

NATURAL WONDERS OF THE SOUTH COAST

DYNAMIC DEUA

ALISON MACKAY AND RICHARD MORECROFT ARE CAPTIVATED BY THE CANYONS AND CAVERNS OF DEUA NATIONAL PARK.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY RICHARD MORECROFT AND ALISON MACKAY



Are you sure this is the right place?" It was a rhetorical question of course, as neither of us really knew the answer. However, the small plaque on the wooden post nearby clearly said that this was Wyanbene Cave.

A corroded metal grille, looking like part of an ancient prison, lay closed over a ragged window in the rock. Behind the bars, a rusty ladder descended into stygian gloom. "Surely this can't be it..." But the heavy iron grille swung open as we gave it a pull, and – hearts in mouths and head-torches switched on – we began the descent into darkness.

Wyanbene Cave is one of many limestone formations in the Deua National Park. Deua lies within the triangle of land between Cooma, Braidwood and Moruya – different areas of the park are accessed from each of these towns.

Earlier that day we'd travelled the picturesque road from the coast up to Braidwood, through the misty forests of cycads and spotted gums. They gave way to rolling, pale yellow plains of dried grass – a bleak landscape that only the bright sunshine made mournfully beautiful.

We'd missed the dirt road turn-off to the Wyanbene Caves camping area the first time. It had been cleverly disguised by brightly coloured mailboxes along the road and we'd assumed it was just another driveway. Having corrected our mistake, we came across a large, sun-filled glade in a forest of stringy-barks – a perfect camping spot.

The facilities at all the camp sites in Deua are basic but good – with fireplaces and pit toilets to help protect the pristine nature of the park. The toilets at Wyanbene are set back in a beautiful forest of varied eucalypts that is swathed in mist in the early mornings – if you have to have pit toilets, these surely are the most romantic in the world.

At night, cocooned in our sleeping bags, we're awakened by several antechinus using the outside of the tent as a playground. The little mouse-like marsupials patter around on the tarps, sounding as though they are right on our pillows, then scabble up the corner seams and surf their way back down the material, to land and scamper across the tarps again. Sleep is hard to come by, but eventually morning dawns bright and clear – wallabies bounce, black cockatoos screech overhead and we have the valley and the glade to ourselves.

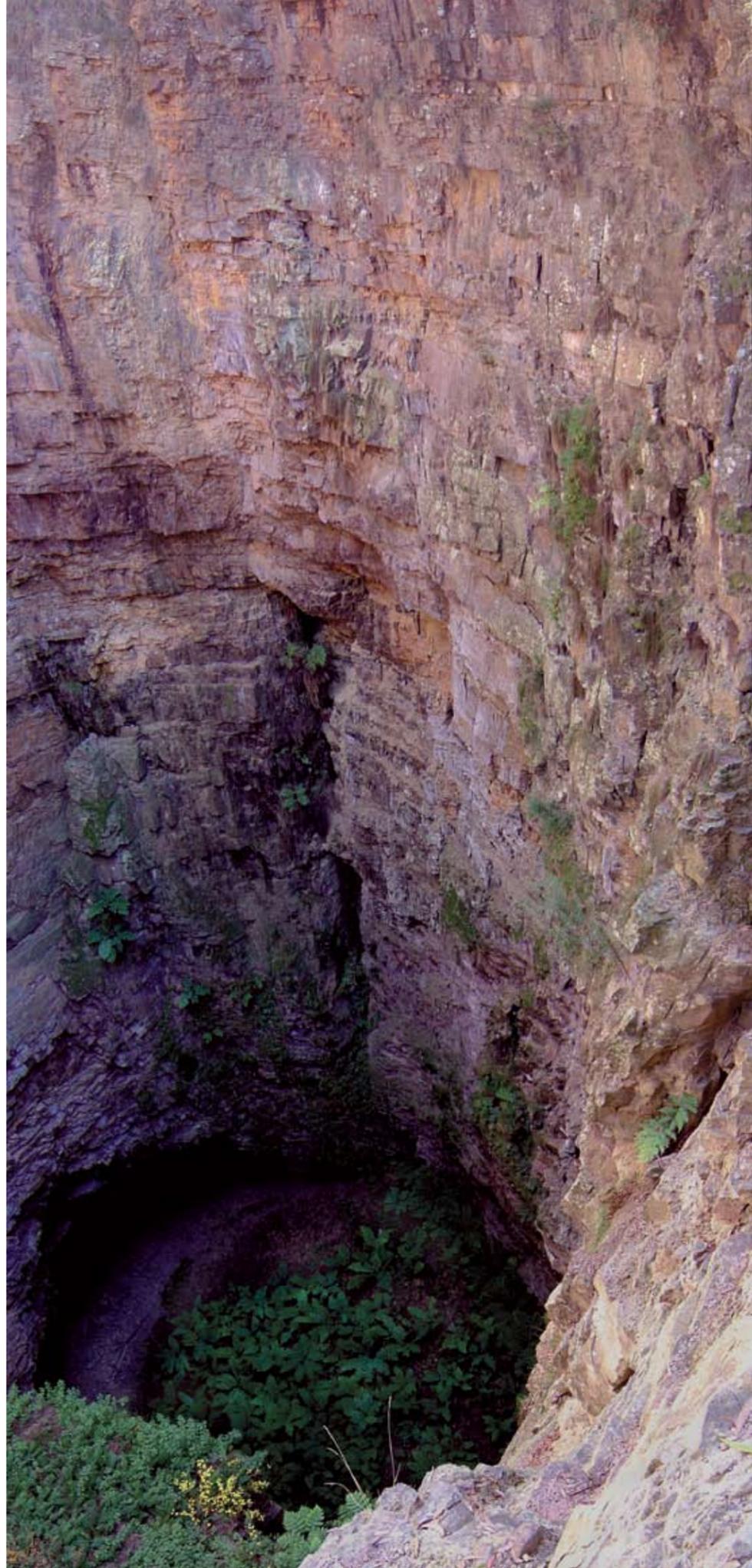
Above: Brightly coloured dinghies can be hired for a casual day's boating. Paul O'Brien and seadog, Patch, bid us farewell. **Right:** Fishing from Nelligen wharf is a popular pastime. **Opposite page, top right:** The houseboat's wake distorts the reflection of a perfect afternoon sky.



GOING UNDERGROUND

The geological history of Deau dates back over 400 million years. The area lies on a base of granite, which is responsible for heaving up some of the high sharp peaks within the park. But it's the underground parts that Deua is probably best known for and these were all formed as a result of limestone karsts throughout the region. Caves and sinkholes are a feature of this and there are many accessible underground experiences here. Bendethera and Wyanbene caves are the most well known and have been used since their discovery in the late 1800s. Clarkes Cave gets its name from the infamous Clarke brothers – bushrangers who robbed their way around the area in the 1860s and used the cave as a refuge.

Although the first few hundred metres of these caves are accessible to the general public, it's necessary to take basic equipment such as protective clothing, shoes and good torches to explore. Further than this, you'll need a caving permit and a lot of experience underground.



The early morning is not as cold as it can get at Deua, but we start a fire for coffee, croissants and banana bread. The latter is a little charred and smoky – and definitely unfit for vegetarians as it seems to have a slight barbecue-plate-taste of last night's steak... but it's still delicious!

Camping and walking demand food, so we're preparing lunch and snacks even as we eat breakfast. It's a perfect day for the long hike to the two best-know features of Deua National Park – Big Hole and Marble Arch.

From the Berlang camping ground, this 13-kilometre walk delivers its first obstacle almost immediately. We have to ford the Shoalhaven River – not too dramatic today, as the water level is fairly low and there is a little race of stepping-stones that lets us keep our shoes dry – mostly.

It's a relatively short walk through a scrubby eucalypt forest, then suddenly we are upon the accurately but unimaginatively named Big Hole. It seems to open up out of the ground from nowhere. At the top of this 50 metre wide void, trees strike out at precarious angles, gripping the bare rock with twisted roots. Fortunately there is a great observation platform from which you can gaze safely into its depths. It's like looking back in time, down to the collection of Jurassic-looking ferns lurking in the gloom at the very bottom, nearly 100 metres below.

Beyond the Big Hole, the track plummets and then undulates onwards for about an hour's walk through changing forests – some with enormous termite mounds, others mined by wombat holes. Finally we come across steps that have been cut into the hillside and the track plunges steeply downwards to the creek-bed on the damp valley floor. We make our way through dripping tree ferns into the Marble Arch, a huge, vaulted cavern 15–20 metres high. With the help of head torches we can see it's lined with veins of marble with long slashes of red and pale-cream stretching up into the soaring roof above. Periodically, the bright midday sun pierces through holes high in the rock, to leave divine shafts of pure light penetrating to the stone floor. It feels like a damp mediaeval chapel.

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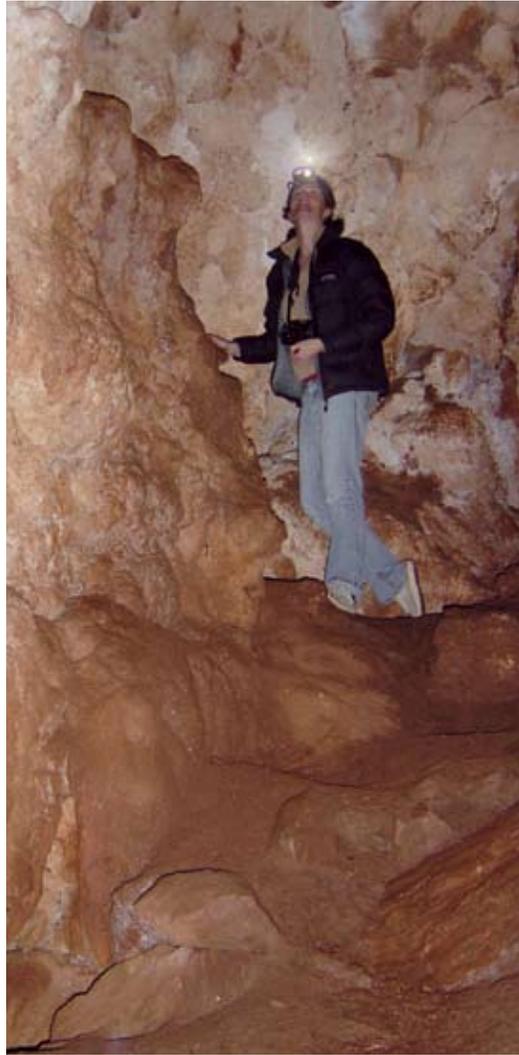
TOUR OF DEUA

Deua National Park is about 320 kilometres south of Sydney and 110 kilometres south east of Canberra. It can be accessed from the main towns of Moruya, Braidwood and Cooma and covers over 120,000 hectares.

Deua is such an exciting and varied landscape – it includes high peaks with great views, sculpted river valleys and waterways ripe for exploration, not to mention beautiful bushland and exciting underground adventures.

It can get a little chilly in winter and a little warm in summer, but in-between seasons here are spectacular. Places like the Deua River camping area and the nearby Bakers Flat are great campsites, each within 50 metres of the beautiful Deua River – a great playground for kids of all ages. Wyanbene and Berlang are also easily accessed from Braidwood and offer great bushwalks and caving experiences. Bendethera Cave is a little harder to get to and requires a 4WD vehicle.





We pass through the cavern and into a thin, steep canyon, with mosses and tree ferns, smoothly eroded rock and a trickle of water running through it. This canyon travels for about a kilometre and in wet weather would be full of raging water – a dangerous place to be. We slip and slide our way down the canyon, until the creek deepens and we have to turn back. It feels great to be back in sunshine as we emerge from the cool rocky depths and we eat our lunch on some sun-drenched rocks above the arch.

In contrast to this warmth and light, less than 24 hours before, we were descending an iron ladder into the mysterious gloom of Wyanbene Cave.

As soon as we stepped away from the base of the ladder, the darkness closed in on us; so intense that we needed a hand torch to help out our struggling head lights. As well as being eye-poppingly dark, it was also steep and extremely slippery underfoot. We inched forward carefully and awkwardly, until the floor levelled out and we found ourselves in a large rocky chamber. Here, water dripped from stalactite formations on the roof; minerals glistened in the rock and a little stream became a small lake and disappeared out of sight into another rocky cavern. A tiny bat flitted around the chamber, navigating perfectly in the dark. It was far better equipped for this environment than we were, so with torches and bravery fading, we made our way back to the ladder.

It felt as though we'd been exploring the dark cavern for hours. In fact, it was still daylight when we emerged and we'd only been underground for 30 minutes. The mystery and magic of Deua had kept us enchanted – and as we headed back to the campsite, we didn't yet know that we had a late-night date with a mob of antechinus who were definitely party animals. ■

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