

Caveman of the Ottawa

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Dr. David Sawatzky, a 51-year-old Toronto-based physician who has worked as a diving medicine consultant for the military, has spent the past 15 years mapping more than 10 kilometres of Ottawa River caves never before seen by human eyes.

On Friday, he will recount his underwater exploits in a talk at the Canadian Museum of Nature. He took some time out from a vacation in Florida -- which included more cave-diving, of course -- to talk to the Citizen about why he can't get enough of this dangerous hobby.

Dr. Sawatzky on getting started ...

In the early 1980s, he learned to scuba dive and also began exploring air-filled, underwater caves in the Rockies, which is known as "dry-caving" among the initiated. He combined these two hobbies and moved onto cave-diving because he wanted to explore the submerged portions of caves that otherwise cut his explorations short.

"I easily could have killed myself. What I did was what people did before there were courses. I was a very experienced dry-caver, so I was well aware of the dangers of the cave, and that's something a lot of open-water divers don't know. I read everything I could read, and I started cave-diving."

It was a daring move into a sport with a learning curve so steep that most mistakes are fatal.

... on the danger:

"You tend not to hurt yourself -- you tend to be dead. There's not a lot of people injured in cave-diving" who survive, says Dr. Sawatzky.

Worldwide, about 500 people have died cave-diving. They may run out of light, get lost and run out of air trying to find the surface, or they may misjudge the amount of air needed to get out safely. Some take on dives that are too challenging for their experience and training, while others fall prey to "nitrogen narcosis" from the gas used to dilute the compressed oxygen in their air tank, and end up "drunk" and disoriented at the bottom of the river.

The inhospitable caves in typically frigid Canadian waters are even more unforgiving than the caves in Florida and Mexico, where most people dive.

"There are maybe 500 Canadians trained in cave-diving, but there's about 10 of us that actually dive in Canada, because the caves are not nearly as friendly. They're cold, they're dark, they're difficult to access, they're much more dangerous, they're not as pretty."

... on the appeal:

"It's Star Trek: to boldly go where no man has gone before. If you are a true explorer, there are very few options on planet Earth to find something completely new ... and the beauty of caving is that you have no idea what you're going to discover. It's addictive, it's a definite high."

He enjoys "solving the problem that is the cave," measuring each passageway and recording the dimensions on a plastic slate, then plotting it out on a computer to generate a map of the labyrinthine underground world.

... on the underground landscape:

He has discovered toy boats and dolls, garbage and huge rocks that tumble from seemingly stable cave roofs. As his flippers propel him forward, a blinding silt drifts up from the bottom and obscures his view, so the rope he lays down becomes a lifeline to the surface.

The caves are like air bubbles in a slice of Swiss cheese, cutting through the peninsulas that jut into the water. Where they run close to the surface, the roof may collapse and form a small pool that offers access to the cave system.

"The caves have very different characters. Even the caves under the Ottawa River have quite different characters, depending upon the different passageways."

The Ottawa River caves are relatively accessible by the challenging standards of Canadian caves, and clustered just downstream of Pembroke. They are the longest known underwater caves in Canada, with passages varying from one to 38 metres in width. The caves formed in the weak areas between layers of limestone, so in some places the passages are stacked on two levels like a parking garage.

No vegetation grows in the winding tunnels, but the clams, crayfish and sturgeon that live in the river also occupy the caves, making the cave entrances near the surface popular fishing holes.

... on tangling with the wildlife:

When the silt on the bottom of the caves gets stirred up, a diver can only be seen by the occasional flashes of light on his equipment, making him look like a tasty minnow to the large fish trawling the area. When they dart in for what they hope will be dinner, it can be incredibly dangerous for a diver clinging to the nylon rope that will get him back to the surface. A school of pike gave Dr. Sawatzky some scary moments during one zero-visibility dive in an Ottawa River cave.

"There are some fairly aggressive fish in the Ottawa River, and they're in the caves as well. It's like being punched. Some of the larger fish hit very hard, so I got punched a few times by fish. When one hit my hand, I didn't let go" of his rope " - I sort of expected it might be coming."

On being awarded the Star of Courage:

Dr. Sawatzky and some friends were exploring a new and difficult underground passage near Tobermory, Ont., when one of his diving companions went down alone and got lost.

When he didn't surface after an hour -- all the time he would have had with his air tank -- Dr. Sawatzky went in after him, although at that point he believed he was "looking for a body." But when he wriggled through a tiny gap in the cave, he found a cavernous chamber with an air pocket -- and his friend waiting patiently for someone to find him.

"He should have been dead by all rights, but he was extremely lucky. Air pockets are very, very, very rare in underwater caves."

It took several hours for the other divers to round up more equipment and figure out how to get the two men out, but both emerged safely, although Dr. Sawatzky notes that he didn't return to that particular cave for five years.

In 1995, the governor general awarded Dr. Sawatzky the Star of Courage for saving his friend. It is Canada's second-highest award for bravery, bestowed "for acts of courage in circumstances of great peril."