



Group photo at the Berger, 1993

no facilities there and so a commercial campsite in nearby Autrans served as 'base camp'.

We had a 10-day booked window in which to rig the cave, send parties to the bottom and de-rig, and we were fortunate that the weather was kind. Boats taken to cross Lac Cadoux went unused, as the lake was bone-dry for the duration of the trip. In typical GV-style though, this was to be no standard Berger trip. The disappearance of young British caver Alex Pitcher, and the ensuing search, in 1987 had highlighted an alternative to the 'trade' route, and when the unfortunate lad was found dead, having apparently fallen down an obscure vertical drop well off the main route, the alternative route was named the Réseau Alex Pitcher in his memory. Gary's plan was that we would be the first expedition to bottom the Berger via this route. Bob Hall, Ian Middleton and I took on most of the rigging of the Alex Pitcher route, but to cope with our considerable numbers (and varying abilities) the more usual route in the top end of the cave was also rigged, some pitches being double-rigged to allow faster parties to overtake those with a more relaxed SRT style. Equipment and essential supplies for camping were installed at Camp One, with most participants stashing sleeping bags and camping mats in readiness for bedding down on their way out from the bottom. We took turns to man a tent (and logbook) at the entrance for 24 hours a day, for the entire duration, a stipulation imposed following Alex Pitcher's disappearance, as when he went

missing no-one was able to establish whether he was in the cave or had made his way out. We had to install a chemical toilet at Camp One, and we also ran a telephone cable to the camp from the entrance. The Dobsons took the lead in installing this, which went down the Alex Pitcher route.

The rigging was accomplished in good time, although two lads from the Dales who'd talked their way onto our trip trod on a few toes by hogging the rigging of the lower pitches, reaching the bottom and then disappearing off to climb Mont Blanc. Once the ropes were in place, we took advantage of the still-settled weather, and everyone who wanted to reached the 'bottom' – the 'pseudo-siphon', at a depth of a little over 1100m.



Gouffre Berger 1993. The Rivière Sans Etoiles (Starless River)

Camping underground added an extra frisson to the whole enterprise, and even those with no ambition to camp or to descend below 1000m were able to experience the wonders of the famous Salle des Treize (Hall of the Thirteen) and the magnificent Rivière Sans Etoiles (Starless River). Bob Hall and I chose, in contrast to most others, to go in as far as Camp One in the evening and sleep over on our way into the cave, rather than camping on the way out. It was a good idea in theory but neither of us slept very well and we were up later than planned, losing any potential benefit we'd hoped to gain by being at Camp One, 500m down, first thing in the morning. Gary, with Ian Miller and Chris Payne, opted to bounce to the bottom and back in one hit without camping.

I'm pretty sure that Bob and I were the only party who used the Alex Pitcher route to travel in and out on our bottoming trip, and we did this just to tick the box, having been so involved with its rigging – it was something of a collectors' piece in comparison to the more traditional route.

That 1993 trip was a personal landmark in my caving career – I still think the Berger is one of the finest caves in the world, but more importantly, it was a significant milestone in the history of SWCC. The trip was the precursor of the subsequent bi-annual foreign trips, and some of those who went to the Berger in '93 have been on many, in some cases all, of Gary's later expeditions. Many of them also see it as a watershed moment. Bob Hall says: "The SWCC Vercors trip in 1993 was a real turning point in my life. I had never caved abroad before and doing so for the first time back then was a real epiphany. Of course, the Berger was great, made all

the better by working out how to bottom it by an unconventional route – perhaps even a first? But I loved the Grotte de Gournier too; one of the loveliest caves I have ever seen. Beautiful and memorable.

I'd never been shy about vertical stuff – done on ladder in the old days of course. But getting to grips with SRT properly in preparation for the Berger, suddenly yanked my vertical caving out of the dark ages and I never looked back. My interest in serious caving had been miraculously rejuvenated and I was saved from the looming, and otherwise inevitable fate of becoming a Babysitter. I have much to be thankful for!"

To this day, stories and anecdotes from August 1993 are shared and enjoyed in the Long Common Room and on caving trips. The die had been cast and by the time we pulled the last bag of rope out of the Berger entrance, the question was being asked: where next?

The answer, in 1995, was the Gouffre de la Pierre St. Martin (PSM). Cavers everywhere know something of the history of the cave (for a while a successor to the Berger's title of Deepest Cave in the World) due to the tragic death of Marcel Loubens in 1952. Located in the Pyrenees, and straddling the border between France and Spain, the PSM has been a through-trip since the French energy company EDF drilled a tunnel into the huge Salle de Verna, at the cave's bottom end, as part of a 1960s hydro-electric project. These days tourists can visit the Salle de Verna and marvel at this huge underground void under the electric lights that have been installed, but in 1995 the cave was still undeveloped.

Gouffre Berger 1993. Le Grand Eboulis (the Great Rubble Heap)

