



Trip Review: Pungalina, the Gulf Savanna by Richard



Water-filled passage in Elsa's Cave

Photo courtesy of Daryl Carr

Over June 2006 I drove to *Pungalina Station* in the Gulf Savanna region of the Northern Territory. Along with 7 members of the Victorian Speleological Association, we were to undertake cave exploration.

The drive was an adventure in itself: 7000km return, 7 days each way, \$1000 of petrol. Not all of the drive was tedious. I camped in magnificent forest by the Darling River, went Bilby watching in Charleville, saw the "Crocodile Dundee" hotel in McKinley, and visited Lawn Hill National Park.

Good roads all the way, except after the remote *Hells Gate* roadhouse, where petrol was a staggering \$1.87 a litre. The last 170km stretch took 7 hours after cars got bogged in mud and stuck on sand-drifts.

Finally we were there, camped by a billabong, with 2½ weeks food. No quick trips to the shops here! It wasn't what I had expected: open forest with grasslands, not the red center desert. Birdlife was abundant, fresh-water crocodiles were spotted, the fishing was fun, and Larry from the Robinson River Aboriginal Community visited, displaying his turtle catching skills.

Caving took on 2 main aspects; (1) either exploring, photographing, surveying and hunting for new passages in known caves, or (2) exploring the surface for new caves! This area was first explored by cavers in 2005, although the land owner Owen already knows a number of good caves, it has great potential for new discoveries.

Ballroom Cave was discovered on the 2005 expedition, and surveyed to 400m in length with 2 entrances. By the end of this trip, it was extended to over 1km in length, and 3 entrances. Tim was doing postgraduate work on invertebrates (bugs!) in caves. A number of ingenious traps were set up: a plastic cup was dug in to ground level and anti-freeze was added. The bait was a small lump of tuna wrapped in a cloth and suspended over the cup. The bugs would smell the bait, and fall into

the cup as they were attracted to get it.

Totem Pole Cave has been known to the owner Owen for years. On dusk, hundreds of bats would fly from the entrance to feed overnight. Olive Pythons also found this an excellent feeding time, catching the bats as they flew past. Bat counts were undertaken: numbers of *ghost bats* was 80; the small *orange horseshoe bat* estimated at 500 - 700.



Owen with an Olive Python

Elsa's Cave was surveyed, and Paul spotted a new grovelly passage up which I disappeared, returning 15 minutes later babbling about a lake filled chamber I found. Subsequently named Lake Elsa, after Owens daughter, we later swam across it, and down a water filled passage to another water filled chamber we named the Poolroom.

A number of new small caves were found. Some were open entrances hidden in the long grass. Others required a few hours of rock removal until someone could squeeze through. This is the most exciting part of caving, going somewhere and seeing something that no-one has seen before. Sometimes being the only member of the group who could fit through, I am the only person to have been into 1 or 2 of these new discoveries!

Caving is unique, and Pungalina presents cavers with unique opportunities.

We were privileged guests of Pungalina. To arrange your own trip to Pungalina, including optional flights from Moorabbin, contact Pungalina Safaris : www.pungalinasafaris.com.au ph(03)9882-4262 akirk@ozemail.com.au