


WHAT lies BENEATH

In a subterranean chamber 30m beneath the streets of Mount Gambier, a trio of scuba divers slips into a glassy basin of water. Twin tanks suspended under their arms, fins prostrate, they slowly descend, swallowed by a plume of torchlight. When the light subsides, the divers are gone. They've been drawn into the oesophagus of a water-filled cave system that spans more than half a kilometre.

For 25 minutes they navigate tight passageways devoid of natural light, air and everything essential for sustaining human life. Even more remarkable is that this takes place underneath South Australia's largest regional city, as trucks rumble overhead.

Engelbrecht Cave is one of more than 850 known caves and sinkholes that pockmark the Limestone Coast, a geological time capsule that encompasses SA's entire south-east corner (and then some). Once a shallow seabed, the region slowly emerged from the ocean – layer upon layer of limestone forming through the compaction of sea creatures over tens of millions of years. Gradually water eroded the porous limestone, forming caves. When the ceilings collapse, deep sinkholes are exposed, some puncturing the water table.

Many travellers would be familiar with Mount Gambier's volcanic crater lakes; the Blue Lake is the town's photogenic



Ewens Ponds from
above (left) and below.

A watery wonder world awaits under the surface in South Australia

words CATHERINE BEST

centrepiece. But few know it is also the cave diving capital of Australia. For decades, steel-nerved extreme-sports divers have been drawn to Mount Gambier's beguiling underground caverns. Many have died. In 1973 the Cave Divers Association of Australia (CDAA) formed to regulate site access and diver training. Now, sinkhole SCUBA is going mainstream, with local dive operator Darren Mitchell of Dive Experience (diveexperience.com.au) leading certified recreational divers into the region's only commercialised site, Kilsby Sinkhole (kilsbysinkhole.com).

Located in the middle of a 335ha, fourth-generation sheep farm, Kilsby is like the remnant of a deep missile strike. A yawning

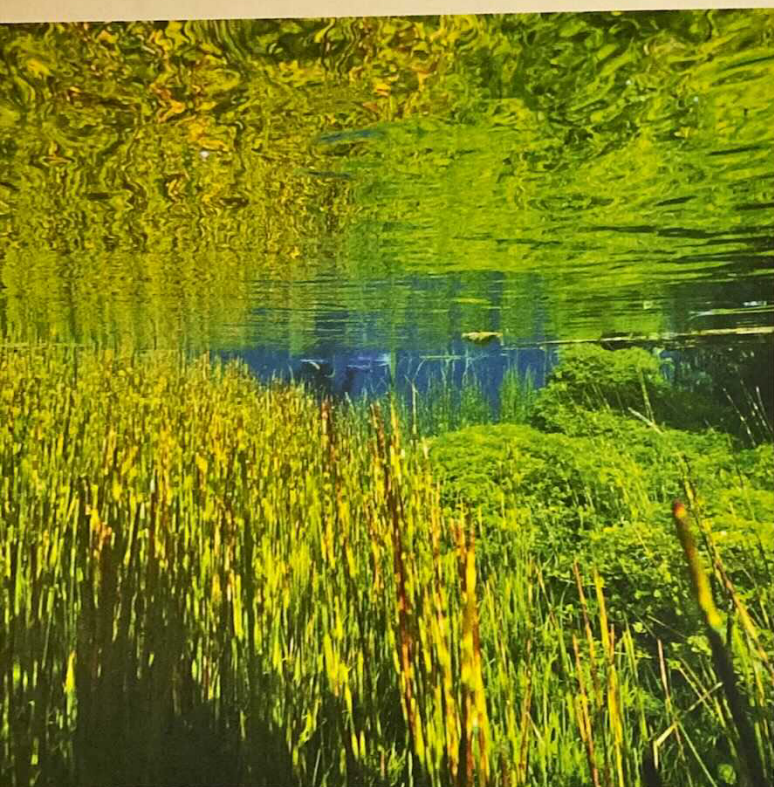
12m-wide chasm in the middle of an otherwise unremarkable paddock. When the sun shines overhead, the water – 15m down and more than 60m deep – sparkles like a sapphire.

I pull on a 7mm wetsuit (the water is 15 degrees – “temperate, not cold,” Darren says) and gear up. We pad tentatively down a steep access ramp and two sets of ladders to an overwater platform – our entry point to an experience Darren says will be “the best dive of your life”.

“When we're down there you won't be able to tell where the water stops and the air starts,” he says. And he's right. The water is so clear I can see my daughters standing on a viewing platform on



RIBBONS OF TECHNICOLOR REEDS SWAY IN THE CURRENT, TINY FISH DART AND WATER BEADS PERSPIRE FROM THE POND BED



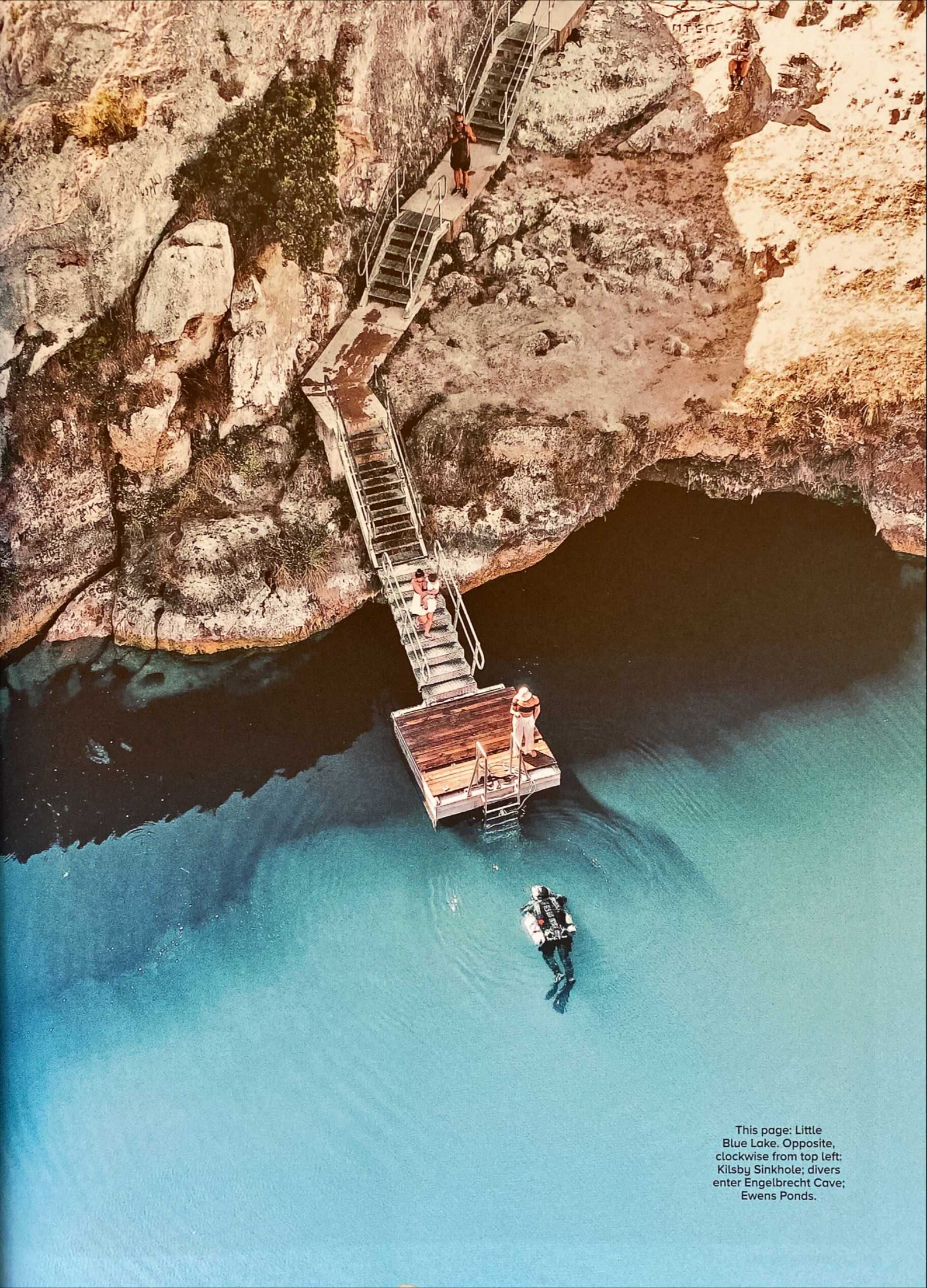
the lip of the sinkhole from 20m beneath the water's surface. Sometimes I don't know which way is up. And then the sun momentarily breaks through the clouds and light shafts strobe through the water in a psychedelic lightsabre dance.

As a non-certified cave diver, I'm restricted to the open, sunlit part of the sinkhole, which is about 27m deep. However, there are underground caverns three times deeper. For decades, South Australia Police have used Kilsby for police diver training, and in the 1970s and '80s it was used for sonar weapons detection testing.

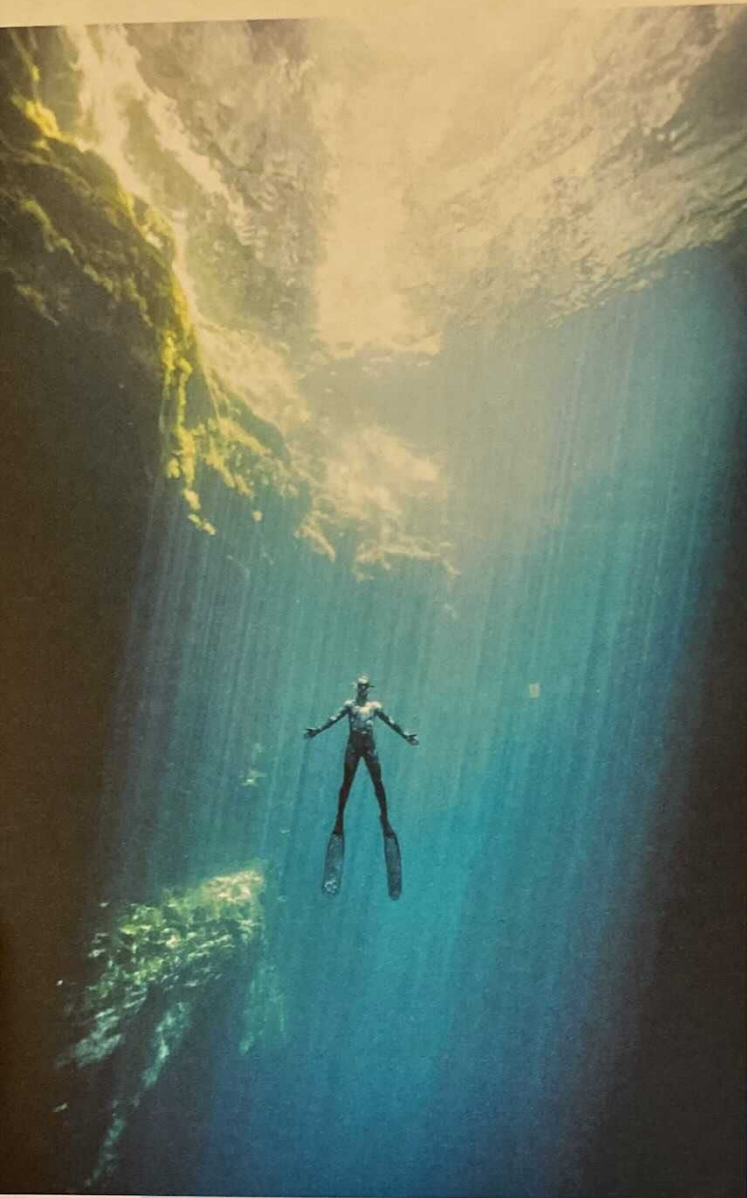
Owner Graham Kilsby also offers thrice-daily snorkelling tours for non-divers, and has started producing craft gin, blending the sinkhole's "gin-clear" waters with local botanicals. Plans are afoot for onsite accommodation, a coffee shop and conference centre.

"It will be lovely for people that don't want to, or can't jump in the water," Graham says of the expansion plans, adding that Kilsby is the only sinkhole in Australia accessible to open-water divers.

After Kilsby, we dive Ewens Ponds – three enormous underwater basins connected by an umbilical cord of shallow swim-throughs. Ribbons of technicolor reeds sway in the current, tiny fish dart and water beads perspire from the pond bed. Our kids snorkel with Darren (Ewens is the region's most accessible adventure-swim experience), while we shallow dive – a sensation that oscillates between flying over a lunar crater and swimming in an aquarium.



This page: Little Blue Lake. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Kilsby Sinkhole; divers enter Engelbrecht Cave; Ewens Ponds.



LOCALS GROCERY SHOP A STONE'S THROW FROM A GAPING HOLE IN THE EARTH AND KITTED-OUT SCUBA DIVERS HOBBLE ACROSS A ROAD

We round off our adventures with a swim at Little Blue Lake – a 47m-deep sinkhole that's like a miniature Kilsby and Blue Lake rolled into one.

Mount Gambier's dry cave formations are equally enthralling: Umpherston Sinkhole with its ivy-draped sheer walls and terraced gardens; the Cave Garden – a deep pocket of green smack-bang in the CBD, and Tantanoola Cave, with its mesmerising stalactite and stalagmite embellishments.

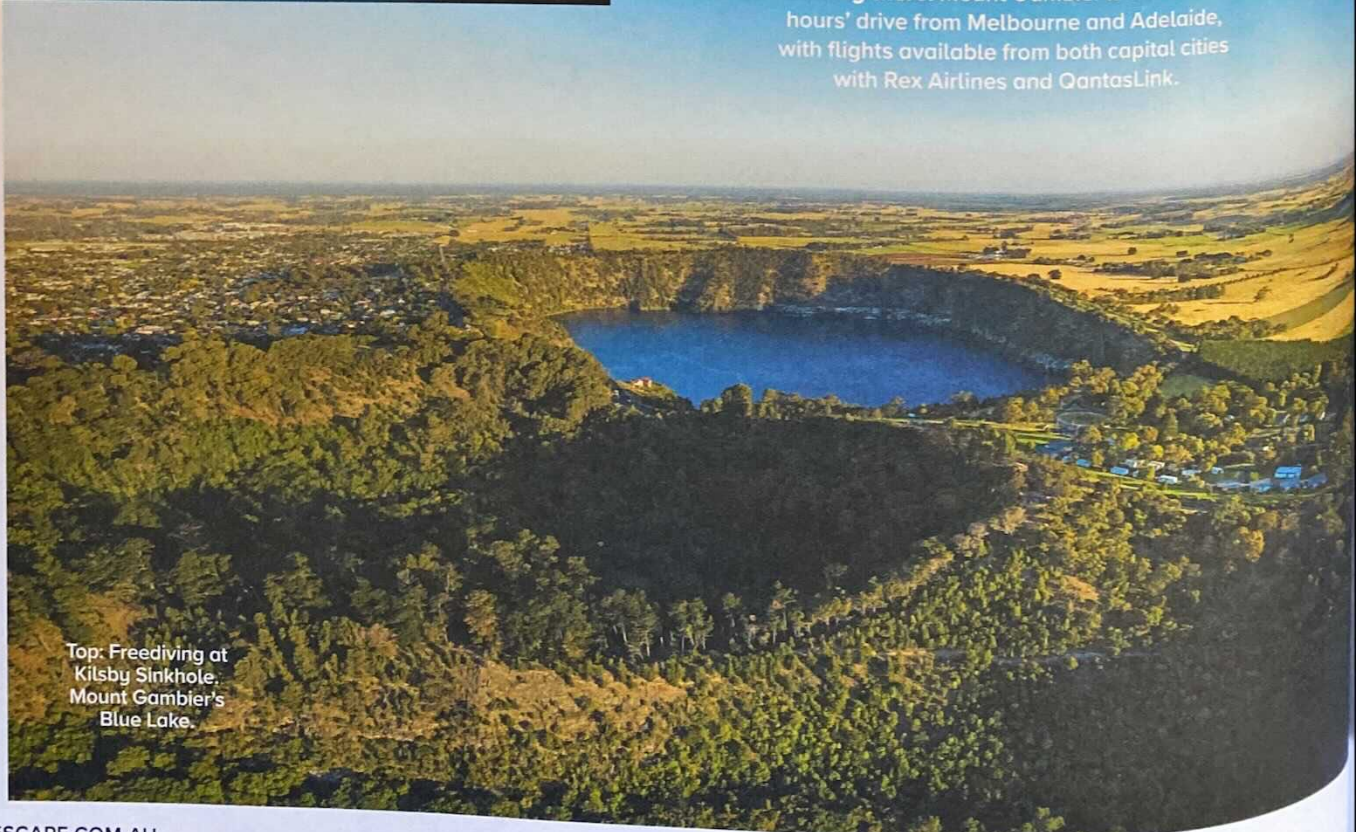
The region's underground curiosities – some secreting prehistoric megafauna fossils – are ubiquitous yet incongruous. This is a place where locals grocery shop a stone's throw from a gaping hole in the earth, and it's not unusual to see kitted-out scuba divers hobbling across a road or paddock.

During my visit, CDAA instructor Tim Featonby is taking a group of aspiring cave divers through their training certification. It's a lengthy process, and there is no margin for error – equipment failure, getting lost in an underwater labyrinth or kicking up a plume of silt can have fatal consequences. Nonetheless he talks fervently about exploring water-filled chambers as big as the MCG and discovering wombat-like fossils the size of rhinos.

"It's not for everyone, we don't want people that are claustrophobic, are not comfortable with dark places who can't handle stress," he says. "But it's a beautiful environment."

ESCAPE ROUTE

Getting there: Mount Gambier is about five hours' drive from Melbourne and Adelaide, with flights available from both capital cities with Rex Airlines and QantasLink.



Top: Freediving at Kilsby Sinkhole. Mount Gambier's Blue Lake.