

Notes from a LIMESTONE OPERA

Stalactites, stalagmites and... a soprano? As Sandy McPhie discovered, Jenolan Caves now offers much more than spectacular natural formations

It's the middle of summer but it's cold – really cold – as my partner Jim and I leave Sydney and drive up through the Blue Mountains. By the time we reach Jenolan Caves House, it's only 9°C.

I'm not complaining. We've come for a Valentine's Day weekend and the misty rain and open fires are romantic. So is our room, which is bathed in candlelight with rose petals and Lindt chocolates scattered over the bed. There's even a chilled bottle of bubbly waiting for us.

By the time we wander downstairs for dinner, we're in holiday mode. The restaurant, like the whole hotel, is a museum piece, with thick curtains, wood panelling and carpet muffling conversation to a pleasant hum. The menu is long enough to give choices but short enough not to cause too much indecision, and the wine list is a pleasant surprise. James Brady, the food and beverage manager, tells us he's made an effort to offer plenty of local region wines, and a good domestic and international selection. He also tells us about the unique cave cellar he's setting up. Guests who choose from his special wine list (bottles range from \$110 to \$140) can accompany him into the Imperial Cave to select their bottle. We're given a sneak peak and I reckon even if the wine is a bit out of your usual price range, it's worth it for the personal cave tour.

Throughout the weekend we notice



FROM LEFT: A rainy day at Caves House; the grand reception hall; Chifley Restaurant.

lots of special touches like this, which show how integral the caves and Caves House are. The solid mock-Tudor hotel was completed in 1927 and since then little has changed. Facilities have been modernised, but the rooms retain a period feel and there's not a TV screen in sight, which gets my thumbs-up.

The hotel exists solely because of the world-famous network of limestone caves that, with incredible foresight, were declared a reserve back in 1866.

It's not until we go underground for a cave tour on Saturday morning that I really grasp what a remarkable part of the world this is. Our guide, Ian, leads us through a tunnel behind Caves House and down a long, winding staircase through the Dragon's Throat into the Temple of Baal cave. Here he gives us the first of a series of light shows – plunging us into darkness, then illuminating different features as he explains how the caves were formed 340

million years ago, and how dissolved limestone crystallised over millions of years to form the beautiful stalactites, stalagmites and helictites (the latter grow sideways). In the cave's inner chamber, lights and music emulate the passage of water down through the caves, and then Ian highlights different formations and tells us about the Old Testament story of Baal which gave the cave its name. Red and white altars are overlooked by a fantastic sheet of crystal known as the Angel's Wing, while high in the cave sit Paradise and the figure of Baal.

The high-tech LED lighting was installed a few years ago, replacing old globes and slashing the electricity use by 90 per cent. Jenolan has always been cutting edge. Today's caves management consults to countries around the world, and back in 1880, the first electric light was switched on in what is now Chifley Cave – more than 20 years before the first street lights came on in Sydney.

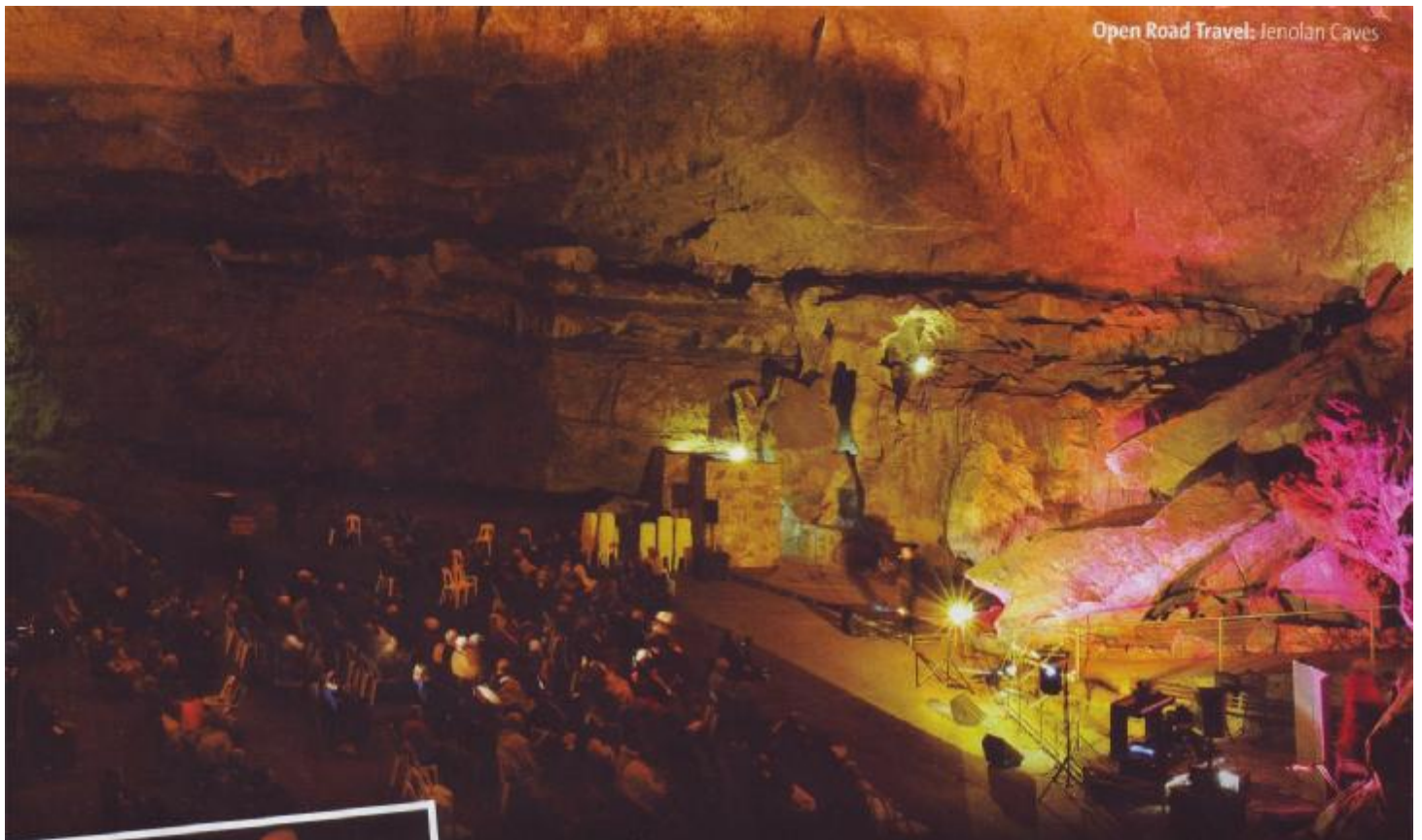
The cave tour has whetted our appetite, so we take another one after lunch. This time we're led from the Grand Arch, through Lucas Cave and down deep into the River Cave where the clear blue subterranean pools of the River Styx reflect the rocks so perfectly, it's impossible to tell wet from dry, until underwater lights are switched on.

From the River Cave we climb up through the three magnificent chambers of the Orient Cave – India, Egypt and

THE DRAGON'S THROAT: Into the Temple of Baal. RIGHT: James Brady stands proudly in his cave cellar.



Photos: Jim Scurios



finally Persia – so named because the cave's beautiful formations and crystals evoke the shapes and textures of the east.

It's still raining as we hurry back to change for an early dinner. Part of the Valentine's package is a performance of Opera in the Caves and it's another dash through the rain to the Grand Arch, which has been transformed into a makeshift theatre. We're not opera buffs, but as the four singers' voices rise up and around the massive cave, Jim and I are entranced. We're delighted to get seats for a more intimate performance in the Temple of Baal on Sunday. How the organiser got all the chairs and an electric organ down those narrow stairs, I can't imagine. But the performance is quite magical and we float out afterwards humming arias.

By now we're hooked on the caves, so we squeeze in just one more – a self-guided tour of the Devil's Coach House and Nettle Cave. Hand-held audio guides mean we can take the tour at our own pace, savouring the chance to have a cave to ourselves.

After seeing just a few of the 300 or more caves discovered at Jenolan, it's easy to see why guides spend much of their spare time exploring in the hope of finding more. I'm not keen on confined spaces but I'm seriously considering going back to try adventure caving – where you don overalls and squeeze through small

spaces to see caves otherwise inaccessible.

The weekend has been a series of surprises, but we have one left to come. Before leaving, we take a walk around the Blue Lake reservoir where we've been told we might spot a platypus. I've spent hours scanning remote waterways without ever seeing one so I don't hold much hope but I look, just in case.

Then up ahead Jim calls, "Come here – quietly." On the dam wall a small brown shape is scuffling in the mud. I creep closer and see an unmistakable duck bill. I can't image a better way to end the weekend. ☐



ABOVE: Ian shows us a piece of broken crystal; 'silk drapes' in the Orient Cave.



STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN: Climbing from the River Cave to the magnificent Orient Cave.



EXCLUSIVE MEMBER GETAWAY

NRMA Travel is excited to launch its first Members' Getaway, held at Jenolan Caves between May 8 – 18. A two-night weekend stay starts at \$250 per person twin-share, including accommodation, breakfast, three cave tours, a grand afternoon tea, a wine and cheese pre-dinner function and a special NRMA Director-hosted winemaker dinner. There are also one-night, mid-week and day-tour options, and special events throughout the week. Phone 1300 053 095 to book or receive a brochure.