



Tunnel Creek Cave, Australia

Wrapped around the southern fringe of the great Kimberley wilderness, in the northern corner of Western Australia, the Napier Range is a narrow line of rugged limestone hills formed by an exhumed Upper Devonian reef. Well over 100 km long, the reef developed on the fault-guided edge of the uplifted Proterozoic block that is the Kimberley, facing out southwest into the Canning Basin, and the front of the reef today forms an impressive line of cliffs along much of its length. The reef ridge is now breached by four rivers that drain off the Kimberley, and each cuts through the limestone to expose fine sections through the various reef facies. But the smallest of the four, Tunnel Creek, had cut only a shallow gorge before it found an underground route. This now forms The Tunnel, an almost level, walk-through cave that is 700 metres long and nearly all about 5 metres high and 20 metres wide. The cave probably dates back to the Tertiary (geomorphology moves very slowly in Australia), so what started as a sequence of phreatic loops beneath the gorge floor now has a graded profile. Where the cave crosses beneath the dry gorge, the intervening rock has failed, leaving a collapse doline in the gorge floor and a large skylight in the cave roof. Tunnel Creek is a popular stopover for adventurous tourists in the outback. Paddling through the shallow pools with minimal torches in nearly total darkness is regarded as geological fun. More so because crocodiles frequently choose to cool off in the cave pools; but they are only the ‘freshies’ that are no threat to people, and the seriously dangerous ‘salties’ never come up-river as far as the cave. This splendid piece of karst morphology, along with the magnificent Devonian reef that it is formed in, are not always fully appreciated. © Photograph and text by Tony Waltham Geophotos