



MYSTERIOUS: The Undara tubes are the world's largest and longest lava tubes – a series of tunnels created when molten volcanic lava surged across the land some 190,000 years ago

Take the tube for a glimpse of the past

By **CAROLINE BERDON**

AFTER a demanding day at work, most people hit the gym, share a drink with friends or collapse in front of the television. Andrew Sturges disappears down a lava tube.

"I love it, because your brain's got no choice but to stop," he says. "You've got nothing to focus on."

Luckily for Andrew, he is surrounded by the dark, silent lava tubes. He is the resort manager of Undara Experience, a bush camp in northwest Queensland, on the eastern edge of the ruggedly beautiful Gulf Savannah.

The lodge sits on top of some of the world's largest and longest lava tubes — a series of mysterious tunnels created when molten volcanic lava surged across the land during an eruption some 190,000 years ago.

It is just after nightfall and Andrew has taken us to the mouth of one of the tubes, where there is quite a frenzy going on. There are about three quarters of a million micro bats breeding in these dark holes beneath the Savannah, and tonight they are flapping about crazily.

If these surroundings are not bizarre enough, we return to camp and settle in for the night in an old train carriage, despite the fact we must be nearly 40km away from the nearest rail track.

There are 32 train carriages at the Undara camp that once



INVITING: The tubes (above and below) are in the centre of Australia's McBride volcanic province, an expanse covering 3000sq km



ran as part of the Sunlander train between Brisbane and Cairns. Ours is a joy to stay in: there is room for a comfortable big bed, the luggage racks provide acres of storage, and the ensuite uses the train toilet's original flip-down sink.

Undara is in the centre of Australia's McBride volcanic province, an expanse covering 3000sq km and home to 160 volcanoes — all remnants of an ancient mountain range.

"Every little bump you see is a volcano," says our guide, Steven O'Callaghan. "They

pretty much litter the landscape. Most people don't realise there's that many volcanoes in Australia."

It is one of these volcanoes — the Undara Volcano — that caused the lava tubes when it erupted 190,000 years ago.

As Undara's lava gushed

If you go

Undara Experience: call (07) 4097 1900, email res@undara.com.au or visit www.undara.com.au.

Undara is 275km from Cairns. The Savannahlander train runs between Cairns and Mt Surprise, the closest town to Undara. Call 1800 793 848 or visit www.savannahlander.com.au

downhill along dry river beds, the exposed layer on top cooled and crusted. But the fiery magma below continued to flow through the tubes, making them longer and longer. When the eruption finally stopped, the lava drained out of the tubes,

leaving behind a series of long, hollow tunnels.

One of Undara's lava flows made it 163km to the Einasleigh River. In modern geological time, this is the longest lava flow on Earth from a single volcano.

Since then, roof collapses have left the longest remaining section of about 500m.

These collapses have created a curious geological wonder: dark and moist micro climates where rainforest plants and evergreen vines thrive. This is the vegetation that covered the area 200,000 years ago — before it was blacked out by lava, and then in more recent times, battered by bushfires.

"Before the volcano erupted, this country was covered by pretty much the same vegetation that you see in the lava tube," Andrew tells us. "Everything in this Savannah region has evolved to be fire tolerant, where everything in the lava tubes hasn't. When you walk into the lava tube, you notice it's a bit cooler, there's no wind and humidity is a bit higher."

There's no darker place than an underground cave, but Andrew is happy to have the tubes to himself when he ventures down here.

"If we get rain, water will gush into the tube in different places," he says.

"Then the tube is no longer quiet and you just hear that rushing water."

* The writer was a guest of Tourism Queensland.