



MARCUS THOMAS

New Zealand Caveman

INTERVIEWED BY SUSAN PARIS



School Journal Story Library is a targeted series that supplements other instructional series texts. It provides additional scaffolds and supports for teachers to use to accelerate students' literacy learning.

Marcus Thomas: New Zealand Caveman has been carefully levelled. While the contexts and concepts link to English, science, and social sciences at level 4 of the curriculum, the text has a reading year level of years 5 to 6.

Teacher support material (available at www.schooljournalstorylibrary.tki.org.nz) contains key information to help teachers to provide the additional support and scaffolding that some students may need to meet the specific reading, writing, and curriculum demands of *Marcus Thomas: New Zealand Caveman*.

A young man in a red caving suit and helmet with a headlamp, standing in a cave with stalactites.

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Introduction

Many people enjoy extreme sports. For some, the thrill is in climbing the highest mountains. For others, it's in exploring the ocean's depths. Marcus Thomas is a bit different. As a caver, he chooses to play in the dark.

But what sort of person would choose to spend their **leisure time** underground? What skills does a caver need? Marcus answers these questions and more ...





How did you get into caving?

When I was young, I read a lot of adventure stories and books about **mountaineering**. Then one day, I saw a **documentary** about the Nettlebed cave system near Nelson. While watching that film, something in me ignited. Caving – that’s what I wanted to do!

There were no caves where I lived in Christchurch. But I got out books from the library, and I was given a copy of the *New Zealand Cave Atlas*. I would spend hours reading the maps of the caves. I noticed that some of the maps had question marks on them. This meant that maybe those caves had not been fully explored. In the back of the book, there was an address for the New Zealand **Speleological** Society.

So I sent them a letter.

What was your first caving experience?

I was twelve years old. A family friend was also interested in caving, so we went on a day trip to Nettlebed. At the time, this was the deepest, longest cave in New Zealand.

The walk to the cave took three hours. I didn't know what a cave entrance looked like – but it was unmistakable. It was a dripping, dark tunnel sloping down into the hillside. A cold wind blew out of the cave mouth. We crept carefully through passages and **chambers**. Sometimes we passed deep holes in the floor. The **stalactites** and white **flowstone formations** were very beautiful.

When we got home, I looked at a map of the cave. We had only explored a very small part of a huge **network** that went deep into the mountain. I couldn't wait to go back!



Stalactite formations





Climbing down ropes at Waitomo

What did caving offer you that other sports didn't?

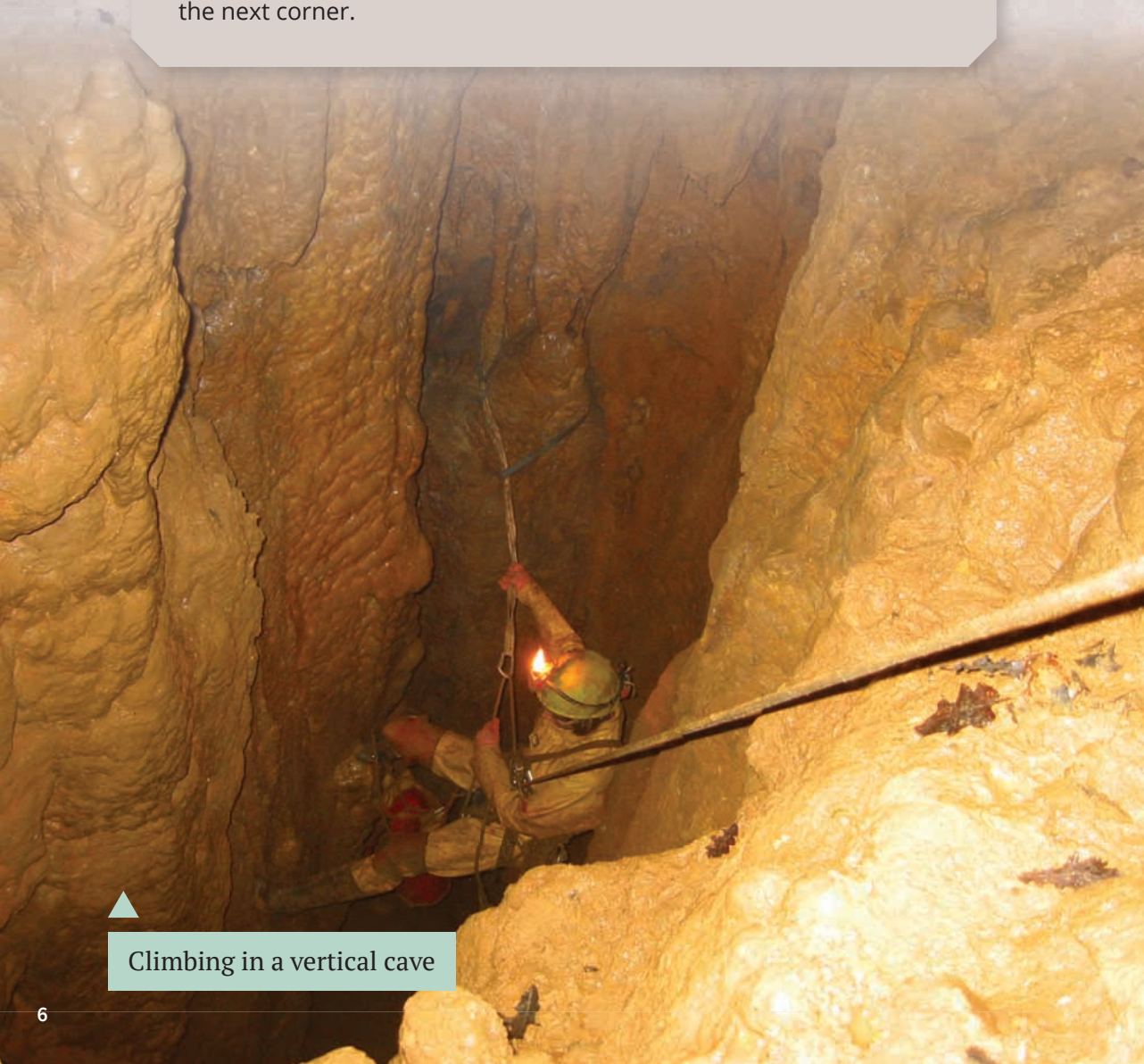
I played football, and I enjoyed the team spirit. But I didn't spend all week thinking about football like I did about caving. When I was fourteen, I was living in Auckland, so I joined the local speleological group. I started going on club trips to Waitomo. These would last all weekend, so there wasn't much time for other sports.

The Auckland group had all kinds of people in it. There were lots of different ages and abilities, but together, we shared a common goal – to explore underground. The good climbers helped others. The strong ones carried packs when people got tired and someone always had a tasty snack to share! I also really enjoyed the technical side of caving, such as learning how to use ropes to get up and down cave walls.

What skills does a caver need?

Caving can be done by anyone – but different caves need different skills. Some caves are **vertical**, and this means a lot of rope work. Other caves are very small, which means having to squeeze through tight spaces. Cavers call a tight space a “squeeze”.

Alpine caving is really challenging. Alpine cavers need to have good technical skills, and they need to be very fit. But most caves just require a bit of curiosity. Cavers all really want to know what’s around the next corner.



▲ Climbing in a vertical cave

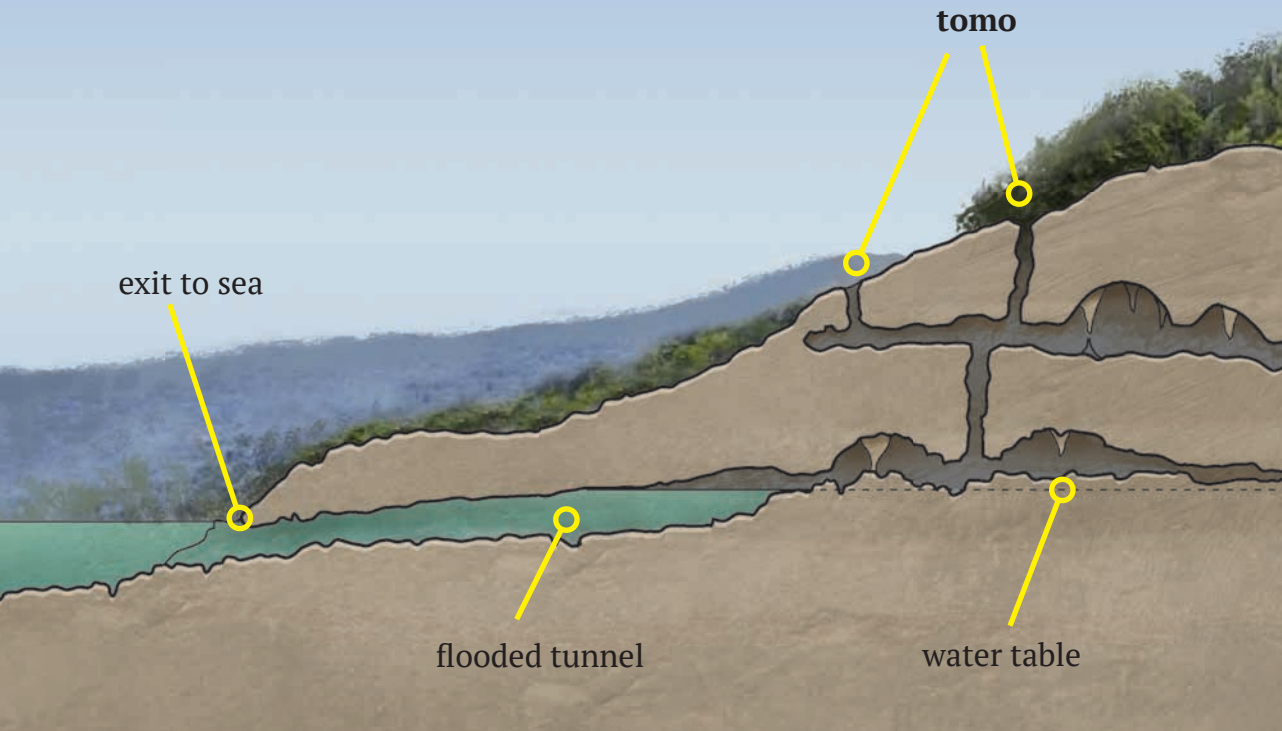


Cavers using lights to find their way

What do you like about caving?

I like looking at the maps for clues. Is there more to find? It's a huge buzz to shine a light into a tunnel or chamber that has never been seen by anyone before. And you never know what surprises a cave is hiding. I also love sharing that moment of discovery with others. There's nothing like coming out after days underground with a story to tell and a map to draw.

Cross-section of a cave



Caving equipment

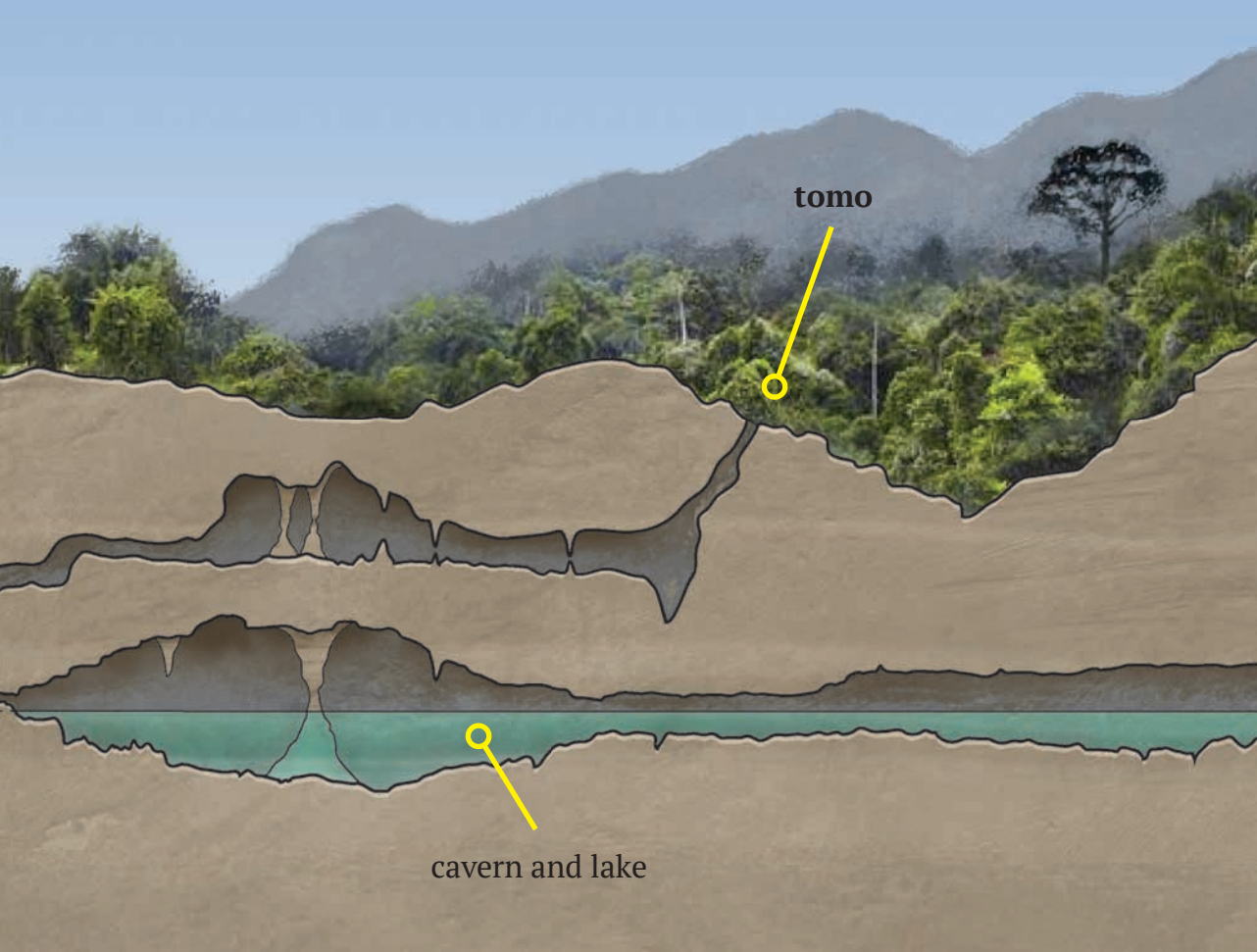


boots

climbing rope

head lamp

helmet



compass

climbing harness

tape measure

overalls

What don't you like about caving?

Exploring a cave can be fairly uncomfortable. It's always very cold. Most alpine caves are around 4-5 degrees, and of course there are no hot showers. That means putting up with being really dirty. It's hard work carrying packs and ropes - but all that is quickly forgotten. I would say there's not much I dislike about caving! Every trip is different, and it's never boring. Last year, I spent at least a month underground on different trips. This takes me away from my family, which is the only real downside.



Cavers camping underground





How do you stay safe?

Some caves, especially the big ones, are very remote. If there is an emergency, help can be many days away. Cellphones and **personal locator beacons** don't work underground, so once you're inside a cave, you're on your own. Safety is *very* important. We follow some simple rules:

- Each person must have three good sources of light.
- Always cave with at least two other people.
- Make sure you have outdoor survival skills.
- Most importantly, always tell someone where you're going and when you'll be back.



▲ A caver being rescued

What has been your scariest caving moment?

If you do something for long enough, you will always have a few scary experiences. One time, two friends became trapped when a passage filled with water. We had been exploring a dry passage and digging out a section where the roof nearly met the floor. I went away and returned half an hour later to find the dig filled with water and my friends gone. Unknown to us, it had started raining above ground. This caused the passage to flood. There was no way I could get to them. Luckily, they had explored the area where they were trapped and found a very tight passage. They just managed to squeeze through and escape.



▲
A caver in a “squeeze”



What are the caves like in New Zealand?

We are very lucky. We have some fantastic caves. Some of them are world famous because of their size, depth, and unusual features. Our glow-worm displays can be amazing. We also have some very long, very deep caves. The explored part of the Bulmer Cavern near Nelson is 72 kilometres long. This makes it the longest cave in New Zealand and the second longest in the Southern Hemisphere. In the next few years, we hope to explore the Bulmer Cavern to over 100 kilometres!

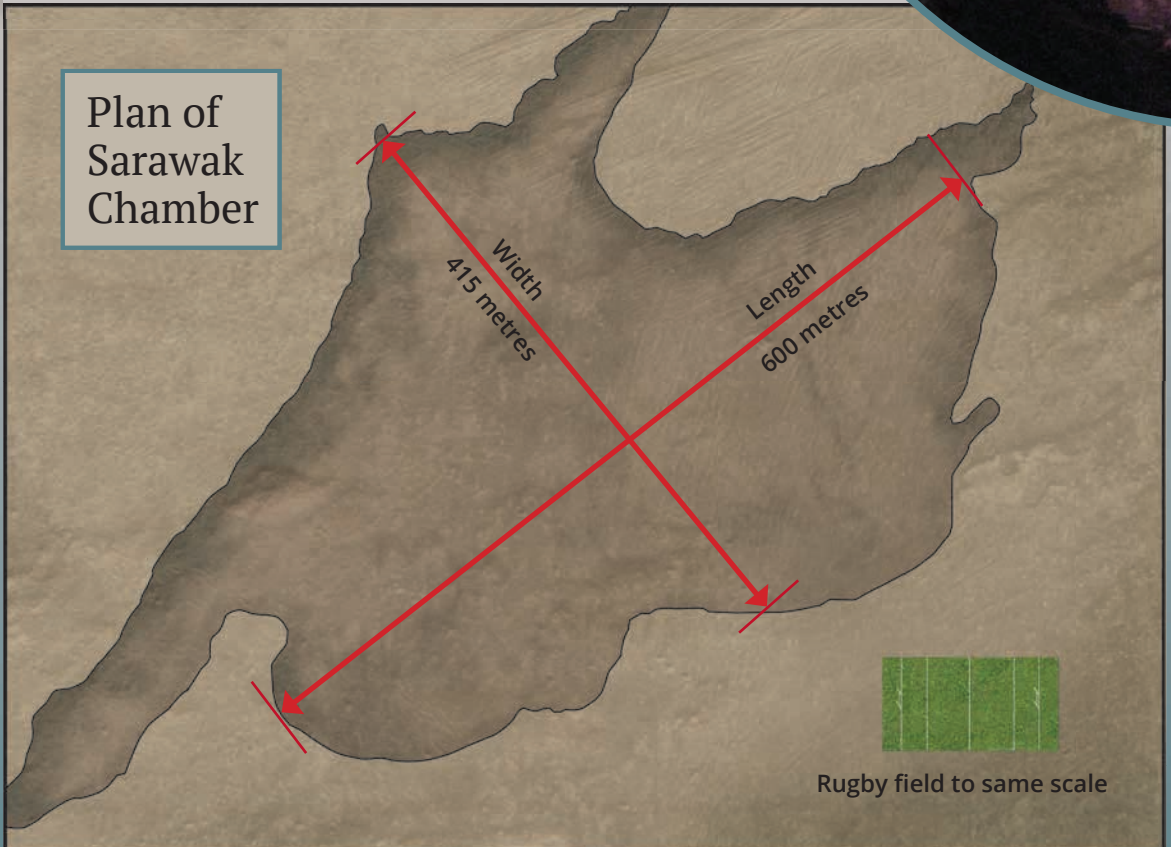
▲
Glow-worms lighting up the cave

Have you ever been caving overseas?

I have done a little bit of caving overseas – but of course I would love to do more. Many people think that France is the birthplace of modern caving, and there are some amazing underground journeys you can do there. China, Borneo, and Mexico all have huge caves, with lots of exploring still to do. Some of these caves are very remote, in jungles or mountain landscapes, which have their own hazards. The world's largest cave chamber is the Sarawak Chamber in Borneo.




Plan of Sarawak Chamber



How does someone become a caver?

Anyone can contact the New Zealand Speleological Society. The society connects people with cavers and clubs in their area. The caving community in New Zealand is pretty small, but it's very welcoming. Caving clubs run regular trips for people of all skill levels.

Caves are fragile places. It's important that anyone new to caving learns respect for the environment. Walk carefully and softly – take only photos, leave only footprints. It takes just one careless caver to cause damage that can never be undone.

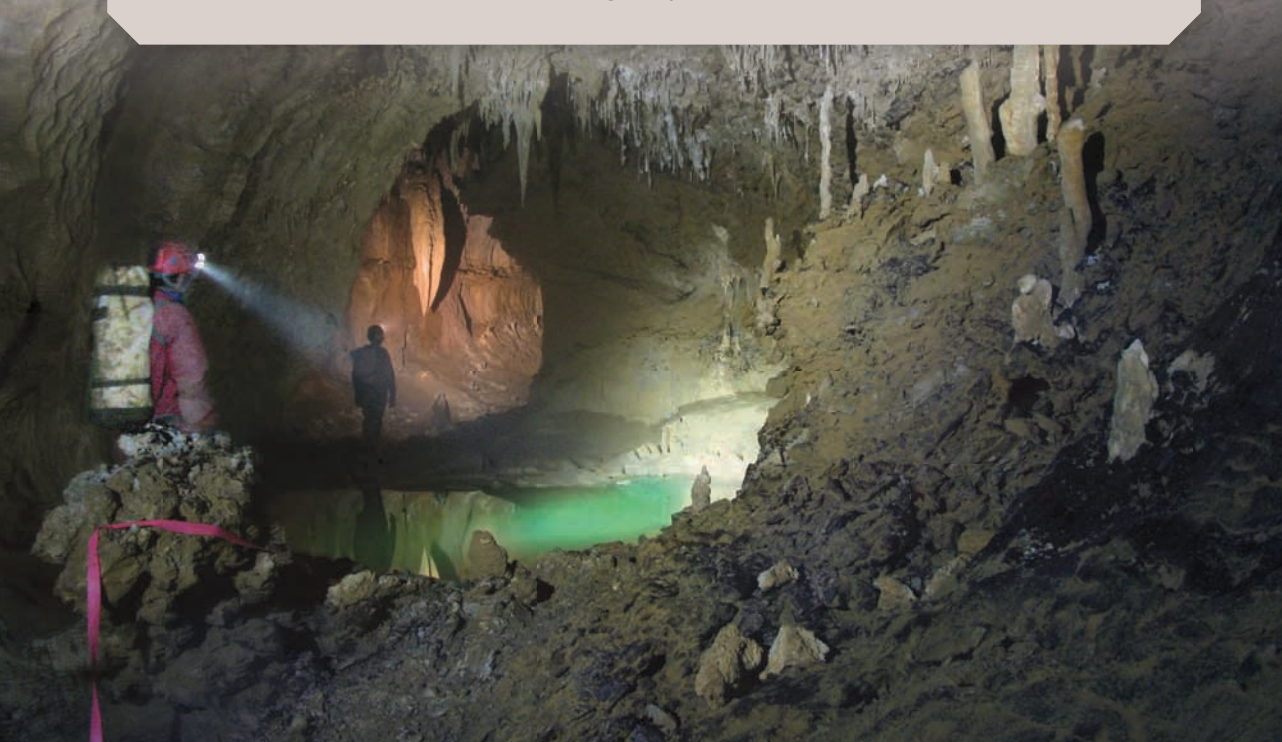


Fragile cave formations



Glossary

alpine:	high mountains
chambers:	large underground spaces
documentary:	a film showing real events
flowstone formations:	sheet-like rock formations, formed where water flows down the walls or along the floors of a cave
leisure time:	time when someone is not working
mountaineering:	climbing mountains
network:	lots of passages and chambers joined together
personal locator beacons:	electronic devices that show where you are if you are in danger or need rescuing
speleological:	to do with caving
stalactites:	stony spikes hanging from the roof of a cave
tomo:	a hole in limestone rock
vertical:	straight up and down



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