

NEWSLETTER MONTHLY



Trip Reports:
Wollangambe Creek
Claustral
Routeburn Track, New Zealand
Kepler Track, New Zealand
Kites Over Kosci

What Else We've Been Doing:
An Island Adventure
New Zealand
Oman

January 2009

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Cover Shot:

Johan on the Routeburn Track, New Zealand.
Photo by Liz Cowen

Last Meeting

Due to the loss of venue, the last meeting was held at Dave's place. Unfortunately only Jim and Dave were present, so the meeting mostly involved watching Top Gear.

Next Meeting

Monthly meetings are temporarily suspended due to the loss of our venue.
The committee are currently seeking alternative accommodation and will advise in due course.

If anyone is able to assist, please let us know.

Quote of the Month

“We all have gray hair” - Dave forgetting that not everyone is as ancient as he is.

Announcements

Fees are due for next year. We will be finalising the cheque for ASF at the March meeting, so please pay your subs before then. The subs have remained at \$70. Payment options include:

Cash – to Jim Crockett

Cheque – made out to Metropolitan Speleological Society Inc.

Bank Transfer (preferred option) – BSB is 062021, Account Number is 000901421 and be sure to include your name in the message.

There has been an update on the bet between Brett and Dave. Due to the unfortunate cancellation of the November Jenolan trip, the bet has been postponed. It is also worth noting that Brett has lost the bet. As such, the next Jenolan trip that goes ahead, Brett will be supplying lamb shanks (cooked in the slow cooker) and a bottle of Mead.

Trip Reports

Wollangambe Creek - 26th December, 2008

Canyoners:

David Stuckey (TL), Debbie Gillman, Kathy Garth, Leanne Garth, Annette Malicki, Cathi Humphry-Hood, Rod Smith, Jim Crockett, Sharon (Jim's mate).

What on earth does Boxing Day represent anyway?

One of the many dilemmas to ponder during our annual float down this excellent river. “You know Rod...the girls outnumber us 2:1 today?” Another of life’s little games. I think the universe is definitely playing with our minds today. I described to Cathi the history attached to certain members of our party and the general weirdness of it all. None-the-less, the sun was shining brightly and the water was clear. A little like my mind actually, since I had completely abstained during the Christmas festivities...or did I just dream that too?

We assembled at the sandbank and started to inflate our air mattresses. Rod’s wetsuit refused to close, Jim’s lilo refused to stay inflated, my water bottle was missing and Annette was late!

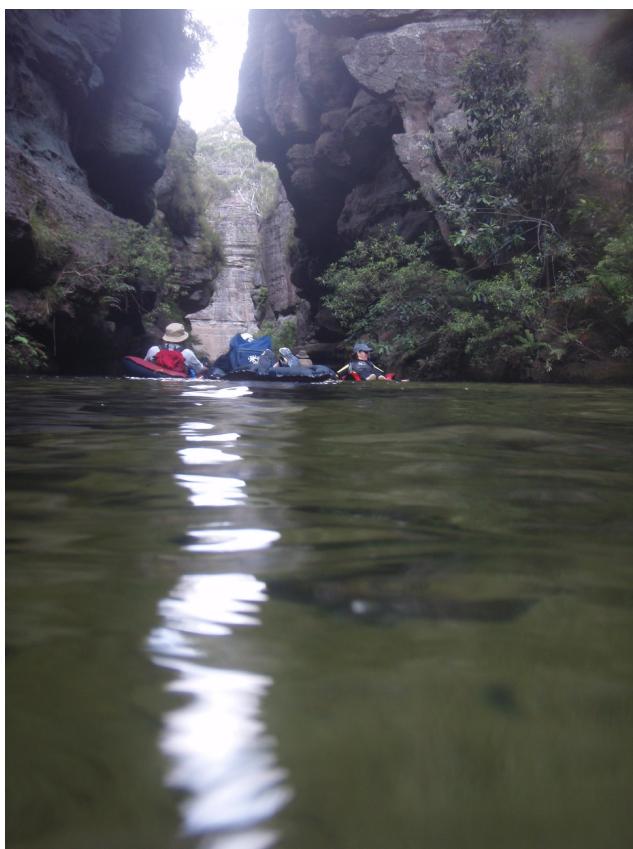
Once we were all together, the expedition started. Usual laughs watching first time lilo riders trying to stay upright. We paddled our way downstream, Rod filming along the way. It really was a brilliant day. Stress was non-existent. I delivered my annual ‘backyard’ speech as we glided across the big swimming hole bounded by fantastic sculptured cliffs. ie: “Wouldn’t you like one of these in your backyard...hey, this is our backyard!”.



The Wollangambe Crowd

Photo: Rod Smith

We were making very slow progress...just the way we like it. Lunch was taken on the huge sloping boulder under the overhang. The billy was boiled and sandwiches prepared. What luxury! Some more scrambles and paddles brought us to the junction with Kelvinator Canyon. I took the twins upstream for a look at this magnificent canyon. It really is first class. The water was absolutely freezing in the dark section but we soldiered on to the waterfall. Several glow worms were observed. Back at the Wollangambe, we revelled in the warmer water. Those of the party who remained at the junction waiting for us found the water to be of a different temperature and offered a different opinion upon getting back in. We pressed on towards the exit track. A quick snack at the exit disclosed that water had invaded my packet of jelly snakes making them very slippery indeed. They were now too realistic to eat and were consigned to the rubbish bag.



One of the beautiful Wollangambe pools
Photo: Rod Smith

The tree root climb section was rigged with a simple belay for those who requested it and we brought the party up safely. The heat of the day began to make its presence felt as we ascended from the depths of the valley. We made the fire trail and gulped down our water before shouldering packs once more and trudging back to the car park.

Once again the Boxing Day canyon descent served its purpose...to de-stress and relax us following the frenzy that is Christmas. And all in our extended back yard.

David Stuckey

Claustral - 27th December, 2008

Participants: Rob Clyne, Tim Grimes, Nathan Timms, Bonnie (Nathan's better half), Cathi Humphery-Hood (guest appearance), Rod Smith (TL)

It's unusual to see so few people heading into Claustral. One car was there when we arrived, and another showed up with two canyoneers heading in while we waited for the rest of our group. Maybe it was the threat of thunderstorms that were predicted for later that day, it certainly had Cathi worried.

Once Rob arrived we discussed our options. Should we do Claustral with potential thunderstorms on the way, should we pick a different canyon, or should we just pack it in for the day. Nathan and Tim, once they joined us, voted for sticking with Claustral, so the decision was made.

By this time the weather didn't look too bad, so Cathi decided to walk in with us with her gear, just in case. When we approached the point of no return Cathi decided not to risk it and turned back. It's always a good decision to pull out if you're not confident for any reason, the canyon will always be there next time.

And so the five of us went a little further before donning wetsuits. Nathan and Bonnie only had spring suits, so it wasn't surprising that the water felt extra cold to them.

We arrived at the abseils and Nathan rigged the first drop with his rope. I had my rope but, since I was last down, we just pulled Nathan's rope through for the second drop. The same repeated itself for the third drop. Nathan was probably happy about that since he was convinced at the last moment to bring his rope as a back-up for mine and was moaning about carrying it all day without it being used. Instead I carried the rope that wasn't used.

We had lunch just after the Thunder junction. Nathan and Bonnie wanted to have a quick lunch and then get moving to keep warm. I was warm enough to unzip my wetsuit, but I actually unzipped it because it was a bit tight. I must have been a bit slimmer when I bought it.

We arrived at the exit around the same time as the first roll of thunder. We didn't need to hurry, but with the weather closing in, we weren't going to hang around unnecessarily either.

Part way up Rainbow Ravine I found a particularly slippery rock, and then the hole beside it. As my foot disappeared between a couple of rocks I pitched forward and landed on the 3 inch diameter log that has probably been used as a foot step to help people up. The log hit me across the bottom of my ribs. But, the log came off second best since I walked away yet the log cracked under the impact.

The rain started as we were finishing the climb out of the top of Rainbow Ravine. By the time we'd reached the top of the Camels Hump we'd had enough of the rain and were thinking that Cathi had made the right decision.

The rest of the walk was uneventful. Soon we were back at the cars, packing up, removing leeches, and heading for home.

Another great Clastral trip.
Rod.

Day 1: Following a two-hour bus trip to the start of the Routeburn Track, the previous sunny weather turned to rain – which was totally consistent with the wise words of one of the hut wardens: “if you can see the mountains, it indicates that rain is on the way...and if you can't see the mountains, it indicates that it is raining”. The rain however couldn't dampen our spirits and so, off we tramped, in our best wet-weather gear along with a variety of international trampers – with which we would become great friends over the following 3 days.

With a delightful walk through a beech forest and crossing numerous swing-bridges, our digital cameras were very busy. After a couple of hours, we arrived for lunch at Routeburn Flats Hut or, Jim's hut as it would be known. A couple of hours after lunch, slowly climbing into the head of a steep-sided valley, we arrived at the spacious Routeburn Falls Hut – it was December 31 and New Years Eve! It was great fun, sharing an extensive assortment of pre-dinner nibbles and two-litres of ‘quality-shiraz’ amongst eleven trampers – a real New Years Eve kitchen party. Jim stayed as long as he dared, before having to leave our hut and return to Routeburn Flats hut – in the driving rain and with diminishing light, down a ‘treacherous track’ all by himself!



From L to R: Jim, Liz, Johan, Saskia, Rod.
Photo: Liz Cowen

The Routeburn Track is 32kms long and traverses Mount Aspiring and Fiordland National Parks in the South Island of New Zealand – a 3 day walk of exceptional beauty. After meeting in sunny Queenstown, we had one or two tasks that needed to be completed before we commenced the Routeburn....such as dining out, enjoying one or two cappuccinos, eating yummy NZ ice-creams, shopping for food, picking-up our Routeburn tickets and purchasing last-minute items such as pack-liners.....



From L to R: Peter, John, Saskia, Kurt, Hester, Kiwi Kev, Dominique, Cali Kev, Liz, Rod
Photo: Saskia Van Der Lely

Day 2: Jim arrived at our hut – evidently he didn't get washed away whilst descending the track the previous night! Still raining and the weather a little colder and wilder, we commenced the crossing of the alpine pass. Superb scenery presented itself immediately – the low clouds making the icy crags look very foreboding. The track ascended the valley walls, passing the beautiful Lake Harris. Some hours later, we crossed the pass at Harris Saddle/Tarahaka Whakatipu (1255 metres) and behold, the sun came out, just in time for lunch! Did I mention the fantastic scenery of the Hollyford valley and surrounding peaks? Jim and Rod did a quick bolt to the summit of Conical Peak whilst the remainder of our party continued to Mackenzie Hut.

Kepler Track, New Zealand - 5th - 8th January, 2009

To finish the day, we enjoyed a ‘refreshing’ swim in Lake Mackenzie and later, enjoyed some excellent ‘Vegas’ card games, courtesy of Californian Kurt, using our trail-mix as gambling chips – I’ll throw in four chocolate chips raise you two peanuts.... That night, an inspection of Liz’s boot, showed the sole to be on the verge of a complete delamination! But we still had 12 kms to walk tomorrow!!! Would Liz’s boot go the distance? Can we give Liz one of Jim’s volleys to wear and stuff it full of socks to fit? How about tying-on the sole with climbing tape?

Day 3: In the morning, we couldn’t see the mountains, which indicated that it must have been raining? Another delightful walk through a moss-forest with fantastic views of waterfalls – we had to walk past a raging 170m waterfall – like walking through a cyclone of water! Lunch was enjoyed at Howden Hut, then the final walk to the shelter shed at ‘The Divide’. Liz’s sole on her boot, miraculously stayed on for the entire day, only to finally fall-off when she stepped off the bus at Milford.



The end of Liz's boot
Photo: Jim Crockett

Two days ‘Rest and Recreation’ in Te Anau including a superb meal at Olive Tree Café, brought our Routeburn trip to an end. In summary, a superb 3 days of wonderful scenery in the company of good friends....it doesn’t get any better than that... But gee, those waterproof pack-liners came in handy!

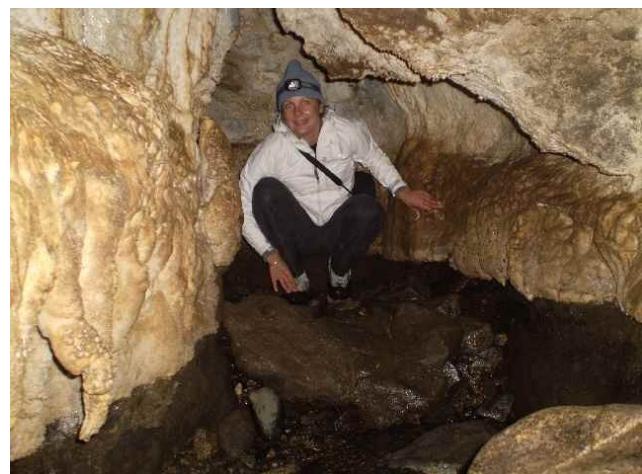
Johan Verhagen

Attending: Jim and Johan (TL) with speleological guests Liz and Saskia.

The ‘Kepler Track’ is yet another spectacular walk in Fiordland National Park, traversing a circular route for over 60kms - we completed the track in 4 days.

Day 1: To start the Kepler Track, you literally just walk out of the main street of Te Anau and follow the lakeshore.....unless you have a water taxi booked to take you across the lake to Brod Bay. Yes, we did! The water taxi deposited us on the shore of Brod Bay – being a little beach with rainforest behind and we found the Kepler Track was just metres away. Immediately we were presented with wonderful walking through cool, lush beech forest – ferns completely covering the forest floor. The track ascended past limestone bluffs and as we ascended the ridge, the cold wind increased. Jim’s wet pants though, weren’t because of rain, but because of a leaking camelback! Upon leaving the tree line, we had to dress-up in our fibrepiles and wind proofs. Wild weather or what! Nice to reach Luxmore Hut – situated all on its lonesome on the alpine slopes under Mt Luxmore.

That afternoon, the speleological urge took hold and we were compelled to explore the Luxmore cave – having an opening of several metres across and with a small stream inflow, apparently the cave extends for 2000m. Jim, the previous day, had explored the Te Anau caves, remembering that Ken Keck had gone there some years ago – and now Jim and Saskia wanted to explore the full 2000m of the Luxmore cave with their tiny led lights. Jim and Saskia ventured off and I imagined one or both, falling down some shaft and Liz & I having to arrange a rescue party and to carry their packs for the rest of the track! But finally they returned from their journey-to-the-centre-of-the earth with tiny led lights. Now we can say that we have truly caved in New Zealand!



We'll make a caver out of Saskia yet!
Photo: Jim Crockett

That night, the weather increased its intensity, delivering 100kmh winds + rain and shaking the hut – actually very exciting!

Day 2: Next morning, the hut warden forbid us to leave the hut due to the poor weather – a bit worrying to see two German trampers returning to the hut, after their attempt at the alpine crossing failed due to such strong wind and rain! However, at about 1.00pm and with the permission of the hut warden, we teamed up with an Alaskan couple (to Peter and Kate, this weather was ‘nothing’ to them) and we departed for the alpine crossing – all rugged up in all we could wear! A few other trampers turned back for Te Anau.

What a great day – a superb alpine crossing along exposed ridges with fantastic views accompanied with strong winds + rain. Interestingly, a real walkover for the Ukrainian trampers who did it in shorts!



The weather doesn't look that bad.

Photo: Liz Cowen

The descent from the alpine ridge into the valley and Iris Burn Hut took ages, or more precisely, 96 zigzags through the forest. Gee, bit of a long haul that day. Meanwhile, Peter and Kate, who were planning to camp out, eagerly swapped their tent for the luxury of the dry hut. That night, we finished-off the last remnants of snacks, Tim Tams, nibbles and Shiraz whilst watching a demonstration of Peter’s yoga ability – ever seen a 62 year old guy put his foot behind his head?

Day 3: Flat walking along the Iris Burn (Burn is Scottish for a creek). Sunny weather too along with a cool walk through an extensive and beautiful ‘fern forest’ to Moturau Hut. Absolutely superb. That afternoon, a swim in Lake Manapouri – how good was that!

Day 4: An easy walk through the forest and along the river, for only one and a half hours to Rainbow Reach – and to our little bus to take us back to Te Anau and you guessed it, the Olive Tree Café. A fun evening of course, comprising a top meal and the official presentation of ‘Certificates of Completion’ for two ‘Great’ Walks. What a top trip.....

Now, next years NZ trip will comprise.....

Johan Verhagen

Snowy Mountains 'Kites Over Kosci' - 24th - 26th January, 2009

Attending: Rod, Jim, David and Johan (TL) with guests Leanne and Kathy.

This trip continued the traditional ‘Kites over Mt Kosciuszko’ walking trip - in fact, it was trip number 4 - with the usual assortment of unique kites. Some kites displayed their battle scars from the previous three Australia Day trips – nothing that a little stitching, patching and re-engineering couldn’t fix!



Kathy and Leanne, or Leanne and Kathy

Photo: Rod Smith

Day 1: The words 'epic', 'hard' or 'huge' really couldn't describe our first day.....which started with a leisurely early morning drive to Jindabyne for a late breakfast and coffee (Jim managed a free coffee by chatting-up one of the girls serving in the café), then a fine ride up the chairlift to Thredbo Top Station followed by a stroll along the track to Rawsons Pass. A real walkover for those fit trampers who recently threw themselves at the sensational Routeburn Track in NZ (you'll have to read about that elsewhere in this issue).

Despite the intense winds - strong enough to push us off the elevated walkway! - the views were spectacular. From the track, we could see the main range of the Australian Alps extending into the distance while all around, was an alpine environment of aged granite boulders and low lying heath and wildflowers. So good to be walking along, with Australian flags flying from our packs, breathing the fresh mountain air on top of Australia!

We stopped for lunch in a little sheltered spot just beneath the sloping bulk of Kosciuszko and later walked to Wilkinson's Valley - our usual campsite, offering plenty of fresh water, swimming, flat camping, views of distant crags and a steady wind for our kites.



The gang on Mt Townsend
Photo: Jim Crockett

Day 2: A clear day with a light breeze and Mt Townsend 2185m was calling us. Leaving our tents set up in Wilkinson's, we headed toward the craggy summit of Townsend. Bit of a bumble really, just a bit of a wander up the valley and we were there. What better place for lunch? How good were the views from the summit? Superb! We descended via the southern flank of Mt Townsend and walked a circuit to the west of our campsite. Finished the day with a swim in an alpine stream. All good.



Jim's patriotic volleys (cover in Australian flags)
Photo: Rod Smith

Day 3: Australia Day! This was the day for flying kites from the summit of Mt Kosciuszko - with big Australian flags flying from the kite strings. Lots of people on the summit too, all enjoying Australia Day.

A few people even thanked us for our display of kites and Australian flags. Gilly, the NPWS Ranger was there too, with her kite!

A top trip - next year will be 'Kites over Kosi 5' - hope to see you there.

Johan Verhagen

What Else We've Been Doing

Apologies to Jim, this report should have gone in one of last year's October newsletter, but somehow got missed.

An Island Adventure – September - October, 2008

I had been wanting to go on an overseas trip for some time and finally the opportunity arose so my plans were made and they included lots of adventure activities but also some relaxing. My first stop was Manila airport but that was only for an 11 hour wait for my domestic flight. After arriving there at 6.30 in the evening I passed the time making many new friends and trying to stay awake. My flight finally left in the early hours of the morning that took me to Cagayan De Oro where I was met by my friend Fedz.

She was going to be my personal guide, my interpreter as she can speak 3 languages and travelling companion for the next 3 weeks.

The first day was spent in Cagayan De Oro which is a major city on the northern end of the island of Mindanao, which is the 2nd largest island in the Philippines. Well it was certainly a very interesting city. The roads were very chaotic with a variety of vehicles sharing the roads. These included motorelas which are basically a 250cc motorbike with cabin attached at the rear and can transport up to 8 people, at usually slow speeds then there were Jeepneys, motorbikes, taxis buses, trucks as well as tricycles and pedestrians all trying for a share of the road, with very few road rules but it all seems to work some how, probably because the vehicles speeds were generally just slow and most drivers were courteous.

The first day was mostly spent resting after the long journey from Australia which took at least 24 hours. Our intention was to use the local transport as much as possible as this was the best and cheapest way to get around but of course not always the fastest so one had to be prepared to wait and endure long journeys on buses etc.

We left Cagayan De Oro to go on the 1 hour bus ride to go to Fedz's place to meet up with her family. This was located in a small village close to the coast line bounded by mountain ranges, banana and coconut plantations and rice paddies.

We had a day of rest before the first adventure of the trip which was to go white water rafting on the Cagayan De Oro river. So we went back to Cagayan De Oro to meet the river guides and travel in the Jeepney to the start of the rafting. We had an excellent day on the river on grade 3 and 4 rapids with Fedz's mother and 2 sisters in the rafting team. Our rafting guide said she was half kangaroo as she was born in Australia with a filipino mother and aussie father and was rather cute. It was an interesting journey as we got to see where the Japanese hid in caves above the river during WW2 as well as seeing Chameleons swimming in the river and in between the rapids was quite peaceful floating down the river.

After another day of rest our next adventure was to go to Camiguin Island to spend about a week there relaxing between some action activities. Camiguin Island is a volcanic island about 64km in circumference located about a 1 hour ferry trip of the coast of the northern Mindanao port of Balingoan. The 7 volcanoes on the island rise dramatically from the sea in a very lush tropical environment. Camiguin island has the most number of volcanoes per sq km than any other island on earth. It has more volcanoes than towns and more than 20 cinder cones over 1000m.

The first day on the island was spent doing a circular trip around the coast of the island. We visited the beautiful Katibawasan Falls with a drop of 70m amongst the jungle which would make a nice abseil trip. Had a swim in the Ardent Hot Springs which is pleasant 39 Deg C amongst a lush tropical setting. Then visited the Sunken Cemetery which is marked by a large cross floating on a pontoon 100m from the shoreline. The Cemetery slipped into the sea after the earthquake of 1871 in which many people were killed. We were very lucky to have timed our visit to the island at the same time as their Lanzones festival and so were able to watch many activities of the festival such as dancing, singing and sample local produce including the Lanzones fruit which the festival is named in honour of. The Lanzones fruit tastes like a mixture between a lychee and a lemon and Camiguin is reputed to have the sweetest tasting fruit in the world.

The next day we organised a guide to take us up to the top of the Hibok-hibok volcano which is the highest volcano on the island at 1320m and last erupted in 1951. Due to the heat and humidity we had arranged a very early start for the Trek and left for the climb at 6.30am with 3 of us on one motorbike for a scary ride to the start of the trek. The climb starts off amongst natives farms and then gradually runs into the jungle as the climb becomes steeper. With the sweat pouring off and having to constantly re-hydrate you quickly gain altitude and the views become impressive.

About halfway up, the climb was becoming too difficult for Fedz and she had to pull out so the guide and myself continued, luckily for her as the track became even steeper before we finally made the top.

Here the view was magnificent with a 360 deg view of the island and of the volcano crater. The next day was a rest day and also allowed us to transfer to other accommodation closer to the beach. At the new resort we arranged for a trip by boat to go to White Island which is a small sandbar island about 2km off the beach. Again it was a very early start and we were transported by native fishing boat to White Island which was not really sand but consisted of finely crushed coral pieces. I was surprised at how many people were already on the island when we arrived at 7am. The water around the island was very warm and clear and so a lot of time was spent swimming before we decided to leave as the temperature was already getting too hot to bear.

The next couple of days were spent drinking, eating, swimming and relaxing at the beachfront resort. We had a few rest days before another early start was organised but very very early this time.

We got up at 4.30am to get a tricycle ride to the main highway and then another hour bus ride to Cagayan De Oro. We then boarded a coach which took us through the middle of Mindanao climbing many mountain passes and crossing many gorges. There we got to see many native villages along the way and the native people going about their simple daily chores. The interior of Mindanao is quite mountainous including Mt Apo a volcano which is the highest peak in the Philippines at 2954m and is set amongst primeval forests. The trek to the top takes about 4 days to complete.

The bus trip took about 8 hours before we reached Davao which is a sprawling city and is famous for the growing of the Durian fruits of which the odour is pungent but the taste is said to be pure delight. Here we met up with 3 of Fedz's brothers and we all had dinner in a Filipino restaurant sampling some strange local foods including Kinilaw which is a raw fish dish.

We stayed in Davao city for a couple of nights before flying out to Cebu. At Cebu we took another 2 hour bus ride south to the village of Moalboal which is a resort area popular with divers. I had booked into a relatively new resort and this turned out to be an excellent place to stay. Right on the beach with outstanding views of the nearest island called Negros with views of the Mt Kanlaon volcano on Negros. This resort was the base for a heap of adventure tours including canyoning, caving, volcano climbing, river climbing, trekking and much more. My intention was to go canyoning and caving. The canyoning was a definite goer but unfortunately we could not caving because we needed a minimum of 4 to make a trip go.



Jim canyoning by Montezuma Falls
Photo: Jim Crockett

The canyoning was organised for the next day. We left the resort in a truck and headed south for 2 hours along the coast before leaving and heading into the interior of the island. The truck stopped amongst jungle and native farms and then we walked for about 45 mins to arrive at the top of the first pitch of about 25m with an excellent flow of water down the Montaneza falls. This was Fedz's first ever abseil and she handled it very well with the help of our 2 guides. This was followed by 2 shorter pitches, a water slide and then the main pitch of 30m and lastly a jump in. It was an excellent canyon with plenty of warm water to bathe but only shallow pools. The canyon ended with a small thermal pool coming from under the creek that we could soak in and further along an even hotter spring in fact too hot to sit in.

There was an awesome barbecue lunch and beers waiting for us at the finish kindly cooked by our driver. How's that for service 2 canyon guides plus 1 driver/cook for 2 clients. This was certainly a very enjoyable day of canyoning one I will never forget. The 2 guides were really funny guys.

The next day we caught the minibus back to Cebu city to spend a night there. We decided to keep close to the centre of the city and the motel we were staying adjoined a major mall which meant that we did not have to venture outside too far into the heat. We spent the day relaxing, drinking, eating and shopping and we ended the day with a sauna and invigorating massage each.

Later that night we boarded an overnight ferry and were accommodated in a large area filled with over 200 bunk beds, no privacy here at all. We both soon relaxed but I was having some trouble sleeping so decided upon a walk around the ferry which ended up in the bar and I was soon enjoying a bottle of San Miguel Red Horse Beer which is a local strong beer. This gave me enough courage to have a go at the videoke machine and attempt to sing 3 songs. I don't remember what they were. That was enough to put me to sleep and I woke up as we were just approaching the port in Cagayan De Oro. It was a real battle to get ourselves, the luggage and our shopping off the ferry and somehow battle to get a Motorela ride and eventually board the bus to go back to Fedz's place.

The next day I had to say goodbye and return to Australia. This has got to be the most adventurous trip I have ever undertaken, it is certainly a challenge using the public transport just like the locals but definitely great fun and you learn a hell of a lot about the culture of the Philippines the country of 7000 islands. I would definitely consider going back as there are more volcanoes to climb, canyons to descend and caves to visit awaiting. It is relatively cheap and the people are friendly.

Jim

New Zealand - 3rd - 10th January, 2009

And so it was, with a heavy heart, that I shouldered my pack and headed off on my own. What adventures awaited me? What obstacles lay before me? Would I succeed or succumb? Am I over-dramatizing the whole thing?

I boarded the bus out of Te Anau, bound for Queenstown. It was an uneventful ride. The driver, thankfully, dropped me at Frankton Marina, where I was to pick up my hire car. I walked the length of Sugar Lane, which runs through the marina, and didn't find Wan-a-car. I turned around and found it on my return leg. No wonder I missed it, it's probably the smallest office I've seen. No other dramas as I took possession of the Nissan Pulsar which was to be my transport for the coming week.

First stop, pick up the gear I'd left in Queenstown. Next stop, Shotover Jet. This had been recommended by Johan when we'd first arrived in Queenstown, so I decided it was time to give it a go. If you're going to do a jetboat ride, this is the one to do. The Shotover River gets rather narrow just downstream from where they launch, and the drivers get the boats within a foot of the cliff walls on either side as they go hurtling down the river. Out the other end of the canyon section and the 360s begin. They tend to run at two speeds, stop and flat-out. While they're stopped they give some info about the boats, the river, the company and anything else relevant. While they're flat-out you just hang on. There are three more runs through the canyon section, including a 360 or two. Once the ride was over I purchased the video footage, I'll have to have a look at it.

I then proceeded to Arrowtown, a nice historic village from the gold-mining era, where I had lunch. And checked out the lolly shop. The home-made fudge was delicious. Then over the Crown Range, a great, scenic, winding, drive, to Wanaka.

I was booked into the Manuka Crescent Motel, but I didn't have a map, so it took me a while to find it. It's within walking distance of town, if you don't mind a fifteen minute walk. A quaint little place. You wouldn't want to be taller than me and staying in the room I stayed in, you'd be hitting your head a bit.

I wandered into town to check my email, phone Chucky (Daniel Clearwater, a NZ canyoneer) to hopefully arrange catching up, look into doing a canyoning trip the next day and then get some dinner. While waiting for my food a Swedish lady sat down and started chatting to me. It wasn't as good as it sounds, she was on her honeymoon and she was getting food since her husband was unwell and back at their motel. Still, it was great to have a chat to someone since the food was taking a long time to arrive.

Sunday the 4th of January I went down to chat to Deep Canyon. The only trip they were running that day was down Niger Stream. I decided to postpone my canyoning til they were running a Big Nige trip (Niger Stream with an extra 4 abseils). Instead I headed for the west coast. Ros (one of the owners of Deep Canyon) told me about some canyons around Haast Pass that I should have a quick look at as I went past. I first stopped at Robinsons Creek, which looked great. The advantage with these canyons was that from the end of the canyon to the car would take less than a minute. Others that looked potentially very good included Wilsons Creek, Cutter Creek, The Trickle and Imp Grotto. I'd have to go back to do some of these.



The terminal face of Fox Glacier
Photo: Rod Smith

Checking the time I decided I could get to Fox Glacier, so I pushed on. I arrived at Fox Glacier in the early afternoon and walked towards the terminal face. The main track goes to a viewing area, still quite a distance from the terminal face. From there it's a lovely view of the glacier, but I wanted to get closer, and I could see that some people were closer. Most of these were with a guide, but I followed a group of tourist along another path that took us closer to the glacier. There were lots of signs telling people about the dangers of rock and ice fall, but no barriers. I enjoyed marvelling at the rough beauty of the place, but couldn't stay too long as I still had a long drive back to Wanaka.

The next morning I went back to Deep Canyon and joined a Big Nige trip. On the bus ride the guide was asking about everyone's experience. The usual responses were coming back, "done it once a long time ago", "done an abseil or two" or "done 98 different canyons". Besides the 2-piece 5mm wetsuit, we were also given neoprene socks, a neoprene hat to wear under the helmet and a thermal top. They obviously didn't want us getting cold. They also had shoes for everyone, but I stuck with my volleys.

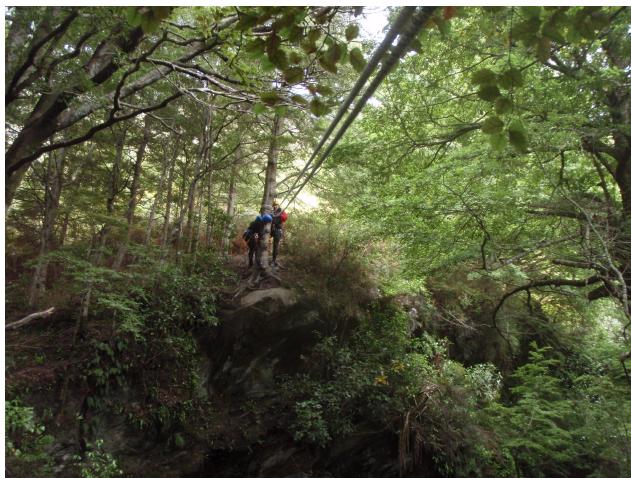
The walk in is uphill and steep, but short. It wasn't long before we were suiting up and abseiling into the canyon. The volume of water is higher than what we're used to over here, but it didn't take long to get used to. The canyon wasn't deep or particularly narrow, but it was quite scenic and dropped rapidly. I lost count of the number of abseils, jumps and slides we did, they seemed to just keep coming. Before lunch one of the others had a blow-out of the shoes he was wearing. Taping them up didn't work, so he resorted to wearing the neoprene socks over the shoes, which got him through.



Just a bit of wet!

Photo: Rod Smith

At the exit there's another, optional, jump of about six metres. Another of our group made a mess of it which I didn't see. But I knew something was wrong when our guide started running down to the pool. Apparently from the top it looked like he'd hit face first and our guide was expecting to see a bloody nose. Fortunately he took most of the impact on his chest, which winded him, but did no other damage.



The flying fox

Photo: Rod Smith

We exited the canyon from the opposite side to that we went in on. Although not a problem (the bus was actually on the side we were on and the track crossed the stream at the bottom), they'd decided that groups should cross the canyon, so a flying fox had been set up. I wasn't complaining, another bit of fun for the day.

All-in-all a great day. I talked to Ros at Deep Canyon when we got back to discuss the option of doing Wai-Rata as my hundredth canyon. It would have made a great hundredth, it involves a helicopter flight to get in and a jet boat ride to get out. But, as it turned out, the water level was too high all week.

Tuesday morning I opted for a sleep-in, followed by an easy day. I started at Stuart Lansborough's Puzzle World. This included a large maze, a number of optical illusions, including some of the tricks used in the movies, and a variety of other oddities. From there I went to the Toy and Transport Museum. This just appeared to be someone's collection(s) put on display, but, admittedly, a very large collection. There is the equivalent of four aircraft hangars full of cars, planes, fire engines, toys, sewing machines, farm equipment, etc.

Wednesday I decided to get back into a more active pursuit and headed along the Mt Aspiring road. Ros had told me about a walk from the end of the road that was worth doing, so I went to check it out. The road was dirt most of the way, which didn't bother me, but when the bridges stopped to be replaced by fords, I wasn't so sure. A number of people had pulled over before the first ford, so I did likewise. I walked up to the ford to see how bad it was, and a softroader went straight through while I watched. I decided to test out the hire car and went for it. This was the first of seven fords, but none of them caused me any problems.



The swing bridge to start the Rob Roy track.

Photo: Rod Smith

From the end of the road the track continues up the valley for approximately a kilometre before splitting. Continuing straight ahead will take the walker to the Mt Aspiring Hut, I turned right onto the Rob Roy track which immediately crossed the river on a swing bridge. About an hour up the track, following a tributary, brought me to the Rob Roy Glacier viewpoint at the end of the track, just above the tree-line. The weather was a bit miserable, so I didn't stick around too long. After crossing the swing bridge on the way back the track passes through farmland, and there was cattle hanging around. This included two cows getting a little frisky. Note that I said two cows, not a cow and bull. I'm not sure if there was a bit of confusion or something else going on, I didn't stick around to find out.

Since it was now apparent that I wouldn't get into another canyon while in Wanaka, I booked myself into a half-day climbing tour. So, next morning, I joined Ben (a tourist from England) and our guide to do a few single pitch climbs. The first area we went to (Riverside) we started with Dog Leg, an easy grade 12. This was followed by Right Ascension, a 14, and Infinite Inveigling, a 16. From there we moved to Hospital Flat. Here we started with Big Corner, a fun grade 14. Ben went first and scrambled up very quickly, but with dubious technique. His reasoning was that, as he said "I was scared I was going to get scared but it wasn't scary". The next climb was a 17 called Head Banger Arete. A found out exactly why when I banged my head, thankfully not too hard. The top was the hardest bit, as Ben said "it got more vertical at the overhanging bit". Lastly Ben and I had a go at leading on a 12 called Do I Have To?

Friday, and it was now my last day in NZ. I checked out of my hotel and headed for Queenstown. On the way I stopped at Arrowtown for lunch, and to go to the lolly shop. Did I mention the delicious home-made fudge? Then to the airport, where I found that my bag hadn't gotten any lighter, it was still 28kgs. The difference this time was that I was charged for the extra weight.

While waiting for boarding to start I noticed a couple that had obviously just arrived and were on the same plane as me. I know I shouldn't generalise, but with the guy wearing thongs and the girl in ugg boots, I immediately thought they probably weren't the brightest lights on the harbour. They went on to prove that that was the case. There was an elderly lady in a wheelchair, so the lady working at the gate took her to the plane just before boarding started. The couple, seeing no-one at the gate, decided to scan their own boarding passes and go through the gate before it had closed and locked. I couldn't believe it! Sure enough, about a minute later, they were sent back into the airport. An interesting bit of entertainment to finish off my New Zealand trip.

Rod.

Oman - 11th - 22nd January, 2009

Participants – Rod Smith, Sarah Payne

After 14 hours on a plane we landed at Abu Dhabi International Airport at 5:15am. By this stage I'd had almost no sleep in over 24 hours and a thumping headache. It was still 5 hours til my 55 minute flight to Muscat. Unfortunately I was able to see everything the airport had to offer within 10 minutes. A couple of cafes, half a dozen duty free shops and a chemist where I could get some panadol.

On the surface the airport looked nice, but one look at the toilets showed that it wasn't that good. They also had trouble getting people onto the plane for the next leg of my journey. I was happy to be on my way, even though it was a little late.

It's the first time I've arrived at an airport and there's been someone waiting for me with my name on a sign. The novelty's already worn off. He wasn't very talkative, but we got moving quickly, which was good.

I arrived at our accommodation to be greeted by Sarah. Things were starting to look up. We had a short wait before we were being picked up again to go diving. I informed Sarah about my lack of sleep, and to keep an eye on me to make sure I didn't fall asleep underwater.

The drive to the diving was a good opportunity to observe what driving in Oman was like. Driving seems to be the only adrenaline sport the locals partake in. The road rules are treated as suggestions, indicating is done with the hazard lights, the horn is used extensively (there's a sign at one roundabout telling people not to use their horn!) and yet you only have to wear a seatbelt if you're sitting in one of the front seats. I'm glad I wasn't doing any of the driving!

We arrived at the dive centre in one piece and met the dive master. His name is Chad and he was originally from the USA. We filled in the appropriate paperwork, got our gear together, met another diver who would be joining us and jumped onto the boat. The boat captain knew two speeds, stop and go, so it wasn't too long before we were at the dive site.

Considering how little diving Sarah and I had done, we did rather well. In the end it was a 43 minute dive, Chad expected about half an hour. We saw a turtle, lobster, moray eel, starfish and a large array of fish. Certainly not the kind of dive you could fall asleep during.

After dinner I faded quickly and was asleep by 7:30pm. The next morning I was feeling great, but Sarah wasn't, apparently my snoring kept her awake most of the night. We were picked up early by Suleiman, who was to be our guide for the next six days. Suleiman is an Omani who had been working there for about three years. He knew no English when he started and had picked it up from all the tourists he'd travelled with. Although his English isn't perfect, he was easy to understand and quite talkative, happy to explain all about his native Oman.

Our first stop was Wadi Taap. The walk in was undulating (a word Suleiman had only learnt on his last tour, and was keen to use). We were planning to go for a swim and then have lunch, but the water didn't look overly appealing. That didn't stop us having lunch. On the drive back towards the coast we were stopped by a wayward goat, then the sight of two young, barefoot boys running up the dirt road to move the goat. They then wanted to shake hands and invited us to coffee, we declined. Sarah wanted to take their photo, but they asked for some money for it, so we declined that as well.

Our next stop was TiWi for a cold drink, before heading up Wadi TiWi. We made it a fair way before we were stopped by a funeral. The road was blocked and we couldn't drive through. Walking may have been an option, but we were happy to respect their customs and turn around. From there we went to White Beach where we would camp for the night.



From L to R: Rod, Cedric, Suleiman
Photo: Sarah Payne

We set up camp at the end of the beach. He we were joined by Cedric, another of the guides, who wasn't taking any tourists out at the time. Cedric is from Reunion Island and was hired to take French tourists around. We got a small camp fire going (impressive considering the complete lack of vegetation) and watched the sun set followed by the full moon rising over the ocean. As the moon rose through the sky the tide started coming in. When a wave came up high enough to send water under our vehicle, we decided it would be better to move camp before we got soaking wet. An hour later one of Suleiman's friends from TiWi delivered some bread for our breakfast in the morning and took my camera battery which was flat and needed charging. The Omani people are certainly friendly and helpful.

In the morning we saw that moving camp was indeed a good idea, the remains of our small camp fire had been spread out by the waves. Sarah and I went for a swim before we had breakfast, packed up camp and said goodbye to Cedric. Our next stop, Wadi Shaab. Wadi Shaab is a great place to visit, once you walk up for a while you get to a pool where we jumped in for a swim. We swam upstream for a while until we reached a cave that was really quite spectacular. It was possible to go further upstream, but difficult, so we just hung around there for a while, exploring the cave, and doing a water jump or two. Suleiman said this was a very popular spot for tourists, but we had the place to ourselves. It wasn't until we were walking back towards the car that we saw other people heading for the pool.



The beautiful waters of Wadi Shaab
Photo: Sarah Payne

After going through TiWi to pick up my camera battery we made our way to Sur, a reasonable sized coastal city, where we had a looked at a Dhow (style of boat) shipyard and museum before lunch. After that we went to Ras Al Had and Turtle Beach where we would later that night watch the green turtles laying their eggs. We arranged timing for viewing the turtles then went to set up camp.

Well after dark we arrived back at Turtle Beach where we joined a tour to view the turtles. A 1km walk to the beach and we could just make out a couple of turtles digging their holes, mainly by the sand being flung out at regular intervals. The guide's assistant found a turtle that had started laying eggs and we went in for a closer look. Quite an amazing experience. And while we were watching another turtle made her way out of the surf and headed up the beach.

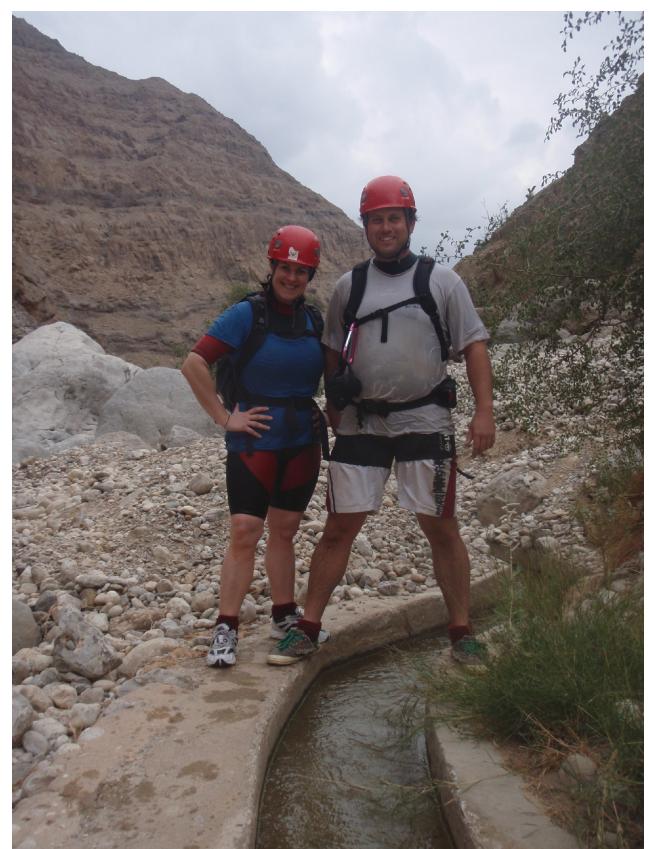


Sarah and Pete getting splashed by Cedric's water jump
Photo: Rod Smith

The next morning we headed for Wadi Bani Khalid and my 100th different canyon. Even though I wasn't feeling too good that morning, nothing was going to stop me doing the canyon. We met Rob (the tour company owner), Cedric and Peter (who would be joining us for the rest of our tour). Suleiman took one of the vehicles to the end to pick us up, the rest of us were going through the canyon. Canyoning is something the locals aren't interested in, so it's only tourists and ex-pats that do it. As such, the sport is quite young in Oman. I'm not sure if the locals knew what we were doing when we put on wetsuits and headed downstream.

We didn't take a rope or harnesses, they wouldn't be needed. Rob was the only person in our group who had done the canyon, and that was a number of years ago, so we were all looking forward to the experience. It wasn't too long before we found water. The temperature is warmer than in the Blue Mountains, probably around 16 degrees. There were complaints about the cold water, but I thought it was lovely. It wasn't long before we found the first waterfall, about 12 metres high and with a single bolt at the top. We climbed around it to a ledge about 6 metres above the water where we jumped in. Sarah opted for the lower ledge, still about 4 metres high. There were a couple more waterfalls and plenty more jumps as we headed downstream before finding a suitable ledge for lunch.

All the nasal enemas were helping to clear out my sinuses and I was feeling better. Lunch was suffering a bit from water getting in, but we managed to get enough dry food each. Shortly after lunch was the longest swim of the day, like swimming one of the Wollangambe pools. The second half of the canyon, while still quite beautiful, wasn't as exciting. We realized we were approaching the end of the canyon when we started seeing the fallage (aqueduct) system. Not too much longer we found a small dam. At this point Suleiman found us and we followed him, plus a helpful local, back to our vehicle. We all piled in and drove back to the start and the other vehicle.



Rod and Sarah at one of the aqueducts
Photo: Cedric

After sorting out our gear we headed for the desert and a Bedouin family where we had dinner. The hospitality of the Omanis is quite astounding. The meal has some ritual about it, including only eating with your right hand, but not too much, and there was plenty of food. Sarah and I were feeling rather lucky, since that morning the two of us had four guides. We also got to experience rain in the desert. It was a persistent drizzle that reminded Sarah and Peter of England. For the first time we pitched the tents instead of sleeping under the stars.



Our desert camp
Photo: Sarah Payne

The next morning we awoke to grey skies, but no rain. After we had breakfast we bid farewell to the Bedouin family. We also bid farewell to Rob and Cedric who were heading off across the desert for a bit of a recce. We instead went for civilization, our first stop Nizwa, the old capital. While Suleiman did some food shopping, Peter, Sarah and I checked out the old fort, now a tourist attraction, and the Souq (an open air market).

When then moved on to Bahla. We looked at a new hotel that's been set up using traditional building techniques to create an interesting mix of old styles and mod-cons. It looked like a nice place to stay. Then Suleiman took us to his family's home for lunch. We got to meet his sister and some of his brothers. Sarah also met his mother, and was surprised by her knowledge of English. After lunch we went to a lookout over the city. Although the view was quite spectacular, the lookout was spoiled by the amount of litter. The last stop before leaving Bahla was the fort that they were in the process of restoring.

From Bahla we headed for Jebel Shams, the highest mountain in Oman at 3075 metres, and in eastern Arabia. Although we didn't get to the top, we camp on a plateau at approximately 2400 metres. The weather closed in a bit with some isolated showers, and the wind chill was making it unpleasant while we waited for dinner to be cooked. We decided it would be warmer inside one of the tents, so we all migrated to my tent to play cards. We taught Suleiman some card games including Bartok, Sevens and Shithead.

In the morning we found ice covering the washing up water that had been left out. There was also snow on top of Jebel Shams, which doesn't happen often.

While we were getting ready a couple of locals showed up and set up shop in case we wanted to buy any of the local merchandise. They didn't stay long, presumably since we basically ignored them while we continued to get ready. It was then a short drive to the village and the start of the Balcony Walk, with a stop at the lookout to have a look at where we'd be going. The locals at the village see a lot of tourists, and make an income from selling their wares. We were the first tourists that morning, and already had our bags packed, so we were almost at the start of the walk before they even realized there was a possible sale to be made. We kept walking and they gave up quite quickly, presumably thinking they could get us on the way back. However, unlike most people, we weren't coming back that way.

The Balcony Walk is called the Balcony Walk because it's between two cliffs, the one on the left rise up to 200 metres above us, and the one on the right dropping up to 400 metres below us. Although there's quite a slope down from left to right, it's quite a wide balcony, so it certainly wasn't scary. The end of the Balcony Walk is an abandoned village that is spectacular mostly because of it's location, and the start of the via ferrata. This via ferrata is mostly vertical and closely follows a route that the locals used to solo to get back up to the plateau above us. I'm quite crazy, but I don't think I would have soloed it!



Sarah enjoying the via ferrata
Photo: Rod Smith

I was getting excited, my first via ferrata! Peter would go first to demonstrate techniques and help Sarah, who went second. I followed, loving every second of it. The initial climb rises over 100 metres to a ledge wide enough that we didn't need our cows tails, and there wasn't anything to connect them to anyway. The second section of the via ferrata is not as high, approximately 50 metres. From the top it's a short walk back to the road where we met Suleiman and off we went.

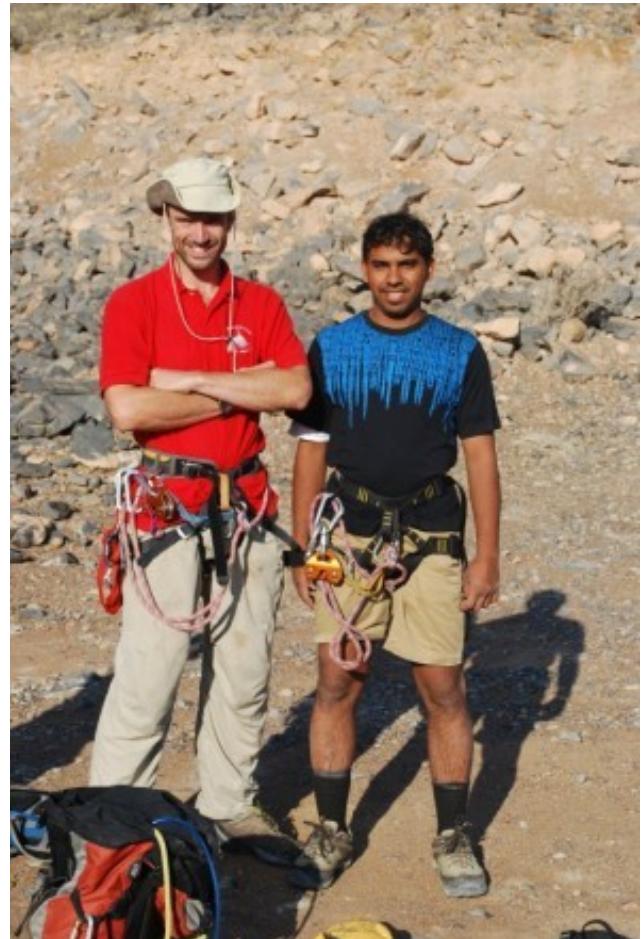
The Balcony Walk and via ferrata is at the top of Wadi Goul, also known as the Grand Canyon of Oman. We drove a long way to get to the bottom of Wadi Goul. Here we found one of the few villages left in Oman without electricity. They also make carpets/rugs in the traditional manner in a shelter made mostly of palm fronds over a rock and steel tube frame. The mobile phone on top of one of the rock pillars looked a little out of place. Here we had coffee and dates, and we each bought a carpet.

After driving across quite a high pass and down a goat track road we camped on a football (soccer) pitch near Balid Seet. Football pitches were all over the place, consisting of flat ground (no grass) and two goal posts. This one also had the road going through it. The goal posts new the end we camped at became an impromptu clothes line.



Sleeping bags drying on the clothes line
Photo: Sarah Payne

The next morning was a short drive to the Snake Canyon Via Ferrata. This via ferrata was much more horizontal, but did include some up and down, as well as four zip wires and a monkey bridge. Suleiman accompanied us for this via ferrata. The order was changed a bit, and I lead most of the way. After a short descent we arrived at the first zip wire. I was a little nervous crossing a single wire about 100 metres up, but I didn't hesitate. What a rush! I got about three quarters of the way across before needing to start going hand-over-hand. Thankfully it wasn't too far. Sarah came across next, and absolutely loved it. Suleiman was next, followed by Pete.



Pete and Suleiman ready for action
Photo: Sarah Payne

The second zip wire was constructed perfectly, we ran out of momentum at the same time as we reached the opposite ledge. The third zip wire you had to make sure we had to go feet first to ensure we didn't hit the opposite ledge too hard. From here the via ferrata descends across the cliff before climbing a little to a small cave where we stopped for a short break and filled in the visitors book. Another climb and we arrived at the fourth zip wire.

Sarah, who had been struggling (but enjoying it), decided to bail at this point. Pete took her up to the exit point and then came back down to join us for the rest of the trip. I decided to film the fourth zip wire traverse from a first person point of view as I crossed. This seemed like a good idea til I didn't quite reach the far side. I needed to do a small bit of hand-over-hand, but it was difficult with a video camera in my hand. So it became a hand-over-middle finger maneuver.



Pete on one of the zip wires

Photo: Sarah Payne

A reasonably easy horizontal section brought us to the monkey bridge. This consisted of two wires, we hung onto the top wire while walking across the bottom. Pete went across first and demonstrated the test of nerves where you let go of the top wire and take your feet off the bottom so you are hanging by your cows tails and then pick up the bottom wire and give it a kiss. The challenge had been thrown down and had to be met. Both Suleiman and I met the challenge with ease. A short, vertical section and we were finished. From here we drove to the Al Nahda resort where Sarah and I said goodbye to Pete and Suleiman and checked in for a couple of days of luxury.

We were a bit disappointed with the Al Nahda resort. The staff were friendly, but didn't seem to know a whole lot about how things worked, and there seemed to be various communication problems. It also didn't help that the Omani football team won the Gulf Cup the first night we were there, so there was an impromptu public holiday called for the following day. They needed someone to proof-read some of their documentation. For example, under cancellations it said "We understand that unexpected thighs happen".

After two full days at the resort it was time for Sarah to head home. I still had one more day in Oman, so I said goodbye and wished her well since she'd be getting off the plane and going straight to work.

The next morning I received a phone call from Laura (who had planned our trip) to tell me that I wouldn't be able to do the final via ferrata. This was because the Omani football team were going to have a parade through Muscat and thus most of the roads would be closed or choked with traffic. Instead I could go walking or kayaking. I said kayaking sounded alright, so I met Simon, who was to be my guide for the day, at another resort on the beach. He informed me that they didn't have any single kayaks, and he gave me a list of other water activities. I was feeling a little "put on the spot", so I just picked one, jetskiing. I'd never done any jetskiing, but, considering the Omani lack of safety, that wasn't a problem. A quick "here's the start, here's the stop, this is where you can go", and I was away. Although fun, I'm not about to run out and buy a jetski.

After that we decided to go for a drive to check out some Wadi's that Simon had never been to. A great way to spend the afternoon, just checking out the local scenery.

After that, dinner, airport, flight to Abu Dhabi, 23 hour transit (horrible, but at least they have a transit hotel), then 14 hours back to Sydney.

What a trip! Next time I go over there I'll be planning to do a lot more caving and canyoning, preferably a lot of first descents and exploratory trips.

Rod.

Future Trips

Welcome to the new look future trips section. Anyone with artistic abilities are welcome to submit their own icons for any of the categories here, and/or any other categories. If we use your icon then you'll have to be prepared to accept the praise and admiration from your fellow club members. Send your icons, or any other feedback, to roderick_smith@hotmail.com.

Legend:

Activity	Grade	Accommodation		
	Caving	 Easy		Camping
	Canyoning	 Easy/Medium		Cottage
	Diving	 Medium		
<i>Extras</i>				
	Hiking	 Medium/Hard		Kites
	Abseiling	 Hard		Camp Ovens
	Cycling	 Extreme		
	Horse Riding			
	Kayaking			
	Climbing			
	Skiing			

