

POST SCRIPT

THE YORKSHIRE POST • SATURDAY OCTOBER 08 2022



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TONY JOHNSON

CALM THAT LIES BENEATH...

Yorkshire is beautiful on the surface but as two reporters discover, it is just as fabulous deep under the surface too. Nish Kumar and Josh Widdicombe report.



“Type 2 fun: Slightly stressful at the time but it builds really good memories.”

IN Yorkshire we all know the Dales are one of the UK's most beautiful, calming and soothing natural landscapes – stunning views of rolling hills stretching miles to the horizon and wide-open skies. But what is less known, and far less visited, is another landscape beneath the earth at Ingleborough: a vast network of winding passages and caverns, carved from the limestone rock by ice erosion over 600 millennia. This underground world has long held fascination for a different type of visitor to the Dales. Britain's caving community has been coming here since the 1870s.

Many of us would prefer to stick to the surface, with the idea of venturing underground to take part in caving, or potholing as it is better known, being the antithesis of a relaxing day out.

But for psychologist turned caver Steph Dwyer, the underground Dales can be just as soothing as the landscape above.

Steph has explored these caves over a thousand times. She is a passionate potholer – most recently venturing into the Ario Caves in Spain's Picos de Europa in a quest to find Europe's deepest cave – and is bringing this into her psychology work by doing a doctorate studying the use of caving as a therapeutic tool in stress relief.

To put her theory to the test, The Yorkshire Post donned hard hats and went underground in the notoriously beautiful Long Churn Caves with Steph and her colleague Mike Bottomley, who are both Yorkshire Dales Guides.

On one of the UK's warmest days, it felt odd getting kitted up in heavy-duty thermals, waterproofs, helmets and head torches. As we strapped into our harnesses and peered over the edge of the gaping hole in the earth we were about to be lowered down, it didn't feel like a particularly natural choice of activity for stress relief.

One by one we were lowered down in our harnesses, legs dangling, trying not to look down. Water rumbled and roared beneath and after only a few dozen feet darkness swallowed us.

Once at the bottom, hearts pounding,



we took a path into the rock, which quickly became narrower and shorter, forcing us on to all fours, crawling nose to tail. Surely Steph had made some mistake?

But as we emerged from the passage and unfolded ourselves in an echoing, glittering cavern, things began to make more sense. Our torchlight caught glints of beautiful fossils of long-gone coral and anemones.

A shallow pool of water shone underfoot.

Standing in the stillness of the cave with its almost church-like atmosphere, you could see her point.

Next, however, we reached a section that Steph described as “Type 2 fun: slightly stressful at the time but it builds really good memories.”

She then pointed us in the direction of the tiniest gap in rock imaginable, which we would need to squeeze through to reach

the next cave. The reward for shuffling on hands and knees in the wet was emerging in another beautiful cave, this time bedecked in stalactites and stalagmites.

One of the most difficult sections to navigate was The Slot, a narrow opening we had to slither through like a letterbox.

With some huffing and puffing, and Steph's expert help, we scrambled through. After these tricky sections we were rewarded with a breather, sitting still in the darkness. The silence was a presence in itself, almost impossible to experience in the outside world, where the hum of traffic and technology seems ever present.

The most impressive views of the cave system are from a ledge at Alum Pot but they are not easily won. First, a scramble down a rock face known as the Dolly Tubs Pitch, and then another rather undignified lowering by rope down a 45ft vertical drop. It's a long way down, but Steph's calming and capable presence made anything seem possible.

Stepping forward on the Alum Pot ledge, our bodies coursing with adrenaline, the darkness gave way to the slivers of light streaming in from the open mouth of the cave above. Waterfalls cascaded all around, and ancient seashells littering the ground crunched underfoot. As we neared the edge of the ledge, we saw more pitches even lower down, where advanced cavers can lower themselves another 250ft deeper into the abyss.

For novices however, the only way out was up. Hoisting ourselves back up the tiny ladder to the surface was the most exhausting part of the day.

The final challenge was a long crawl through a tunnel filled with ice-cold rushing water, which by now felt perfectly normal.

Slowly we emerged in the real world, squinting into the sunshine, and bringing a little bit of the calm of the caves below with us.

If you are a novice caver you can also explore the caves of Yorkshire with the expert tutelage of Yorkshire Dales Guides.

Contact them at: <https://www.yorkshire-dalesguides.co.uk/>

SAFETY FIRST: Caving instructors Steph Dwyer and Mike Bottomley, top, of Yorkshire Dales Guides. Inset, taking no chances with all the latest safety equipment.