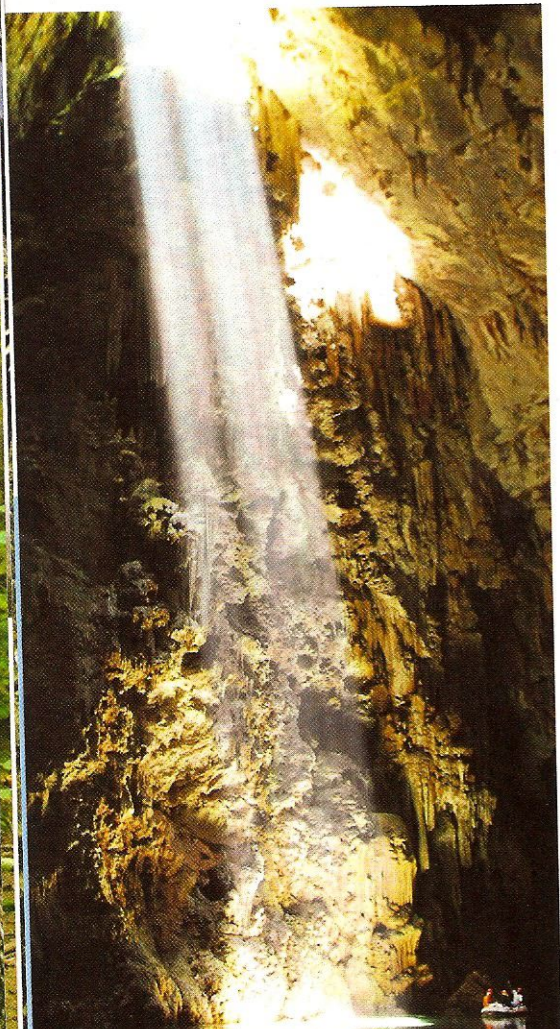


# Into The Abyss

OUR ADRENALIN JUNKIE DESCENDS INTO THE DEPTHS OF THE EARTH TO DISCOVER AN ALIEN UNDERWATER WORLD



## If You Go...

The Abismo Anhumas is located 23 kilometres from Bonito, an ecotourism hot spot in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul. Tours leave daily but are limited to 16 people. Only four scuba dives are allowed each day, and you must have Open Water certificate. Equipment and guides are provided. Visitors are assessed and trained beforehand in the visitor centre. The cost is R\$360 (about \$210 CDN) to abseil and snorkel, and R\$530 (about \$306 CDN) to abseil and scuba. For more info visit [www.abismoanhumas.com.br](http://www.abismoanhumas.com.br).

**I DROPPED 30 STORIES INTO THE ABYSS**, watching a faint glimmer of light reflecting off a pool at the bottom. By now I've rappelled on several continents but the Abismo Anhumas cave, sheltering a subterranean water wonderland, comes with a neat little twist. If I was ever to walk again beneath the glorious sun, I had to climb back up the very rope I came down. Hand over hand, inch by inch, breath by breath.

Caves are plentiful here in South America's Pantanal, the world's largest wetland. A huge compression in the Earth's crust has created a 150,000-square kilometre freshwater flood plain, stretching across Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay. With so much water, the Pantanal is one of the most biologically diverse regions on the planet, a bird-watcher and animal lover's paradise.

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It is also a region under threat with about 95 percent of the land privately owned, much of it used for cattle and crop production.

The town of Bonito, in the Pantanal's Brazilian section, is the springboard to one of the most compelling (and daunting) cave adventures I've ever experienced. Discovered in 1984, and opened to the public in 1999, the Abismo Anhumas is a crack in the Earth's crust just big enough to allow adventurers through, at the bottom of which is a shimmering lake home to massive underwater cave structures that can be explored by scuba or snorkel.

The descent is easy enough, in that terrifying "I'm only alive because of this wet rope" kind of a way. Although there are daily tours into the cave, guides test their clients the day before to see if they can hack it. After all, anyone can be lowered down, but climbing up a 72 metre rope through a narrow rock shaft requires some stamina. The thinking is if you can scale up their seven-metre high in-store platform, you're set.

Once I arrive on the bottom and slip into the crystalline depths, I float weightlessly above the alien world, a scene from a movie, a waking dream. While your typical spectacular stalactites drip from above, some of the conical underwater stalagmites are 20 metres tall. The tranquillity is shattered when I am strapped into a belay device to begin the long climb back. The modified harness cuts into my water-softened flesh, as I heave with my legs, and steady with my arms. After 10 minutes, muscles are burning, but if I need incentive, all I need to do is look down. Suddenly, the darkness below looks like a watery grave. Connected as a backup to my

*kind of a way*

climbing partner, the rope shakes as he quakes with fear. But each thrust brings more light, until finally, after squeezing through an unassuming crack in the rock, we reach the top.

Having spent a few hours in the cool abyss, floating in its calm water, the heat and humidity is like a punch in the gut. Next time, I'll rent the scuba gear and enjoy the abyss just a little bit longer.

*Robin Esrock is the co-host of the OLN adventure series, Word Travels.*