, and these formations have simply carried on growing since then, quietly and patiently adding layers in the dark, to arrive at exactly what stood in front of me today.

That is the odd gift of this sport that I have found. It is an intensely physical act and a contemplative one at the same time. You squeeze through a gap on your stomach, then you stand still and find you can't quite get hold of the scale, or the age, of what you are looking at.

THE COMPANY:

The people surprised me. On every caving trip I have joined, the group has been remarkably calm, and our expedition leader, Sinead Hattingh, most of all. It is exactly the calm you want when you are deep underground and genuinely between a rock and a hard place, and it is exactly the calm you want around two ten-year-olds on their first real limestone cave, who took their cue from it and were calmer than their fathers.

The group that went in on this day met as strangers and came out hours later having heard each other grunt, groan and moan through every tight squeeze. It strikes me that as adults we have very few places left to spend time together. Work, home, and a club if you belong to one. This was a rare one: slow, quiet and shared, and worth the drive up to Oudtshoorn on its own.

WHY THERE ARE NO DIRECTIONS HERE:

It also explained something that had puzzled me before the trip. I could not find this cave online, and cavers, or spelunkers, are careful about what they publish. Inside, the reason is obvious. You want people to see these places, because nobody protects what they have never experienced. But the formations are irreplaceable, and a single careless visitor undoes a hundred thousand years. Back home, you can see exactly how that goes at our better known and more accessible caves.

Taking two ten-year-olds in with people who taught them to see the place, and value it, rather than just get through it, felt like the right way round of doing things. They came out talking about how old it was, not how muddy they were. So I will leave out the directions. If you want to see it, find these people who look after it, and go in with them.



Strangers on the road that morning; the same group, hours later and a long way underground.



Coralloids, better known as cave popcorn, on the wall of a crawl. A single fingerprint of skin oil stops a surface like this growing.

Photos from Glittering Grotto – 29 August 2026

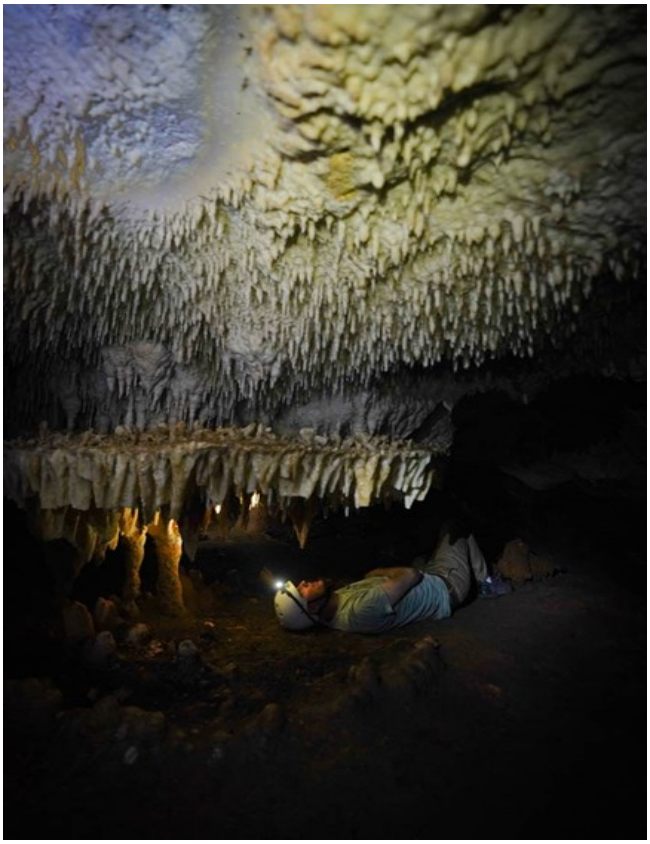
Credit : Bart Love



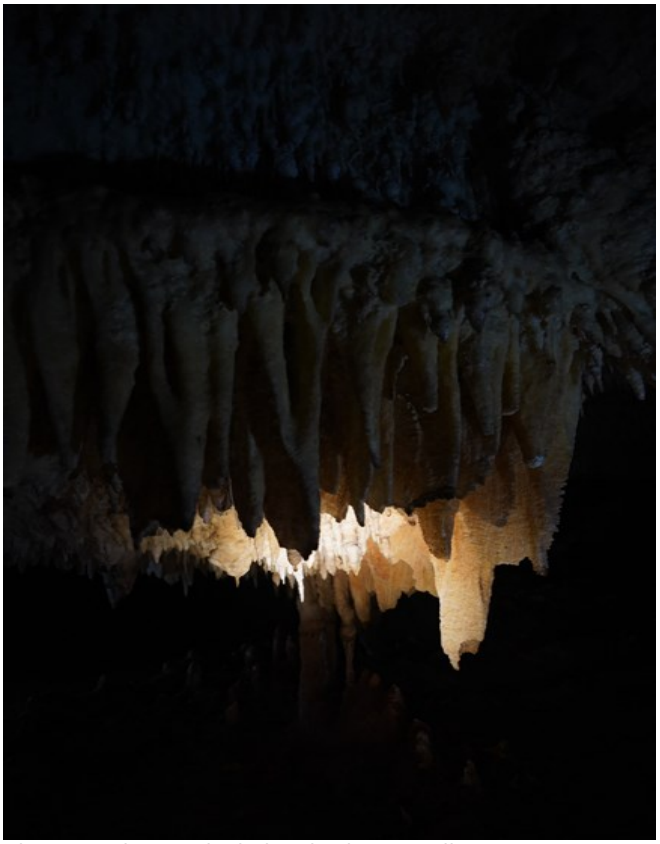
A ceiling fringe, seen at close range. The one thing you may not do down here is touch it.



A rift passage, walked sideways. The scale of the place only registers once there is a person standing in it.



Soda straws: thin hollow tubes, each still carrying its bead of water.



Flowstone drapery, built drop by drop at millimeters per century.



Deep in the system. One headlamp is enough to set a whole ceiling glittering, because every tip still carries a bead of water.



San figures near the entrance, with mermaids and fish among them. Nothing here is protected or preserved. It is simply accessible.

A Day Beneath the Mountain – Caves, Karst and Hidden Gems
By Paul Smuts

There are hikes, there are adventures—and then there are days that stay with you long after the boots have been taken off.

13 September was one of those days - ICUN's Day of Caves and Karst

Eleven keen and excited cavers gathered at Constantia early in the morning, ready to experience a very different side of Table Mountain. Thanks to a permit that allowed us to drive up the Jeep track, we were given the rare privilege of getting closer to our underground playground without the usual long climb. That meant more energy, more time and, most importantly, more opportunity to explore. And explore we certainly did!

Vivarium Cave – The Adventure Begins

Our first challenge was Vivarium Cave, led by Rudolf, whose experience and knowledge immediately gave everyone confidence. This was not simply a case of walking into a cave. We had to leave the beaten track behind, negotiate tight spaces and squeeze our way through the rock. At times, it was a matter of twisting, turning and wondering, "How on earth am I going to get through there?" But that's exactly what made it so much fun.

Eventually, the cave opened into a beautiful hidden space, complete with water and tiny shrimps. Emerging from the darkness to a spectacular view across Orange Kloof was one of those moments that made all the squeezing and scrambling worthwhile. Rudolf was patient throughout, guiding us carefully and helping those who needed assistance. His calm manner and experience made us feel safe while still allowing us to enjoy the adventure and discover things for ourselves.

Cunonia Cave – Getting Tighter!

After a quick breakfast break, we headed for Cunonia Cave.
If we thought the first cave had tested our flexibility, Cunonia was ready to raise the bar!

The passages became tighter and the squeezes more demanding. At one point, I found myself well and truly stuck. There was only one solution—wiggle, twist, breathe in and somehow convince the body that it was considerably smaller than it actually was! Eventually, I made it through.

The younger members of our group were particularly impressive. It was fantastic to see children taking part in the adventure and tackling the challenges with enthusiasm. They seemed to glide through some of the passages that had the adults questioning their life choices! Their involvement also added something special to the day. Seeing the next generation experiencing, appreciating and learning about these remarkable natural environments was wonderful.

Through Rudi's Cave into Bat Cave – A Hidden World Comes Alive

Next came Rudi's / Bat Cave , and getting there was an adventure in itself. We made our way through lush vegetation and forest, pushing and ducking our way towards the entrance. Then, suddenly, we arrived.

As we entered, the atmosphere changed. The sounds of bats immediately reminded us that we were visitors in their world. The cave seemed to come alive around us—a mysterious, beautiful underground environment that felt completely removed from the world above. It is difficult to put into words what makes a cave like this so special. The darkness, the rock formations, the sounds, the water and the feeling of discovering somewhere hidden away from everyday life all combine to create something extraordinary.

A World of Colour Under UV Light. One of the highlights was seeing the cave through UV photography. What appeared to the naked eye as an ordinary dark cave suddenly revealed an unexpected world of colour. The photographs showed striking red, yellow-green and blue-white fluorescence.
We were told that the deep red glow is likely associated with chlorophyll from moss or algae following water seepage.
These organisms can absorb UV light and re-emit it as a deep red glow.

The yellow-green fluorescence is thought to be associated with lichen, with compounds produced by the fungal component responding to the UV light.

The blue-white glow, which appeared only in certain damp areas, may be linked to humic acids washed down from the fynbos soils above and concentrated where seepage water evaporates.

Whatever the precise chemistry behind each colour, seeing these hidden details revealed through UV light was fascinating. It was a reminder that caves are not simply holes in the mountain. They are living, changing environments with their own chemistry, biology and stories written into the rock.

Just when we thought the adventure was coming to an end, there was one more surprise.

Deep Freeze Cave. (The Dungeon)

The name certainly seemed appropriate! This was another fascinating cave, with a dramatic drop on one side that immediately caught everyone's attention. Looking down into the void gave us a taste of what would be involved in exploring this section properly. Definitely one for an abseiling adventure another day!

And that was perhaps the perfect ending to a day that repeatedly surprised us. Every time we thought we had seen everything, another passage, another cave or another hidden feature appeared.

More Than Just Caves

What made the day particularly memorable was that it wasn't only about the caves. It was about the people, the shared experience and the willingness to help one another.

Eleven people arrived as a group of enthusiastic explorers, but throughout the day there was constant encouragement, assistance, laughter and excitement. When someone needed a hand through a difficult squeeze, there was always someone there. When someone discovered something interesting, it was shared with everyone. There was no rush. We had time to stop, look, photograph, learn and appreciate what was around us.

A special thank you goes to Rudolf for leading the adventure with such patience, knowledge and confidence. His experience made a huge difference, particularly when negotiating some of the more challenging sections.
Thanks also to everyone who assisted, shared their knowledge, helped along the way and contributed to making the day such a memorable experience.

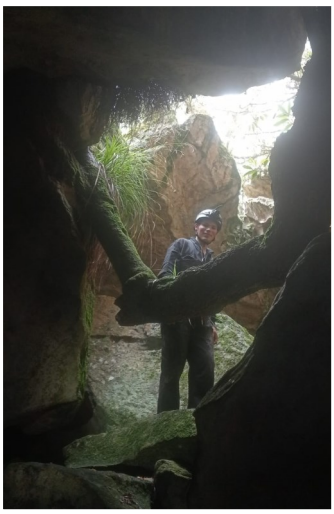
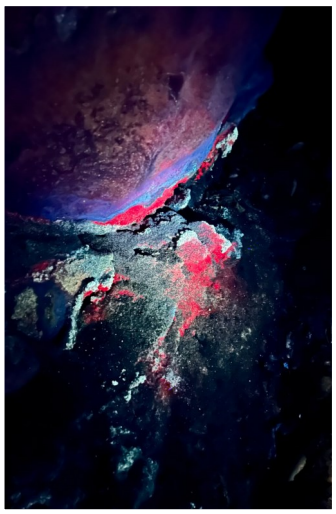
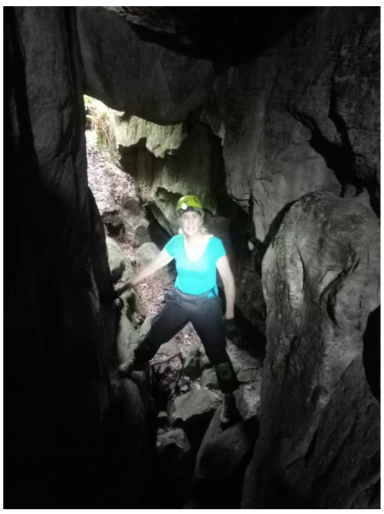
Hidden Gems Worth Protecting

Perhaps the biggest takeaway from the day was just how much beauty is hidden beneath and around our mountains.
The caves, cracks, crevices, water seepages, vegetation and tiny life forms all form part of an incredibly delicate environment.
These are places that should be explored with respect and, above all, protected and preserved.
We were privileged to experience a side of Table Mountain that very few people get to see.
By the time we called it a day, we were tired, dirty, scratched, probably a little more flexible than when we started—and very happy!

What a day. What an adventure. What a privilege.

The ICUN Day of Caves and Karst was more than a day underground. It was a journey into hidden places, a test of courage and flexibility, a lesson in nature and geology, and an opportunity to share something truly special with like-minded adventurers.

Some days are simply recorded on a calendar, others become memories and 13 September 2026 was definitely one of those days.

Welcome to CPSS by Andre Grove

Allow me to introduce myself. For many of you, the name Andre Grove may be unfamiliar. Those who have been caving for a few years may remember it, or perhaps we've shared a trip underground.

Although based in Gauteng, my connection with the Cape Peninsula Spelaeological Society goes back many years. I've always had a soft spot for the caves around Oudtshoorn in the Western Cape. If you enjoy spectacular formations, they're hard to beat.

One of my more memorable visits to the Oudtshoorn area involved searching for a cave with a former CPSS chairman. Unfortunately, we found an extremely unhappy beehive first. Being from Johannesburg, I confidently assumed I wasn't allergic to bee stings. It turns out Western Cape bees never received that memo. The result was an arts festival being brought to a temporary standstill while organizers tried to determine whether the afternoon's featured performer would still be able to take to the stage. Outside the caving world, I've spent the past 35 years performing professionally as Andre the Hilarious Hypnotist, so there was a fair amount of concern. Thankfully, the show went ahead. Judging by my swollen face, however, I looked more like the Phantom of the Opera than a hypnotist.

Cape Town also taught me that mountain distances are measured very differently. I once set off from Kalk Bay convinced I was on my way to a cave. Hours later, after several hikers assured me I was "almost there," the mountain simply kept going. The cave won that day.

Those stories probably tell you everything you need to know about me. I enjoy caves, I enjoy adventure, and I have an unfortunate talent for finding trouble along the way.

When I was asked to serve as President of the South African Speleological Association (SASA), I was honored. I was also disappointed to learn that CPSS had become largely inactive. Credit must go to the previous committee for keeping the club's finances and administration in excellent order. That gave us something solid to rebuild from. I made myself a simple promise. Before my time as SASA President comes to an end, I want to see CPSS back where it belongs, underground, exploring caves, welcoming new members, and creating new stories.

I'm delighted to say that journey is already well underway. Parry Pavlis has provided experience and continuity. Sinead Hattingh has enthusiastically stepped back into leading meets. Joshua van Coller has brought energy and fresh momentum. Together, they've formed a committee I couldn't be more proud to work alongside.

Whether you're a long standing member or joining us for your very first trip, welcome to CPSS. By joining the club, you also become part of the South African Speleological Association and a national community of cavers who share a passion for exploration, conservation, and discovery. I look forward to meeting many of you, preferably underground. If not, perhaps beside another beehive.

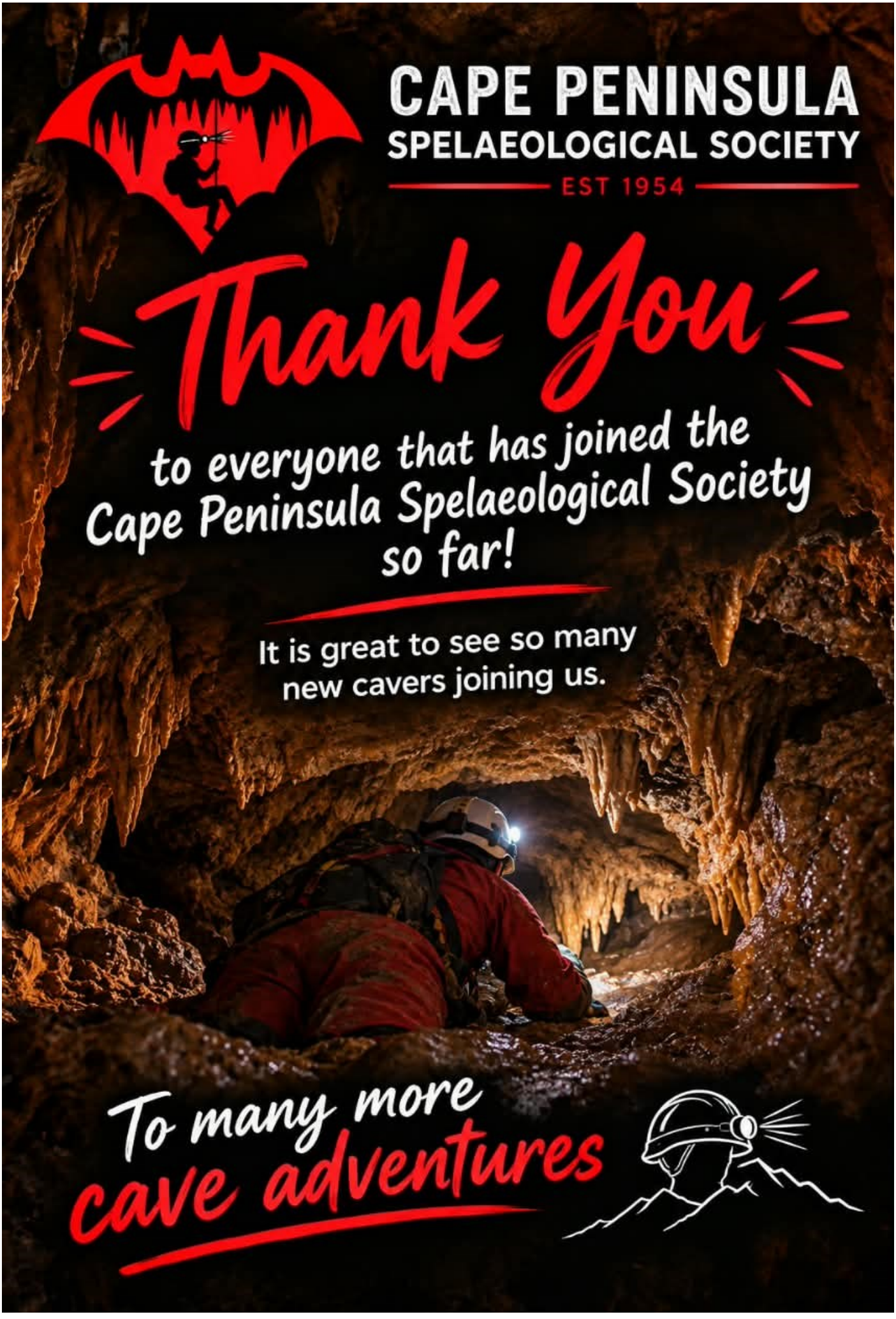
Kind regards,

Andre Grove

President South African Speleological Association (SASA)






CAPE PENINSULA
SPELAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY
EST 1954
Thank You
to everyone that has joined the Cape Peninsula Spelaeological Society so far!
It is great to see so many new cavers joining us.
To many more cave adventures