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An interview with Lisa Clark, an experienced caver

My first question has to be: why do you do it? Why do you go exploring caves?

Because they're there. That's what mountaineers sometimes say when asked that question and I think my answer's the same. I suppose the big difference is that a climber can stand and look up and see the challenge while for a caver, really you have to imagine it. To me, that makes it even more appealing. How does what I imagine a cave system will be like compare to what I find when I get in there?

How did you get started as a caver?

Well, as a child my interests were all to do with exploration, but on the surface! On family walking holidays in the Lake District my brother, Chris, and I used to go racing ahead of our parents, always trying to get to the top of some hill to see what was there. But actually it was only when I went to university that I got the chance to try caving. Chris is a keen climber now and I haven't been able to tempt him underground!





What was it like the first time you went underground?

It was here in Daveley Dale! My first thought was: this is crazy, I can't see a thing! Then of course your eyes get used to the dark and you begin to make out shapes in the light from the headlamps. But in those first few moments your other senses take over – you realise how reliant you're going to be on touch or hearing for example. You know the saying about hearing a friendly voice? Well that's exactly how it is when you're underground: hearing that familiar voice, especially if it's an experienced caver, is very reassuring.

What's the most dangerous thing you've done while caving?

I think it would have to be an exploration of the caves in New Dell. It's not a particularly dangerous system and we were well prepared, but while we were underground there was a flash flood. That's one of the biggest threats to cavers because the water level can rise so suddenly. Team work is critical in caving, you really do have to work together and in this case, the team on the surface realised we might be at risk and were ready to help us; luckily we made our own way out just in time.

And the best moment?

For me, it's that moment when you've been sliding on your stomach for ages, moving more like a worm than a two-legged creature and wondering just why you're doing this, when the tunnel opens out and you slither into a cavern in all its silent splendour. There's tremendous beauty of a sort that you just don't see anywhere else – everywhere you look you can see the work of nature rather than the hand of a human. And how many other places are like that in this country, completely without human influence? There's nothing to compare it to on the surface.