

Mine *to know*

On Tasmania's West Coast, visitors can experience the world of the copper miner, two kilometres beneath the Earth's surface

The opportunity to observe a mine in operation exists only at Queenstown in Tasmania; no other mines in Australia offer this experience. Enthusiasts from throughout the world make the journey to see a functioning mine for themselves, run by Vedanta Resources/Copper Mines of Tasmania. Fully accredited by Tourism Tasmania, Douggie's Underground Mine Tours began operating in October 2002 and have already attracted more than 3500 visitors.

According to tour operator Doug Hayden, 'What visitors experience is often beyond what they imagine ... We must adhere to the strict safety rules of the mining company, and daily mining operations dictate how our tours are conducted'.

For a visiting friend from the United States and me, the thought of being two kilometres underground, and journeying through the belly of a mine, triggered an immediate feeling of claustrophobia. After a few deep breaths, however, I agreed to accompany my eager friend on the tour. We arrived in sleepy Queenstown and parked in the main street. A woman passerby, clad in overalls and smiles, directed us to the departure point.

We completed some paperwork and prepared to climb into our real-life mining gear. Giant mining boots were lined up along a side wall. We each slipped into a pair and giggled nervously at the chunks of dry mud stuck to the outsides. We



were then fitted with bright yellow safety vests and provided with earplugs and safety glasses. Lastly, we were supplied with a life-saving canister known as a 'self rescuer' that enables you to breathe in case of emergency. I studied the instructions carefully, ensuring I knew how to operate my new silver 'friend'.

'It's very simple,' declared Douggie. 'You either wear the self rescuer or you don't come down into the mine. Everyone entering the mine must wear one.' Douggie smiled at his two nervous 'miners-to-be' and pointed us in the direction of his vehicle. He helped us, in our giant boots, aboard the big, sturdy LandCruiser.

Our guide chatted cheerily as we trundled up the hill and entered the Mt Lyell mine area. With the creek beside the road glowing a vibrant orange, we were entering a very unfamiliar world. Before going underground, Douggie explained safety procedures and provided each of us with a safety helmet and a headlamp with its accompanying battery. At this stage our belts weighed five kilograms and we felt fully prepared.

It was now time to farewell the sunshine and head into the mine. We drove several hundred metres to the tunnel opening. It was at this point

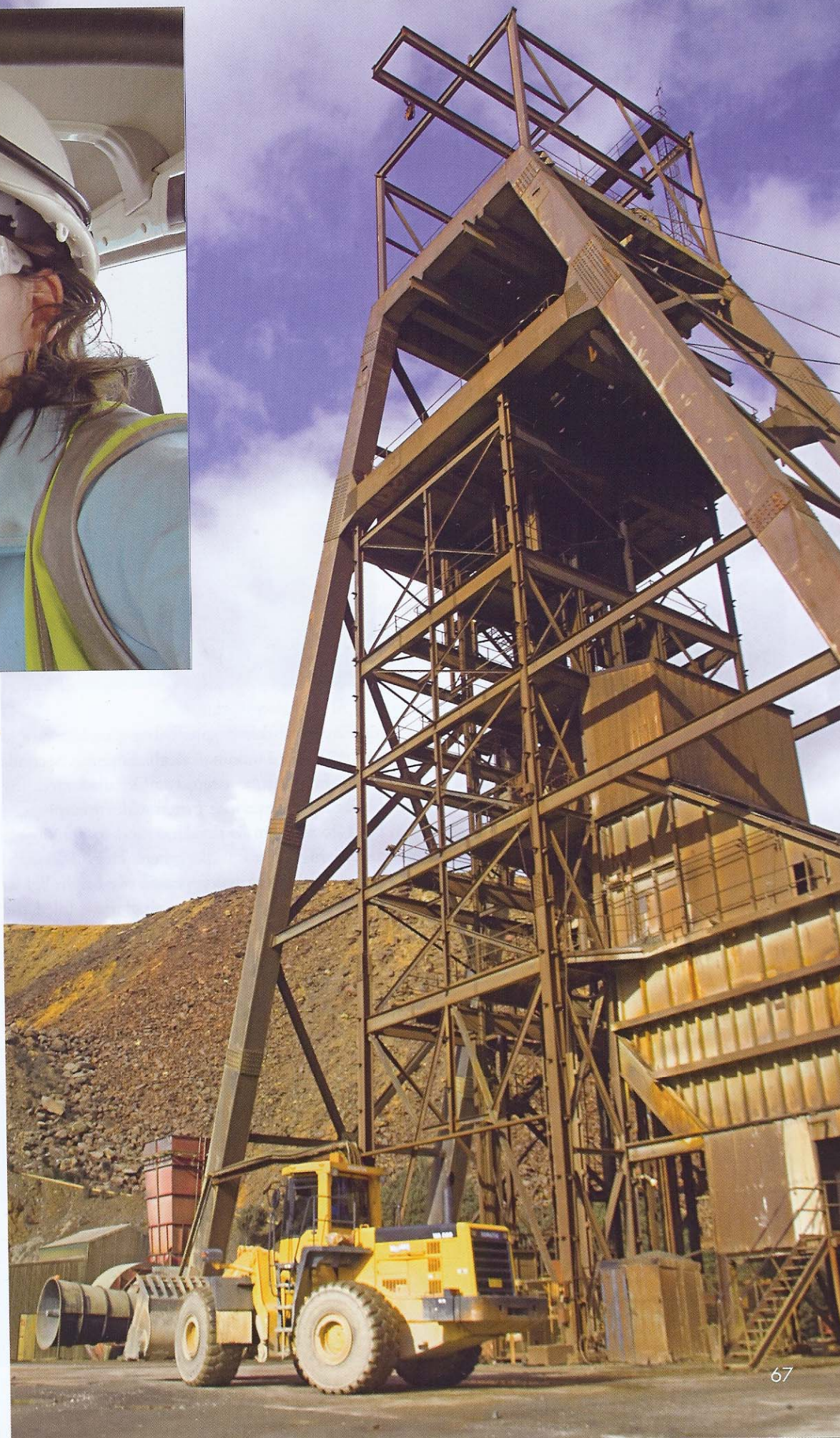
WRITER
Alice Hansen

PHOTOGRAPHER
Ricky Eaves



ABOVE
Writer, Alice
Hansen, and
Katie Jenette

RIGHT
Pit head,
Mount Lyell





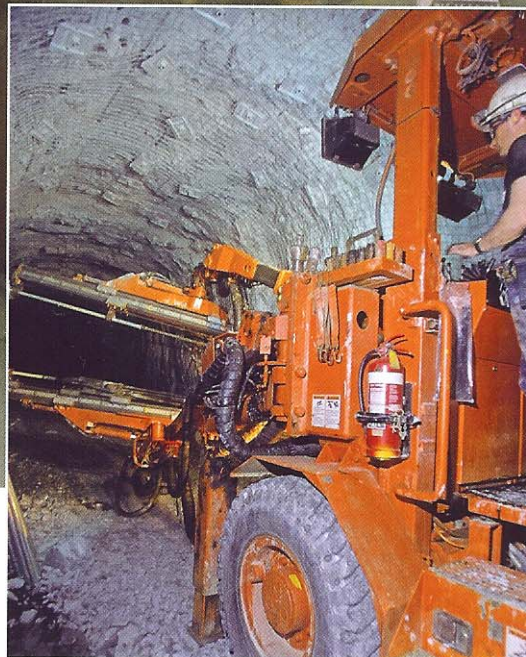
that my pulse began to race as I realised that the tunnel would be swallowing us up in a matter of seconds. The rocky descent was steep, and, looking back, I had a final glimpse of daylight. I stared wide-eyed at my companion, and in my excitement, blinded her with my headlamp!

As we travelled deeper underground on our seven-kilometre journey, Dougie pointed out a sign on the wall that indicates sea level.

At approximately two kilometres below ground, our guide found a small turn-off to park our vehicle. Through the underground communication system he is made constantly aware of truck movements and mining operations for the duration of our tour. Then he cut the engine and told us to keep our headlamps off. We sat in total blackness and a whole new wave of anxiety overtook me. Seeing absolutely nothing is a serious challenge if you've never before experienced total darkness. It is part of Dougie's routine for visitors to experience such a sensation in case of power failure. I must admit my relief at finding the headlamp switch when we were given the command to light up.

Our walking tour then began. It involved nearly one-and-a-half hours on foot through varied conditions as we explored the workings of the mine. The air was surprisingly cool and fresh – the mine's ventilation system is highly effective.

I convinced myself that I was beginning to feel comfortable experiencing the environment



Underground at
Mount Lyell

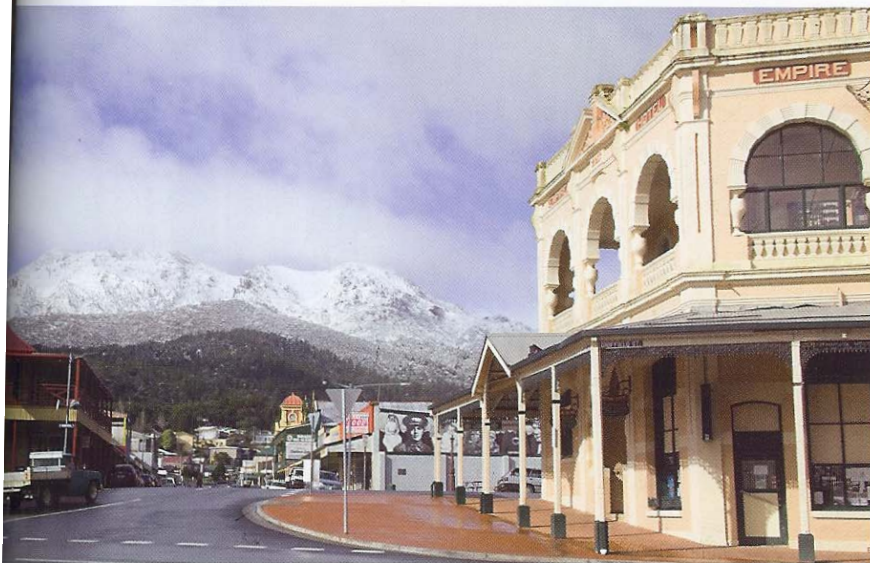
OPPOSITE
Queenstown

of a mine worker despite being acutely aware of the millions of tonnes of earth above me. Seconds later, however, a deep rumble distracted my thought processes as it penetrated my earplugs.

I looked up with alarm and saw Dougie beckoning us to walk faster. Then I saw it. Through the darkness appeared two bright lights. An extraordinarily large mining truck filled the tunnel like a cork in a wine bottle – the tunnel is just large enough for the Tasmanian-built Caterpillar Elphinstone loaders and Caterpillar dump trucks. The truck roared towards us, its headlights beaming ominously. At this stage I realised that the mud-caked, knee-high boots on my shaking feet could carry me quite briskly. We hurried to a tunnel offshoot and stood in awe.

The truck's wheels alone were taller than a man. We stood and watched as the monster thundered down the tunnel. The sight of that first truck was overwhelming. It was reassuring to know that Dougie knows every corner of the mine.

We visited the large maintenance workshops that are lit up like day, as well as tiny hidey-holes for Porta-loos. The miners at their work stations were all very friendly.



Further information

Dougie's Underground
Mine Tours


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Queenstown
Tel: 0407 049 612

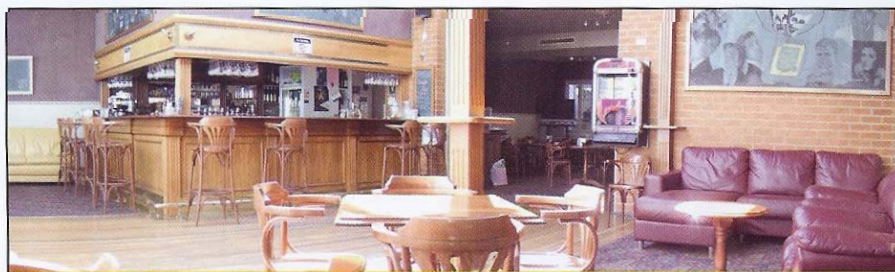
Bookings are essential; although full access is usually available, it depends on the day-to-day operation of the mine and is at the discretion of the mining company and its contractors. For example, there may be maintenance days that preclude access to some or all parts of the mine. The tour is quite physically demanding and you will need full mobility and a moderate level of fitness.

We saw a large conveyor belt carrying smaller (non-truck-sized) rocks. Our guide stretched out his hand above the belt and invited us to do the same. We tentatively raised our hands and felt the amazing sensation of warmth from the rocks that still carry heat from deep within the Earth.

It seemed that every tunnel offered another strange sensation or experience. We were invited to peer down shafts that drop hundreds of metres and are used to transport ore in large metal bins. We talked to mining operators in charge of control panels that resemble airline cockpits.

At the conclusion of our tour we were taken to observe the famous crusher. This huge device, which looks like a gigantic pair of grinding teeth, is able to easily reduce boulders to small-sized rocks.

Completely captivated by our experience, we were disappointed when the LandCruiser appeared. As we slowly climbed back up the path into the sunlight we agreed that our trip below the Earth's surface was one of the most memorable experiences of our lives. 

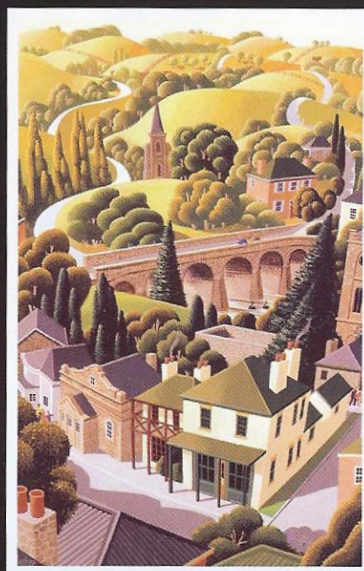


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