

Curious Caves

The lure of the unknown can put lives at risk. Experienced cave divers know better than to let curiosity get the better of them

By Ayesha Cantrell

■ **Curiosity killed** the cat but proper training could've brought him back. This is of course a very simple view but when you look at the facts of cave diving fatalities, an alarmingly high number of deaths seemed to have occurred just to satisfy the divers desire to know what lies a little further in.

Makes you wonder – doesn't it? What would you do? Would you be able to resist temptation or would you just have to poke your head in? If we are being honest most of us enjoy a pretty swim through and maybe this is where the problem lies. Just nipping into an entrance to see what it's like hardly seems any different – does it? No? Would you climb a sheer rock face without lines and training just to see what the view was like a little further up? No? Then why enter a cave without the same? Some 90% of fatalities in caves belong to these souls who did just that.

Before you stop reading, I'm not trying to be belligerent or incendiary; more of us than care to admit have done foolish things underwater but if you are reading this then you got away with it and hopefully learnt a valuable lesson. That lesson probably taught you caution or resulted in an equipment purchase or further training.

My first cautious experience of an overhead environment was many years ago in the cenotes in Mexico. At the end of some technical training I took a day to explore some underwater sites that the area is famous for. I really didn't expect to like it much but wanted to see for myself. The safety procedures in these well bubbled passages seemed high, my guide properly certified and the dive was a simple tour. The routes and permanent lines were well maintained and clear signage proclaimed 'There's nothing beyond this sign worth dying for.'

With such low expectations it was hard to be disappointed:- there were some beautiful vistas but it wouldn't rate in my top 10. I missed the fish, the critters and the colour but diving in fresh water was indeed a pleasure. I was pleased I dived and happy that I was comfortable with the experience but I didn't leave feeling that this was something I should do more of. I left a confirmed open ocean diver.

A strange turn of events though found me almost immediately bubbling around the raggedy Menorcan coastline. Asked to photograph some of the sights for a local dive centre I saw the irony immediately as I realised these open ocean sites were in fact caverns and swim-throughs.

'The Jewel' was the first formation I visited and, torches on; I followed my guide into a large and lofty chamber. A letter-box like slit in one side, allowed the light to stream through offering a cathedral quality to the chamber. Around what could have been an altar; the cavern gave way to an area where the fresh and saltwater mix offered the amazing visual effect of a halocline. In the crystal clear waters, unmarred due to the lack of silting, the effect was stunning as the halocline seemed to slice through where the stalagmites and stalactites didn't quite meet. Swimming towards our exit the visual impact of the entrance point and the letter box was nothing short of amazing. This formation wasn't quite finished with us yet though as we ascended into the air pocket above. The chamber was equally as stunning. Above water the warm reds, browns and oranges of the erratically and, in turns, gracefully formed rock could be seen and contrasted starkly with the aqua water lit from below.

I left this dive feeling quite different about caverns atleast. The rock formations were stunning and the light penetration gave the whole dive a kind of heavenly quality. There was also quite some life to be spotted too. Again I felt this unlikely to turn into a passion:- it's more like choosing a different brand of beer just for a change of taste!

The next site I photographed is called 'The Archway' and this swim through again offered the lofty, sun drenched vistas and the contrast of the impossible blue against the archway. The passage led us up, around and back over the top of the wall and into the unnamed cave. This cavern led us in a circular path around a formation and more stunning water and light effects, amazing rock formations and if you look closely, reminders of creatures long dead embedded in the rock.

There are many more such features along this coastline and the scenery was stunning but would you really call them caverns or are they just glorified swim-throughs? My guide did not lay lines and we could always see our exit. Was this wrong? Probably? So it's quite easy then to see where the lines get blurred. The book definition of a cavern is the initial room of an underwater cave, which is illuminated at least in part by natural daylight. So if there's not a cave leading off does that just make it a swim through or overhang? And then is it fine to wander with impunity?

Fast forward to the present day and I found myself in quite a similar position, asked to photograph the underwater marvels in Khao Sok National Park in Thailand.

The park is stunning:- monstrous limestone pinnacles tower from a seemingly endless lake which is surrounded by ancient rainforest. The area has been on the tourist trail for a long time but is not overly visited. Travellers come here to soak up the peace and quiet, revel in the beauty of nature and trek in the jungle to spot the chattering gibbons and shy deer. The area was not always as it is today, 28 years ago with the need for power in the south the Pasaeng River was damned creating the 165sq km lake that dominates the area today. With that huge areas



were swallowed up by water, villages passed into memory along with mountain passes, swathes of woodland and some fantastic grottos.

For any true underwater explorer 165 sq km of water is too much to take. The curiosity of the fabled cat has nothing on the bunch of technical divers that, bored of the day-to-day and in need of a challenge set out to explore. The locals, although thinking this bunch of westerners were more than slightly mad, do hold the parks memory. It was exciting how word spread and each visit produced new stories of how the land used to look and what beauty may lie submerged. A visit to the park office and some often comical translations proved fruitful too but in the end though, pushing the deflator button is the only way to find out.



The emerald hued magic that you descend into is stunning in itself and diving next to the lakes edge or the outside of some of the huge limestone pinnacles is akin to any ocean wall dive but far more interesting. The passage of time has carved out some amazing bowl like grottos with fantastic stalagmites and stalactites. It's like diving in an ancient fantasy-world throne room which on one side it completely open like a regal viewing platform for a tournament. If Lord of the Ring had been set underwater then it would've taken place here. Little nooks could've housed fire torches and you can easily see a throne platform and huge walls were tapestries could've hung. The rock looks like it has dripped like melted candle wax and you can't be anything other than in awe of your surroundings. Called Pha Deng, literally red cave, this is one of my favourite spots ;-the light penetration is stunning too and this place is certainly suitable for divers who like their wide open spaces.

This is typical of the majority of diving here. No need to 'go in' you can swim around taking in the scenery and be awed. The difference here unlike what I saw in Menorca is that there are routes deep into the rock leading to chambers and more passages. If you will, the opportunity for a bad decision is certainly there. Much like the divers that have been lost hunting lobsters where they have ventured into a lair that is deeper than the nooks which typify the lobsters den. Believing a banquet of lobsters lies within they venture further only to be confused as to their way out due to silting caused by their own fins.

So is cave diving a dangerous discipline? The figures would suggest so but my guess is that with proper training, the correct attitude and equipment many many fatalities could be avoided. Cave diving clearly has inherent risks which each diver chooses to accept. The rewards of discovery for those who choose to explore are worth it. Seeing something that has perhaps never been seen by human eyes and rush of excitement and discovery are what they thrive on.

The temptation of exploration is what found us underwater in the first place so the allure to go further is hardly a trait that would be unexpected in any diver. The majority of us had proper training though before actually diving so think about you're training level, skills and techniques when you see an enticing hole! [SDAA](#)

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opposite page, from top: XXXXXXXX | XXXXXXXX



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