

Cave-rafting venture glowing success

In 1987, Waitomo caver Peter Chandler asked some unsuspecting backpackers to float through the rivers of a limestone underworld in the interests of market research. It was the beginning of a venture that now attracts thousands of tourists a year. Wintec journalism student *Andy Fyers* talks to Chandler about the birth of black water rafting.

PETER CHANDLER doesn't look like an adrenalin junkie. Bespectacled and quietly spoken Chandler, 46, wouldn't look out of place in a desk job.

But don't be fooled. This is a man who has spent his life squeezing through spaces as wide as the span of his hand - in the dark and underground - without knowing what lies ahead. He has plunged down waterfalls, abseiled into tomos and withstood freezing temperatures all in the name a good time.

And it was one of these experiences that, two decades ago, led him to come up with an idea that has become an iconic Kiwi experience, described by Lonely Planet as "one of the most amazing things you can do in this country".

In 1987, Chandler was working as a glow-worm cave guide and hut warden at Waitomo.

Like many keen cavers and guides he had been on recreational rafting trips through Waitomo's underground streams and pools, floating through the limestone caves on a car tyre's rubber inner tube.

Access to the caves was through tomos, chute-like holes in the limestone terrain. Once in the cave system, the rafters floated or walked until they reached the cave's entrance.

Chandler says in the early days, he literally did not know what was around the corner.

"I remember one time going in (to a cave) and the water was quite high and we were floating along, we knew there was a big waterfall coming up but we didn't know where, so it was quite exciting, knowing you had to get out of the water before you got washed over."

Chandler decided others might enjoy the same adrenalin rush so he used his position as warden at the Hamilton Tomo Group Hut to conduct some informal market research, using unsuspecting backpackers staying at the hut. One of them coined the term "black water rafting".

Chandler says the guinea pigs' response was overwhelmingly positive so he obtained permission from land-owner Jimmy Holden to access Ruakuri Cave, and launched the world's first commercial black water rafting venture.

In the early days, the operation was low on capital and infrastructure but high on Kiwi ingenuity.

Chandler's friend John Ash, who quit his job as a schoolteacher early in 1988 to join the venture, says



PICTURE: Nick Eggleston

ICONIC: Peter Chandler launched the world's first commercial black water rafting venture at Waitomo.

Angus Stubbs, who was also employed by Chandler in 1987 and still works as a guide, says in the early days, he had to go looking for customers. "My job was to drive around Waitomo and ask people on the side of the road if they wanted to come black water rafting."

But by the 1990s, customers were finding their own way to the Ruakuri Cave at the rate of 10,000 visitors a year.

The rapid growth meant some things had to change. The ute was no longer suitable for transport and the bush changing rooms were replaced by sheds at the Waitomo Camping Ground and later the Waitomo Rugby Football Club where rafters could also have a shower and a warming cup of soup and toast.

Today, the enterprise is world-renowned. Chandler says inclusion in the Lonely Planet Guide made a huge difference. "Following that article there was a whole series of articles. At that stage there really was a vacuum in adventure tourism. The media then [picked] up on it and it was a bit like riding a wave."

The Black Water Rafting Company has gone upmarket in line with its new status. At its new base at the Black Water Cafe, thrill-seekers can enjoy a latte or a panini with their adrenalin fix. The complementary soup remains although the toast has been replaced by a bagel.

Chandler and Ash believe there are several reasons why the venture is popular. Ash says that the stunning Ruakuri Cave is a big factor. Chandler says it is about perceived risk compared with actual risk. He adds that the frigid waters in the cave might have a part to play. Apparently, ice-cold water induces a state of euphoria.

Angus Stubbs, who was born in Waitomo, says black water rafting has had a hugely positive effect on the region.

"Traditionally people would come to Waitomo for

they had to work out ways to do things cheaply.

"[Pete's] infrastructure consisted of an Austin 1800 ute. He built a cage on the back of it like a stock pen. He used to pile all the wetsuits in and the people would sit on top of them. Pete had a reputation for being quite eccentric."

Chandler's wife Libby says the reaction of the locals to the radical new take on cave tours was luke-warm at best.

"People used to say it's very weird and it's not going to work. I think it hit the locals as a bit of a surprise ... but he (Pete) was too busy to know that there was any scepticism."

Chandler says his own prediction was that the enterprise might attract 800 visitors a year. "[I thought] that would be a good number."

lunch, do the glow-worm caves and then go. There was no one here overnight. Adventure tourism has brought people in, it's bringing lots more money into the area." About half a million people have now experienced black water rafting and several companies now operate in the district.

Last year, Chandler and Ash were awarded the QSM for their contributions to adventure tourism.

They say that while the recognition was great, the bigger buzz is the impact the venture has had on the community and employment in the area.

In typically understated fashion, Chandler is reluctant to take any credit for the success. "That's just progress," he says.