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Under the Land of the Hobbits

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By Steve Murray

Serenity fills the air around Waitomo. The winding roads into this town on the north island of New Zealand run through thick forests, rolling hills and deep green pastures, and the drive sets a fitting mood for a visit to the Waitomo Glowworm Caves. This is Hobbit country. Director Peter Jackson filmed the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy nearby, and he chose his ageless settings well. Three hours by [car](#) or bus from Auckland or two hours from Roturua, the glowworm caves offer a special encounter with the unique creatures that live beneath this lush countryside.

Waitomo sits atop a deep bed of limestone – fossilized coral, shells and other marine life deposited over eons when the region was still under the sea. When the land rose about 30 million years ago, cracks in the limestone provided paths for flowing water and erosion that created the caves and underground rivers found today.

The local Maoris likely knew about the Waitomo caves for centuries. Named for their geology – "wai" (water) and "tomo" (hole or chute) in the Maori language – the caves weren't explored systematically until 1887, when a Maori chief and an English surveyor set out by raft down an underground river. Opened in 1889, the glowworm caves were one of the earliest tourist attractions in New Zealand.

The high entrance to the caves is reached after a walk on a short trail through dense tawa trees and nikau palms that block out much of the sunlight. Once inside, the tour guide navigates visitors along a descending trail through chambers of bleached yellow and brown limestone, decorated everywhere with

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hanging stalactites and tall stalagmites. These columns were formed over millennia by the mineral deposits left from slowly dripping water. It takes about 100 years to deposit 1 cubic centimeter of these columns, so a little math illustrates the incredible age of these caves since the time that this ground rose from the sea.

Early tourists stopped to eat in what is today known as the Banquet Chamber, and soot from their fires can be seen on its ceiling. Farther down is the largest cave, the Cathedral. A natural amphitheater with exceptional acoustics, the Cathedral has been used for musical performances by the Vienna Boys Choir and New Zealand's own Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, among others. The levels of these caves are linked vertically by the Tomo, a 52-foot shaft marking the course of an ancient waterfall.

A still underground river marks the end of the cave path, where visitors board aluminum boats. Once the tour pushes off, everyone gets quiet. Even the guide talks in hushed tones, pushing a single paddle to move through the black water. While spotlights showcase the warm colors of the caves, the boats drift in darkness as the glowworms showcase themselves.

Glowworms aren't actually worms. The species *arachnocampa luminosa* is part of the gnat family and, like much of the life on these islands, is unique to New Zealand. Adults are about the size of a mosquito (their favorite food). In the larval stage, each animal lets down dozens of mucus-covered threads and emits a bioluminescent glow from its abdomen to lure insects into these hanging snares. The glow comes from the same chemical reaction employed by fireflies, involving the aptly named compound luciferin and oxygen. In the ink-black cave, the result is a biological Milky Way of stars.

The lack of ambient light removes any useful depth perception.

These dim constellations could be a few feet away or as far as the night sky — probably what a spacewalk feels like. It's easy to forget that there's hard earth above this panorama of lights, and some theorize that mosquitoes enter the sticky threads because they think they're heading out into the air and to freedom.

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Mottled hints of cave ceiling are the first indication that the boats are reaching the end of the journey. Forest plants shroud much of the lower cave exit, which slows the transition back to surface light. This exit was actually the original entry point when the cave system was first explored. A short trail walk to the visitors center completes the experience, all within less than an hour.

The glowworm ecosystem is fragile. Environmental monitors placed throughout the caves measure carbon dioxide, humidity and temperature, and some areas can be closed to visitors if conditions become too extreme. Smoking and photography aren't allowed in the caves, so visitors leave with only memories of their underground journey. The attention and care for these delicate animals, however, has kept the glowworm colonies viable for more than a century of visitation.

Driving on from Waitomo again offers time to soak in the pastoral countryside and appreciate the rural beauty of this part of New Zealand. While the drive may be familiar by now, however, it's difficult to think about the country in the same way, knowing about the hidden abodes that lie underneath its green fields and forests.

WHEN YOU GO

Although the Waitomo region contains about 300 known caves and tour operators provide access to several of them, the Waitomo Glowworm Caves and the nearby Ruakuri and Aranui caves are the largest and most-visited. Ruakuri contains many limestone formations, and glowworms can be seen close-up during a two-hour walking tour. Its original entrance was used as a Maori burial site and is still considered sacred. Ruakuri is wheelchair-accessible.

Aranui, a dry cave, is located nearby in the Ruakuri Scenic Reserve. Without water, Aranui doesn't have glowworms, but it does provide a home for the New Zealand cave weta, a large, long-legged insect, just inside its entrance. Many tours combine one or more of these caves into longer experiences, and a variety of tour operators offer rappelling, river tubing and rafting, and zip-lining for the more adventurous.

Single-day bus tour packages are available from Auckland or Rotorua that include a stop in Waitomo. Some itineraries include additional stops at other attractions but might feel rushed for a same-day return. Prices, including transportation and admission to attractions, range from about \$160 to \$210; children under 15 are approximately half-price.

New Zealand attractions, including the caves, are busiest during December and January. If you have a choice, it's best to visit the caves in mid to late afternoon when crowds are smaller.

A good place to start trip planning is www.waitomo.org.nz/attractions.asp.

Specifics about the Waitomo Caves can be found at www.waitomocaves.com.

See an introductory video about the caves at www.waitomo.com/glowworm-video.aspx.

Steve Murray is a freelance writer. To read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.

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