



# HARWOOD'S HOLE



Cave v5a2IV ★★ ★



This topo describes a 'canyoning' style trip through Harwood's Hole cave. It is written for skilled canyoning who also have previous caving experience. Be familiar with both canyoning and caving techniques before doing this trip. Get it wrong and you may find yourself on the national news, which would be a crappy way to get famous.

## Location

Canaan Downs, Takaka Hill.

## Character

Arguably the best caving day trip in all of New Zealand. Perhaps one of the best in the world!? The 200m hole gets all the attention, but the cave itself is very beautiful and lots of fun. Because the cave can be done as a pull-through trip in a wetsuit, it is like descending a canyon, but with extra intimidation.

## Warnings

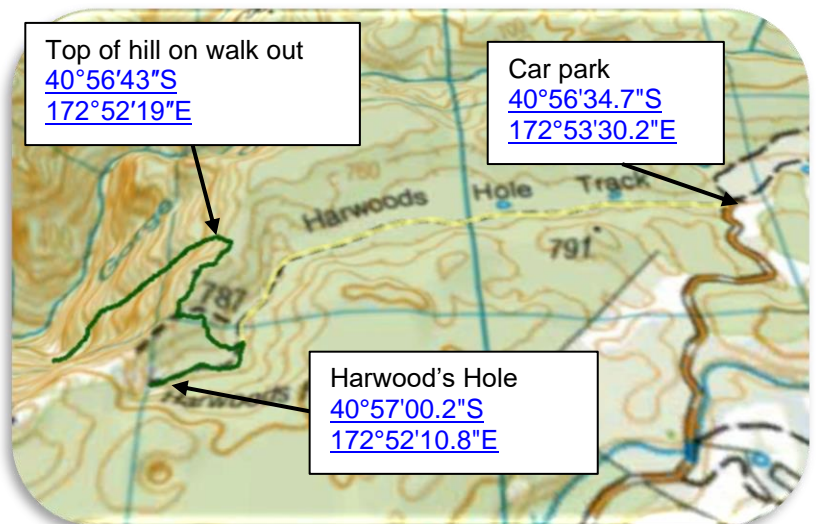
Harwood's Hole (and Starlight Cave below) is a serious undertaking, even for experienced cavers. It is not just a big rappel and a walk out. There have been multiple rescues due to parties being unprepared. Read the full [DOC guidelines](#), but in particular:

- This topo describes a canyoning-style pull-through trip (except for R1 and R2, which you derig afterwards). There may be fixed rigging in the cave, which is infrequently replaced and gets damaged by floods. Fixed ropes have snapped on people in the past, so either avoid using them altogether or check them carefully. Some of the fixed rigging may follow a different line to the sequence of rappels described in this topo.
- Only use a 'rack' style descender (see [Aspiring](#) or [Access Gear](#)) for the big rappel. Other types (ATCs, figure 8s, etc.) can and have melted the rope, leading to the sheath separating. Expect high friction at the top and much less towards the bottom (as the weight of the rope beneath reduces). A leg wrap helps. Only use static rope (10mm or more), not dynamic climbing rope.
- Be ready to ascend back up the main pitch if necessary, and to deal with any problems that can occur on rope (e.g. your descender jamming). Prusiks are too inefficient to ascend such a big pitch. Rig the rebelay 30m down R2, or you will be unable to ascend (if needed) without a serious rub point.

- The cave is very flood prone, don't enter after heavy rain or if it is forecast.
- It is a good idea to leave a sign near the hole entrance to warn tourists that cavers are below and not to throw things down the hole.
- Although in theory navigation through the cave is pretty straight-forward, it is an intimidating place and groups have thought they were 'lost' in the past, requiring rescue.
- The cave is very cold (8 degrees) and you will get wet. Be prepared (wetsuit, spare clothes etc.)
- Although jumps are marked on the topo, be very careful doing any. Being wet/cold will make hypothermia likely if you were to bust an ankle or leg.
- The walk back up the hill is sparsely marked, but is very rough and steep. Do not underestimate it, particularly at night time.
- As with all such trips, make sure you have left a call out time with someone. PLBs don't work very well underground!
- If in doubt, join your local caving club and get some experience before doing Harwood's Hole.

## Map

BP25 Motueka (the green track 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. Canaan Downs

Road is a gravel road but 2WD suitable. The road end is a one hour drive from both Motueka and Takaka.

## Approach on Foot

The Harwood's Hole track makes its way through 2km of beautiful open beech forest, until arriving abruptly at a huge gaping hole. Expect to pee your pants just a little at this point.

Once you exit the cave, there is a sparsely marked route back up to the Harwood's Hole Lookout (which is signposted part way along the main track). The route starts directly opposite the cave exit on the other side of the large, loose scree slope. Look for the red star marker. It then heads straight up the second gully to the top of the hill. It is very rough and very steep, with approximately 440m of ascent.

## Rock

The cave is formed in Marble. The streamway is almost entirely coated in Travertine (calcium carbonate).

## Water

The main streamway is low to medium volume in normal conditions. There are numerous deep pools, but no turbulent white water. The water is very cold, although it can be avoided till near the end if you are a good climber.

## Catchment

Unknown. Numerous sink holes on Takaka Hill.

## Anchors

Predominantly threads and stalagmites. Bolted anchors for the main rappel.

## Gear

1 x 30m (R1), 1 x 200m (R2), and 1 x 60m rope (for all the other rappels). A rack style descender. Mechanical ascenders. Full wetsuit. Spare lights. Gloves for the big rappel. Walkie talkies are handy, otherwise take whistles.

## Route Description

The cave drops 357m in total, ~200m of this in the first two rappels. It is 1.3km long.

There are several ways to rig the main pitch (R2), which starts from a convenient take off ledge that is accessed via a gully on the true right (R1). One possible approach:

- (1) Clip the 200m rope into an anchor of some sort near the top of the hole. This is only so that you can easily retrieve the rope from there at the end of the trip.
- (2) Lower the 200m rope down to the bottom of the hole.

(3) Use a separate rope (>15m) to rappel the gully on the TR (R1) down to the take-off ledge.

(4) Tie the 200m rope (which should be dangling past the take-off ledge) into the glue-in anchors at the ledge. The trip leader can be stationed here and can call people down the R1 gully one by one (being very mindful of knocking rocks).

The 200m rappel follows a slippery wall for 30m to a rebelay. At a minimum, the last person down should rig the rebelay, or there will be a serious rub point if the group is forced to ascend the rope for some reason. That person needs a good head for heights, as the rebelay is free-hanging with ~150m of space below! From the rebelay, the pitch is entirely free-hanging. A bottom ('firemans') belay should be used – use the anchor on the landing rock to redirect the belay to a safe place away from rockfall.

After the hole itself, there is a large loose scree slope that you can (carefully) walk down. At the junction shortly after, turn left and follow the main passageway.

Once the cave narrows, there are a series of rappels and downclimbs (you can stick to the right-hand wall the whole way, despite what the fixed rigging does), past hanging pools, that take you down to the main streamway.

The streamway is quite sporty, with lots of clambering around pools and up and down short climbs. Jumps and slides are strictly optional – remember your light is probably not waterproof!

From the Calcite Gates onwards, the cave tightens significantly. There are a few climbs up and over constrictions in the streamway – when in doubt keep going and look up. There are some short squeezes, including 'shortie's terror' which involves bridging out across a deep pool. The squeezes are not particularly tight by caving standards, but large people will remember them afterwards.

The exit to the cave is reached via an 8m climb out of the streamway. If you come across a series of deep pools that require swimming (and eventually a sump), you've gone too far. The climb itself is not technical but it is exposed, so send your best climber first and get them to belay the others up. At the top of the climb is Starlight passage, which does not flood and is fragile, so please do not touch the formations (they discolour if touched). Then drop back down to a glimpse of daylight and an unavoidable wade across Blue Lake.

## Time

Total time varies significantly. Expect 8-12 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

# HARWOOD'S HOLE

Cave v5a2IV ★★☆☆

*Topo by Richard Bramley*

[www.nsg.org](http://www.nsg.org), [www.kiwicanyons.org](http://www.kiwicanyons.org)

Walk back to hole	1h30m
Derig of main pitch	1h30m
Walk back to car park	45m
<b>Total</b>	<b>10h</b>

## Flash Flood Danger

Extreme. From the Calcite Gates onwards, there are a number of places where there is only a small amount of airspace and the cave floods to the roof. Don't enter the cave after heavy rain (it usually takes a few days to drop after a big rain event) or if rain is forecast. Once you have pulled your first rope (R3) you may not be able to retreat and you have not yet seen the main streamway. If there is significant running water at the main pitch or at the first down climb (8m), it is possible that the cave is impassable.

## Escapes

Only the entrance and exit. Rig the rebelay on the big pitch so that the group can ascend back up if necessary. Existing fixed ropes may allow retreat from the main streamway back to R2, but do not count on it.

## Notes

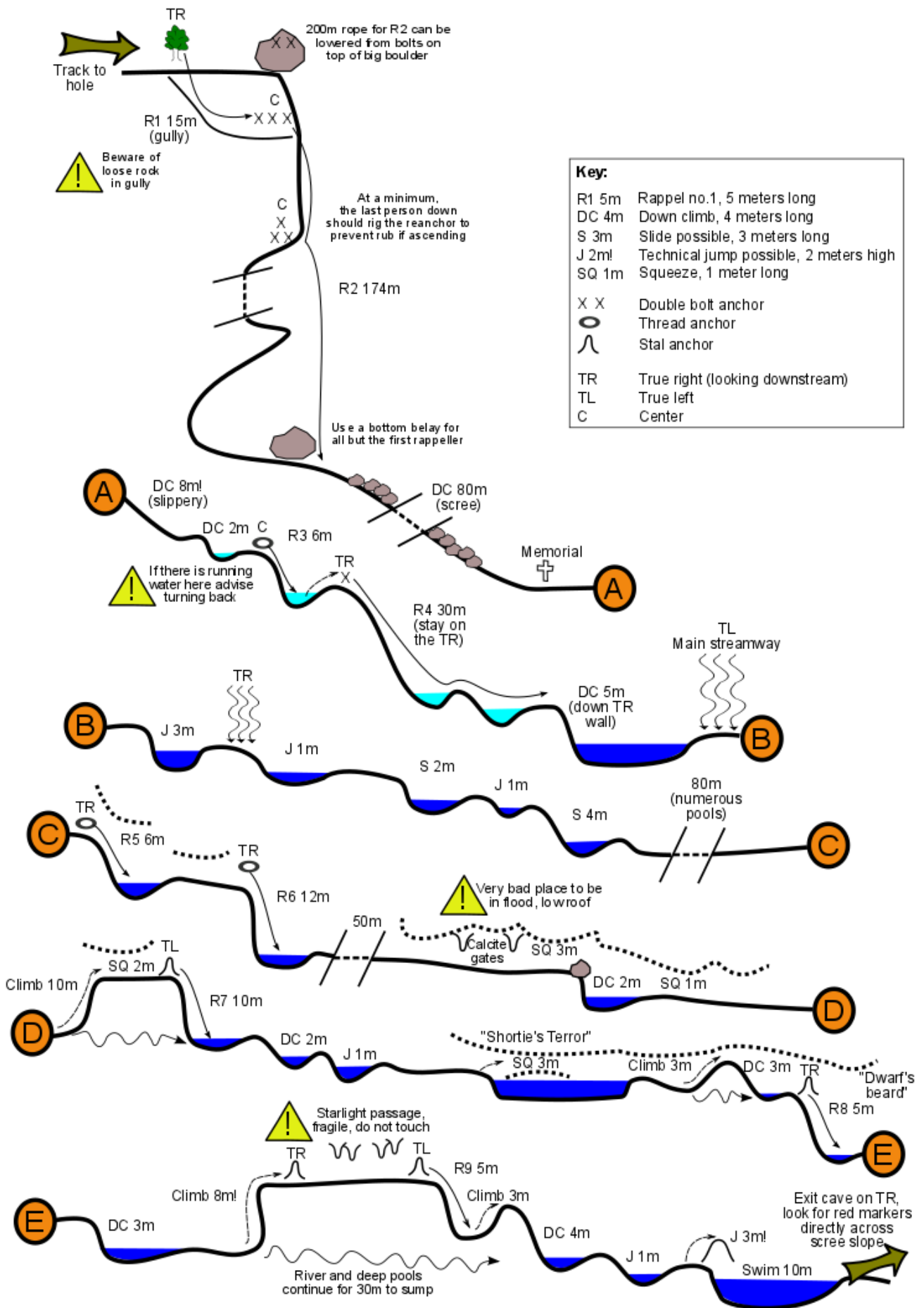
DOC currently prohibits commercial trips in the cave.

First descent in 1959 via winch. The memorial is for Peter Lambert who was struck by a rock when winching into the cave. Contact [NSG](#) for more info.

# HARWOOD'S HOLE

Cave v5a2IV ★★☆☆

*Topo by Richard Bramley*  
[www.nsg.org](http://www.nsg.org), [www.kiwicanyons.org](http://www.kiwicanyons.org)



# 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](http://www.nsg.org), [www.kiwicanyons.org](http://www.kiwicanyons.org)