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Jose

CAVING BY CANDLELIGHT

ARMED WITH ONLY A CANDLE, HITEKANI MBATSANA GOES SPELUNKING IN MPUMALANGA AND FINDS LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL.

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A. Bernat Bacete



Yoga
and SUP
Expedition



We sit quietly in a large chamber behind the nearby Lone Creek Waterfalls with only the dim light of our candle. Crystals, cave popcorn, stalactites and flowstone formations adorn the space 200 million years in the making. Tunnels break the textured walls, leading to more darkness and adventure for the curious and inquisitive. We gently blow out our candles and are quickly enveloped by darkness. Yet inside the cave there is only stillness, the dripping of moisture through the cracks of the rocks, the gentle breathing of the members in our group and the creeping feeling of relaxation after boldly crawling and crouching to reach the cave. A single flap of a wing breaks the silence. How did a bird get in here, I wonder? As if hearing my thoughts, our guide Kestell Barnard responds, “Did you hear that? It’s the sound of a bat’s wing.” And that’s when I knew I’d seen quite enough.

Mpumalanga is well known for its beauty, adventure and adrenaline fuelled activities. Canoeing over the river rapids, swimming and chasing incredible waterfalls and picturesque view while hiking. But what lies beneath?

Adventure tour guide Kestell Barnard of Kestell Adventures offers a ‘Caving by candlelight’ tour through the Lone Creek cave, five kilometres outside of Sabie. As the name suggests, you tour through the caves with a candle. As obvious as it is, I was still surprised to be handed an actual candle. In my mind, I had imagined it a metaphor for dim lighting, such as the rustic lanterns of fantasy books or caves lined with fire lights akin to those of Indiana Jones’ temple where we’d grab a fire torch to explore the darkness. Then, Kestell handed me a candle. A wax



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candle. Perplexed, I looked at him. “This is a candle,” I said. He returned my look, equally perplexed, “Yes, this is a caving by candlelight tour. We’re going to explore the cave with a candle.”

“Oh, okay.”

So, armed with a wax candle, overalls, a helmet and safety briefing we lit our candles and ventured into the mostly dolomite cave. Our first tight squeeze was immediate, and we were told that if we

Top: Hitekani Mbatsana with *that* candle. **Opposite:** the group, alive and well, after the spelunking adventure.



could manage it, we'd be fine for the rest of the route.

There are a maze of tunnels here and an experienced guide is key. Kestell explains that the tunnels stretch all the way through to the next town, Pilgrim's Rest, but he warns that after a certain point they're not safe to explore. So, he prefers to stick to this front part of the cave, which is fine with me.

The tour takes you through muddy tunnels, dark holes and large chambers. While you can mostly walk through the cave, there are some narrow parts and an army crawl is required. The last time I army crawled was at my gym's boot camp class with a toned fitness trainer shouting "mind over matter". Yet in the caves I find myself crawling, holding a candle in one hand, trying not to blow it out because I'm keenly aware of how stressful it would be to hit my head, crawl and move forward in the dark. It suddenly occurs to me that I'm not sure if bootcamp is worse.

Behind me, my travel partners exhibit the same feeling as our route curves and our once adventurous tunnel begins to feel as though it may close in on us. Shouts of "move, move" and light panic combined

with raucous laughter echo through the tunnel as we scoot along on our tummies or crouch (the benefits of being short) to the other side. The proverbial light at the end of the tunnel brings much needed relief. While we crawled for only a few metres, it felt like an eternity. Even so, I'd possibly do it again.

The light from the candle is surprisingly bright enough see, especially when travelling in a group. Even so, Kestell notes, "the candles only give you so much light, there are a maze of tunnels, sometimes you do have to use the same tunnels to get to a new chamber of the cave. With the candles, you can only see so much, sometimes you don't realise you have been down a tunnel, it keeps it interesting." Also, he adds, "torch lights blind people, candles are a greener and cheaper option." None of which I could argue with because certainly, this was one of the more interesting tours I've been on.

If you're keen on further thrills after your caving adventure, Kestel Adventures also offers waterfall abseiling, tubing the rapids of the Sabie River, or canyoning the Mac-Mac Canyon. ●

www.kestelladventures.com

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