



HARWOOD'S HOLE



Cave v5a2IV ★★ ★



This topo describes a canyoning-style trip through Harwood's Hole cave. It is intended for skilled canyoneers with prior caving experience. You should be competent in both canyoning and caving techniques before attempting this trip. Get it wrong and you may end up on the national news, which would be a pretty crappy way to get famous.

Location

Canaan Downs, Takaka Hill.

Character

Arguably the best caving day trip in New Zealand, and perhaps one of the best in the world. The 200 m hole gets most of the attention, but the cave itself is beautiful and a huge amount of fun. Because the route can be completed as a pull-through trip in a wetsuit, it feels a bit like descending a canyon, just with more intimidation.

Warnings

Harwood's Hole (including Starlight Cave), is a serious undertaking even for experienced cavers. It is not just a big rappel followed by a walk out. There have been multiple rescues from parties being underprepared. Read the full [DOC guidelines](#), but in particular:

- This topo describes a canyoning-style pull-through trip, except for R1 and R2, which are derigged afterwards. There has been fixed rigging in the past, but it was often damaged by floods and has now been removed. **Parties must therefore carry rope through the cave.**
- **Use only a rack-style descender** for the main rappel. ATCs, figure 8s, and similar devices can overheat and have caused rope sheath separation. Expect high friction at the top and much less lower down as the rope weight beneath you reduces. A leg wrap helps. Use static rope of 9mm or more, not dynamic climbing rope.
- Be prepared to ascend the main pitch if needed, and to deal with problems that may arise on rope, such as a jammed descender. Prusiks are too inefficient for a pitch of this size. The rebelay 30 m down R2 must be rigged, otherwise ascent may involve a serious rub point.
- The **cave is very flood-prone**. Do not enter after heavy rain or if rain is forecast.

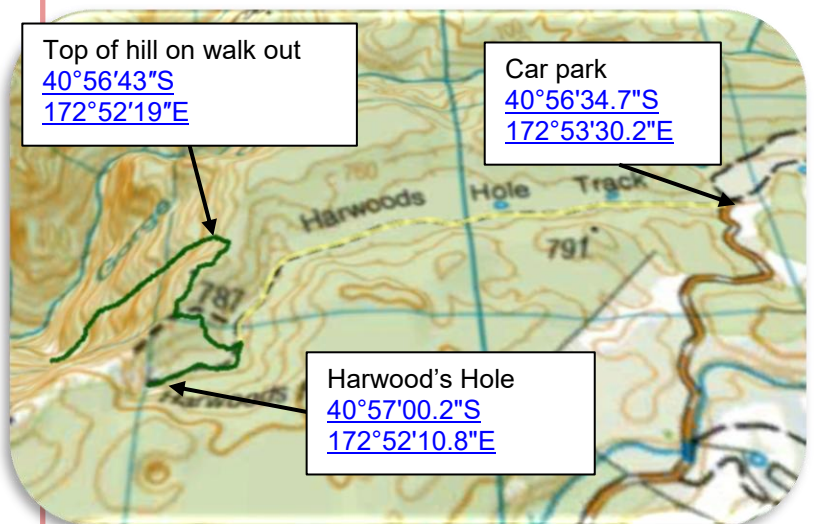
- It is sensible to leave a sign near the entrance warning tourists that cavers are below and asking them not to throw anything down the hole.
- Cave navigation is fairly straightforward in theory, but it is an intimidating place and groups have believed they were lost in the past, leading to rescues.
- **The cave is cold at about 8°C, and you will get wet.** Be properly equipped with a wetsuit, spare clothes, and adequate lighting.
- Jumps are marked on the topo, but take great care with any of them. They are likely not worth the risk.
- **The walk back up the hill is steep, rough, and only sparsely marked.** Do not underestimate it, especially in the dark.
- As with any serious trip, leave a callout time with someone. PLBs do not work underground!
- If in doubt, join your local caving club and build more experience before doing Harwood's Hole.

Map

BP25 Motueka. The green track on the map below shows the route from the cave exit back to the hole.

Approach by Car

The Harwood's Hole Track starts at the end of Canaan Downs Road, at the DOC campsite. The road is gravel but suitable for 2WD vehicles. The road end is about one hour's drive from both Motueka and Takaka.



Approach on Foot

The Harwood's Hole Track follows 2 km of beautiful open beech forest before arriving abruptly at the huge entrance shaft. Expect to pee your pants just a little at this point.

After exiting the cave, return to the Harwood's Hole Lookout via a sparsely marked route. The route begins directly opposite the cave exit, on the far side of the large loose scree slope. Look for the red star marker. From there, head straight up the second gully to the top of the hill. It is very steep, very rough, and involves about 440 m of ascent.

Rock

The cave is formed in marble. The streamway is almost entirely coated in travertine (calcium carbonate).

Water

In normal conditions, the main streamway is low to medium volume. There are many deep pools, but no turbulent whitewater. The water is very cold, although strong climbers can avoid it until near the end.

Catchment

Unknown. There are numerous sinkholes on Takaka Hill.

Anchors

Bolted anchors for the most of the rappels. Some threads and stalagmites are also used.

Gear

1 x 30m rope for R1. 1 x 200m rope for R2. At least one additional rope for the remaining rappels in the cave - a minimum of 35m is required if you split R4 into parts, though 60m is recommended. A rack-style descender. Mechanical ascenders. Full wetsuit or cave overalls with warm thermals underneath. Spare lights. Gloves for the main rappel. Walkie-talkies are useful - otherwise, carry whistles.

Route Description

The cave drops 357 m in total, with about 200 m of that in the first two rappels. The through-trip is about 1.3 km long.

Entrance setup

There are several ways to rig the main pitch (R2), which starts from a convenient takeoff ledge reached via a gully on true right (R1). One workable method is: (1) Clip the 200 m rope into an anchor near the top of the hole so it can be retrieved easily at the end of the trip. (2) Lower

the 200 m rope to the bottom of the shaft. (3) Use a separate rope to rappel the true-right gully (R1) to the takeoff ledge. (4) Tie the 200m rope, which should now hang past the ledge, into the glue-in anchors there. The trip leader can remain on the ledge and call people down R1 one at a time, taking care not to knock rocks.

Main pitch descent

The main pitch follows a slippery wall for 30m to a rebelay. At a minimum, the last person down should rig this rebelay. Without it, anyone forced to ascend the rope later will face a serious rub point. This person needs a solid head for heights, as the rebelay is free-hanging with roughly 150 m of space below.

From the rebelay, the pitch is entirely free-hanging. Use a bottom belay. The anchor on the landing rock can be used to redirect the belay to a safer position, away from rockfall.

Lower entrance chamber

Below the entrance shaft, a large loose scree slope leads down into the cave. Descend it carefully. At the junction soon after, turn left and continue along the main passage.

Upper cave rappels

Once the cave narrows, a series of rappels and downclimbs lead downward past hanging pools to the main streamway.

Main streamway

The streamway itself is quite sporty, with lots of clambering around pools and short climbs. Jumps and slides are optional. Remember that your light is probably not fully waterproof.

Calcite Gates and constrictions

From the Calcite Gates onward, the cave tightens considerably. There are several places where you climb up and over constrictions in the streamway. When in doubt, keep moving and look up. There are also a few short squeezes, including Shortie's Terror, which involves bridging across a deep pool. The squeezes are not especially tight by caving standards, but larger people will notice them.

Exit climb and Starlight Passage

The cave exit is reached by an 8m climb out of the streamway, which usually has a fixed rope on it. If you reach a series of deep pools requiring swimming, and eventually a sump, you have gone too far. The climb is not technical, but it is exposed. Have the first climber belay the others up.

At the top of the climb is Starlight Passage, which does not flood but is fragile. Please do not touch the formations, as they discolour easily. From there, drop back down toward daylight and make the unavoidable wade across Blue Lake.

HARWOOD'S HOLE

Cave v5a2IV ★★☆☆

Topo by Richard Bramley

www.nsg.org, www.kiwicanyons.org

Page 2

Time

Trip times vary a lot. Expect around 8 to 12 hours car to car. Indicative times are:

| | |
|-----------------------|------------|
| Car park to hole | 45m |
| Rigging of main pitch | 1h |
| Descent of main pitch | 1h30m |
| Cave descent | 3h |
| Walk back to hole | 1h30m |
| Derig of main pitch | 1h30m |
| Walk back to car park | 45m |
| Total | 10h |

Flash Flood Danger

From the Calcite Gates onward, there are several sections where there is only a small amount of airspace and the cave can flood right to the roof. Do not enter after heavy rain. After a major rain event, it may take several days for water levels to drop. Do not enter if rain is forecast. If there is significant running water at the main pitch or at the first 8m downclimb, the cave may be impassable.

Escapes

There are only two real escapes: the entrance and the exit. Rig the rebelay on the main pitch so the party can ascend back out if necessary.

Notes

DOC prohibits commercial trips in the cave.

The first descent was made in 1959 by winch. The memorial is for Peter Lambert, who was struck by a rock while being winched into the cave.

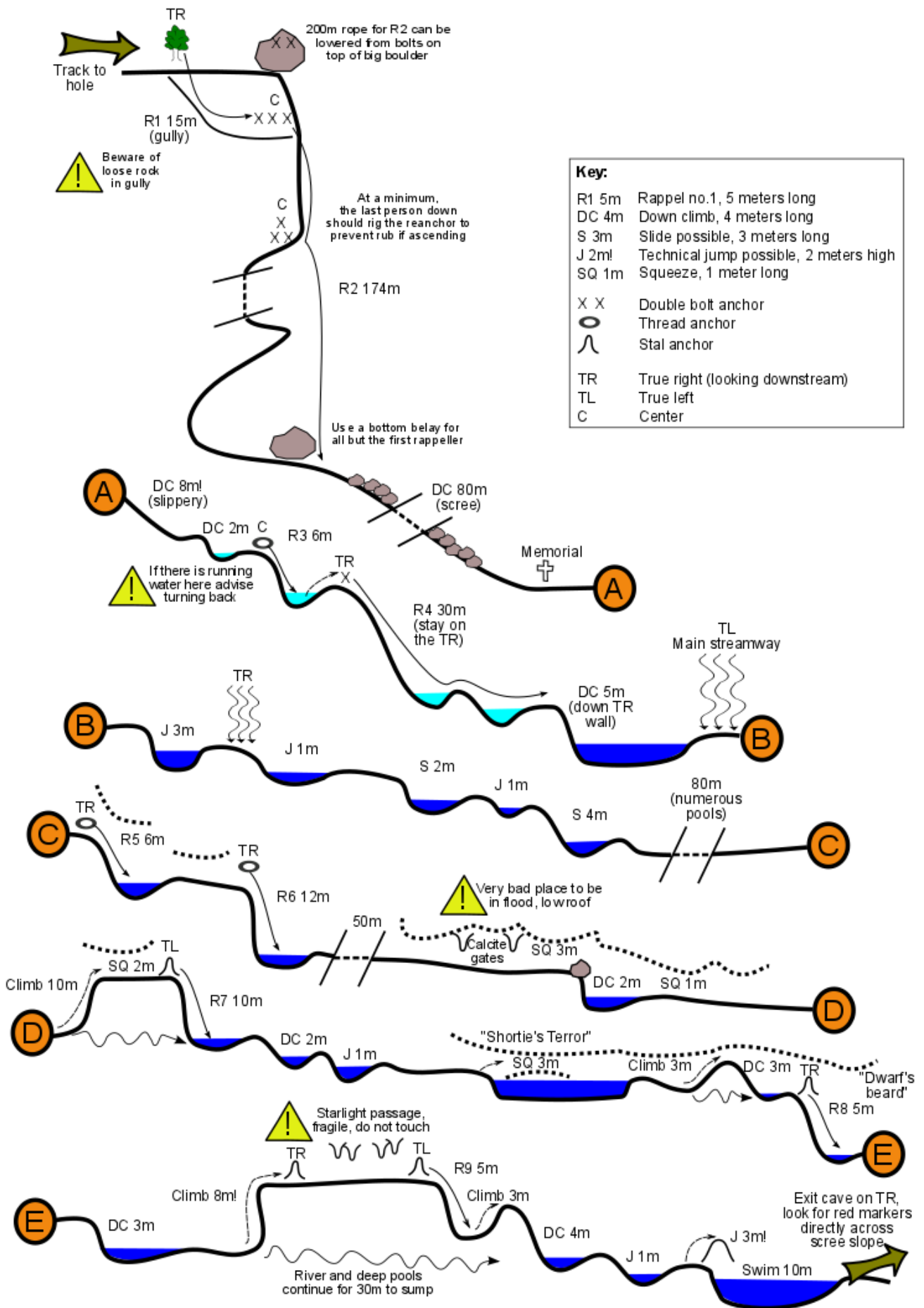
Contact [NSG](#) for more info.

HARWOOD'S HOLE

Cave v5a2IV ★★☆☆

Topo by Richard Bramley
www.nsg.org, www.kiwicanyons.org

Page 3



HARWOOD'S HOLE

Cave v5a2IV ★★★★★

Topo by Richard Bramley
www.nsg.org, www.kiwicanyons.org



The main pitch
Photo by Toine Houtenbos



Deep pools a plenty
Photo by Nic Barth



Justin Venable filling his
pants at the take-off ledge
Photo by Richard Bramley



A rack-style descender
Photo by Lee Den Haan

HARWOOD'S HOLE

Cave v5a2IV ★★☆☆

Topo by Richard Bramley
www.nsg.org, www.kiwicanyons.org