

TIAKI IN WAITOMO

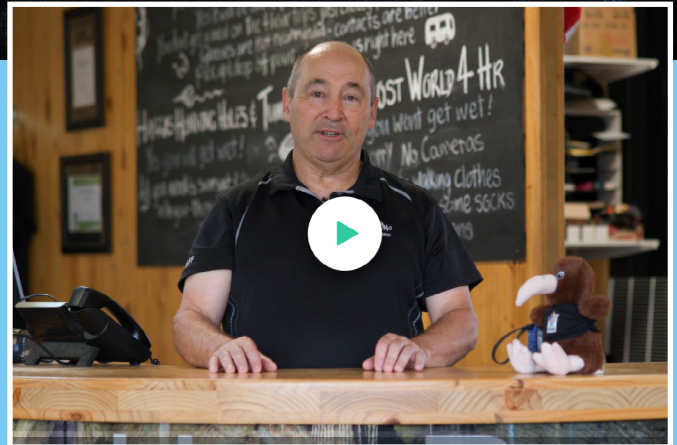
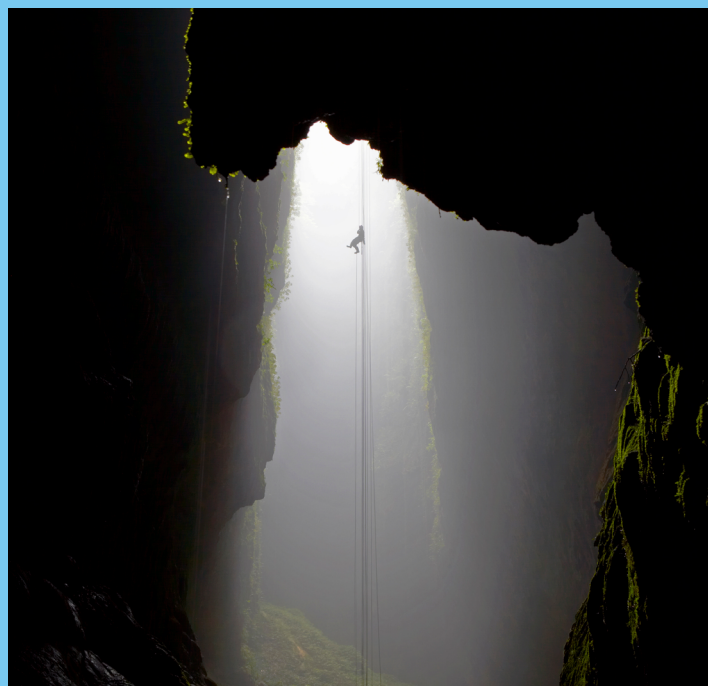
Waitomo Adventures

Care for magical underground world 'common sense'

Dozens of hectares of tree planting, hundreds of thousands of dollars invested in an energy-efficient visitor centre and countless hours spent on pest control. These are just a taste of the immense care Waitomo Adventures' owner Nick Andreef puts into protecting the magical underground world he and his team of tour guides have come to call their second home.

Over the past 36 years, Waitomo Adventures has grown from a small startup tourism business into one of Waitomo's most celebrated providers of caving and outdoor adventure experiences.

The company guides, abseiling, caving and blackwater rafting through the stunning and creatively named Lost World and Haggas Honking Holes, St Benedicts and TumuTumu caves, providing excitement, laughs and lasting memories for guests from New Zealand and around the world.



Sustainability and an unwavering commitment to the New Zealand tourism industry's Tiaki Promise is at the heart of their operation – no surprise given the amazing above and below ground environment is what keeps visitors coming year after year.

But protecting the pristine landscape they operate in is about a lot more than maintaining an income, Nick says. Many of his team grew up locally so caring for the area they explored and enjoyed as kids is largely second nature.

"Caring about and looking after the caves and the landscape around them at the end of the day is common sense."

The first thing guests notice when they arrive at Waitomo Adventures is the stunning multi-million-dollar office and visitor centre, located just outside Waitomo village. Opened in 2019, the building was constructed of sustainably grown pine and its high-thermal-mass design means it requires no ambient heating – even in winter. Solar panels on the roof provide power for underfloor heating in the day spa.

"The beauty of the cross laminated timber product [the building is made of] is that it locks up carbon," Nick says. "So this building here has 210 cubic meters of carbon dioxide locked up in it for the life of the building."

As guests leave the visitor centre and get closer to the The Lost World and Haggas Honking Holes, they experience the next jewel in the company's sustainability crown – a burgeoning native forest, alive with birds like tui, kereru and piwakawaka, as well as all manner of insects.



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Over the past three decades Nick's team has planted 40,000 trees on the land around the caves with the support of local farmers. Many of those trees have now matured.

"You are walking under canopy, people would struggle to believe that there ever was a farm there ... it filters anything from above ground before it gets to the cave, so all of these things add up to a healthier environment down there."

Getting the forest to its current state has been a long journey, and one that has involved working closely with farmers and the community to "wage war" on pests like possums and rats, which can both negatively impact the birdlife and native environment. Cave entrances and water catchments have been fenced off to prevent stock falling in and help ensure the water quality remains high for the many creatures and plants that inhabit the darkness – a lot more than glowworms live down there.

"It's a really fragile environment and we know we have to look after it. We have a special fern in Lost World that occurs in only three places in New Zealand. It's called the *Asplenium cimberiorum* and it's the lowest light-tolerant land-based plant in the world.

"Down the bottom of the caves we have peripatus, or velvet worms, which are a primitive caterpillar-like creature that is the missing link between ancient annelids and insects. In the water there are eels, and in Lost World we often see frogs, so it's critical that we take extra special care of this environment and preserve this unique eco-system."

Another sustainable initiative is the waterwheel Waitomo Adventures has at the Lost World cave site. The water wheel is completely powered by a stream and pumps water for 1.5 km and up 58 metres for the showers guests can enjoy at the end of a long adventure.

"When our customers walk out the side of a hill after a day's caving and start walking through the trees they see this water wheel turning in the middle of the bush."

Nick says his team's approach to New Zealand's Tiaki Promise is a holistic one, involving practical efforts to

improve the environment, a care for the community they live in, and education for guests. The promise, known simply as Tiaki to many, is a commitment to care for the people, place and culture that make New Zealand special.

"It's about the environment, it's about the people, it's about all the pieces of this community and how they interact to create a long-term sustainable situation.

So we're very appreciative of the substantial support from the land/cave owners (local farming families). It's important that we work with the local community and where possible take kids from this community and grow them into cave guides. If we can, [we want to] help the whole community to be a stronger, better, more intelligent place.

The result of Nick's work has undoubtedly been a positive one, and it's something he is immensely proud of. His passion for the environment rubs off on visitors too – he firmly believes the respect he gives them is given back in equal measure, resulting in respect for the caves and environment as they tour through.

"We need our guests to respect the environment because unless they do, these wonderful resources won't be around forever. We want to be sustainable, we want to be around forever, and even after I'm long gone, hopefully the next generation of cave operators will be using exactly the same caves and proudly being able to show these wonderful resources."



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