



**SWCC
CODC**

75th Anniversary Publication

Volume 3



SOUTH WALES CAVING CLUB | CLWB OGOFEYDD DEHEUDIR CYMRU
75TH ANNIVERSARY PUBLICATION
VOLUME 3

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Foreign Caving

Introduction by Andrea Lewingdon

As well as caving in our beloved Swansea Valley, SWCC and its members have a long history of caving across the globe. This theme stretches around the world and includes a diverse range of experiences, geology, art and tourism. It includes both Club organised adventures and non-Club trips enjoyed by members that it is hoped may interest and inspire others.

We start the Theme with thirty years of SWCC adventures in Europe. Tony Baker describes the 'Gary trips', a fitting tribute to and recognition of the impressive efforts of Gary Vaughan through the years, exploring the Gouffre Berger and other systems in Europe. The Theme then moves into the increasingly popular annual Cantabria visits, also organised and written about here by Gary (he's truly a busy guy!).

Then for something completely different. Pete Francis introduces us to the fascinating world of

cave art. Pete takes us as far as Spain, Easter Island, Sudan, Utah and Ecuador and his article is accompanied by some amazing images. Martin Hoff takes us on a journey of members' travellers' tales of foreign lands extracted from Newsletters dating from 1957. This is followed by Noel Dilly's adventures in Bermuda in the early 70s together with a unique history lesson. Noel then also takes us Spelunking in Lava Beds National Monument, Northern California, a more recent 2018 trip. Susan O'Reilly shares with us her 2020 two-day sporty tourist trip in Vietnam (a lucky pandemic trip indeed!) and to round off, Pete Hobson gives us a helpful 'starters guide' to caving in New Zealand.

This has been a very enjoyable theme to read and to edit and certainly inspires me to get travelling!

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◀ *Gouffre Berger 2007. Gary Vaughan, Bill Buxton and Dom Hyland in the Rivière Sans Etoiles (Starless River) (©Tony Baker)*



Gouffre Berger. Gary Vaughan, Dom Hyland and Bill Buxton in the Salle des Treize, (Hall of the Thirteen), 2007 (©Tony Baker)

The Gouffre Berger, and Other Stories: Thirty Years of SWCC Adventures in Europe

Tony Baker

In common with a number of my SWCC contemporaries, I have in the bottom of my wardrobe a pile of old T-shirts. The original colours (many of which were questionable choices in the first place) have faded somewhat, and most of them don't fit me very well now, partly due to the number of washes they've been through and partly due to the fact that I was younger and fitter when I bought them. They survive in my wardrobe despite numerous attempts by my wife to throw them out. They are, though, precious souvenirs – the 'official' T-shirts of many SWCC foreign trips, to caving areas across France and Spain. Trips that have taken me into (and through) the finest caves that Europe has to offer. Those trips have one common denominator – they were organised and led by Gary Vaughan.

2021 is the 30th anniversary of the very first 'Gary trip'. The only people who have been on more Gary-trips than me are Gary himself and Brian Clipstone, so I feel that I'm qualified to write something of an overview. All of the trips have been comprehensively written up in SWCC Newsletters through the years, so there's no point in covering old ground, but that 30th anniversary milestone couldn't be allowed to pass without some recognition.

We'll start back before even that 1991 first trip, with a bit of background. When Gary joined SWCC in the late 1980s he was also the leading light in the East Dorset Speleological Society (EDSS). So, when he decided to organise a trip to the Piaggia Bella system on the French/Italian border, in 1991, (*"inspired by a write up of the cave published by Imperial College and spotted by my then-best-mate Iain Miller"*, he says) it became a sort-of joint enterprise between the two clubs. As well as those who were members of both clubs (Gary, Iain Miller, Gary Nevitt), there were SWCC-only members and a few who were solely EDSS members.

The Piaggia Bella turned out to have its fair share of challenges, not all of which were in the cave itself. Chief among these was 'The Track'. The route up to the cave from the French village of Tende was a bumpy 18km gravel track, clinging to the hillside in a poor state of repair, that took its toll on motor vehicles. The Track would usually take two hours or more to negotiate, in either direction, and a thunderstorm on our last day washed a lot of it away. It broke Brian Clipstone's car early on and I ended up with a big bill for suspension work when my car next needed a MoT test.

Participants fell into three distinct groups - those who stayed at a refugio, close to the cave entrance but an hour-plus walk from where you could get a vehicle (with the advantage of being weather-proof), those who camped at the Col des Seigneurs, the closest you could get a car to the cave (which meant that you had access to all the stuff in your car, without having to carry it for an hour or more to the refugio), and those who camped in the valley and made only a couple of brief forays up The Track. Those who stayed at the refugio had a secret weapon in the form of Gary Nevitt, who didn't go into the cave but ferried endless amounts of food and equipment between vehicles and the hut and took on most of the cooking. Hywel Davies and I had travelled out in my Vauxhall Astra and we pitched our lightweight tents at the col next to the car, where the mountain weather presented challenges of its own. I have vivid memories of 'recovery' days between caving trips spent sitting in the car, being rocked by the wind and with a view of only a few metres of dense cloud. The walk to the cave was a strenuous 75 minutes or more, and we did the walk back in the small hours on a number of occasions, after long, hard caving trips.

Although the terminal sump is at a depth of more than 500m, the Piaggia Bella has relatively few

pitches. Much of the depth is attained quite quickly once inside the entrance, via a steeply descending, boulder-strewn passage that was a major challenge on the way back up after a long trip. At around -250m, you leave the boulders and enter the main streamway, which makes the whole place seem rather more inspiring. In common with a lot of continental caves, much of the vertical stuff had in-situ ropes in place but these were of dubious provenance and we weren't accustomed to having to use dodgy ropes in deep caves. We had a lot to learn!

It took us a few days to get our own ropes in place for the pitches lower down the cave, and trips into Piaggia Bella were interspersed with visits to other local caves, none of which were particularly exciting (see my article on Gouffre de Sodome et Gomorrhe in SWCC N/L no.111). Eventually everything was in place and trips to the bottom (or, at least, to the sump) were on.



Hywel Davies in the Piaggia Bella, 1991 (©Tony Baker)

On the appointed day, Gary led an early-start party to finish the last of the rigging and reach the sump, while Hywel, Brian Clipstone and I followed up to commence the de-rig on our way out. All went according to plan until Duncan Archard, caving with Gary, turned his ankle badly, shortly after they'd started making their way out. With Gary's assistance he got himself out, but the ankle was later diagnosed as broken. Gary: *"Duncan effectively hopped out of the cave and we breathed a sigh of relief when we reached the surface. I can remember that several people waiting at the refugio thought we were larking about and feigning exhaustion as we stumbled and hopped our way from cave entrance to the refuge. Once they realised that we weren't larking about they quickly all joined in with helping to extract Duncan. The following day we had to get Duncan back to the Col des Seigneurs and so we had our first expedition rescue on our very first expedition, which at the time I thought was a bit of a disaster. It turned out to be helpful to future planning as I was always cognitive of the need to plan for contingency. We took a Neil Robertson stretcher to the Berger in 1993 exactly for*

the reason of Duncan's broken ankle." Duncan was clearly a tough cookie!

Hywel, Brian and I came out in the early hours of the morning, into the thunderstorm that nearly stranded us on the mountain by washing the track away.

Gary has an additional memory: *"A group of three Spanish cavers were also camping at the refugio; one of them had the nickname 'Road-Runner' from the Warner Bros. cartoons. They undertook a trip supposedly from entrance to entrance but had missed the main junction. They only realised their error when they arrived at the terminal sump! They managed to get out by scavenging for carbide in abandoned 'carbide pigs'. Their trip lasted 30 hours and they slept for about 24 hours afterwards."*

Despite being a relatively small-scale affair, the Piaggia Bella trip was a success. We'd coped with plenty of adversity, everyone had done pretty much the caving they'd wanted to do, and we'd learned a lot about exploring big continental caves. Hywel and I were away for a total of three weeks and I came back with levels of fitness that I've rarely attained before or since. But this was just the start: *"Once we realised that there was an appetite for big European caves there was no stopping us,"* says Gary.

Although he'd kept the idea to himself, Gary had viewed the Piaggia Bella trip as a tester for the idea of a trip to the Gouffre Berger, and he managed to secure a booking for August 1993. Having realised that EDSS as a club probably didn't have the numbers to successfully rig and de-rig the Berger, this trip was very much an SWCC affair, although most of the keen EDSS members were also SWCC members by then. The trip generated huge excitement and enthusiasm; we turned up in large numbers for training weekends in the Dales (much to the annoyance of regular members of the Craven PC, whose hut we took over on several occasions), and some camped overnight in Top Entrance as preparation for underground camps in the Berger. Some members had to make special annual leave arrangements to be able to make the allotted dates. The first of those official trip T-shirts were made, with a design by Bob Radcliffe's daughter Catrin, although I've never quite established who chose the horrible jade-green colour of the shirts. (My navy sweatshirt, with the same design, has been worn far more.)

In common with all of Gary's trips, this one was open to anyone who wanted to come, regardless of ability or experience. If you want to come and sit in the sun for two weeks drinking tea, you are as welcome on a 'GV-trip' as the toughest caving 'tiger'. In total there were 34 of us who headed out to the Vercors. In those days wild camping was permitted on the plateau at La Molière, directly above the cave (it's now forbidden), but there are



Group photo at the Berger, 1993 (©Tony Baker)

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 Reseau 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) (©Tony Baker)

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 Iain 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) (@Tony Baker)



As in 1993, some preliminary preparation was required, and as well as SRT training weekends we experimented with inflatable dinghies, necessary to traverse the deep and very cold Tunnel du Vent, a long underground lake in the lower part of the cave. The boats were purchased from Toys R Us, which gives you a clue as to their (lack of) durability, and we spent an amusing Saturday in the lakes in Dan-yr-Ogof trying out the various different models. The biggest and most unwieldy of these was christened HMS Vaughan.

This trip's commemorative T-shirt was a more sensible and restrained grey colour, with other colour options, and featured a caver and a skier as a nod to the Col de la Pierre St. Martin's winter role as a ski resort. The graphics were professionally done, thanks to Annie Peskett's partner, Graeme.

Gary had done a recce to the area in the summer of 1994 with then-girlfriend Susie, later to become Mrs. Vaughan, and had found a campsite, Camping Ibarra, that's popular with cavers, being the closest to the cave. The stream that flows through the site emerges from the cave's resurgence, further up the valley, hence its suitability as a means of chilling beer.

There are several upper entrances to the system, although the 320m Lepineux shaft in which Loubens met his untimely end has long been sealed up, considered too dangerous due to the amount of loose material on the walls. Although we'd intended to rig both the Tête Sauvage and SC3 routes, this proved to be something of a logistical challenge and all the through-trips used Tête Sauvage. Gary remembers: *"I think we were so focussed on making sure that everyone who wanted to do the through-trip had ample opportunity to do it that we left Tête Sauvage rigged for slightly too long and effectively ran out of time to rig SC3."*



Pierre St. Martin, 1995. L to R: Brian Clipstone, Tony Baker, Sue Mabbett and Hywel Davies about to embark on a through-trip. This is the entrance to Tête Sauvage and the wooden structure was there for finding the entrance in deep snow. It had long gone by the time of our return in 2017. (©Andy Dobson)

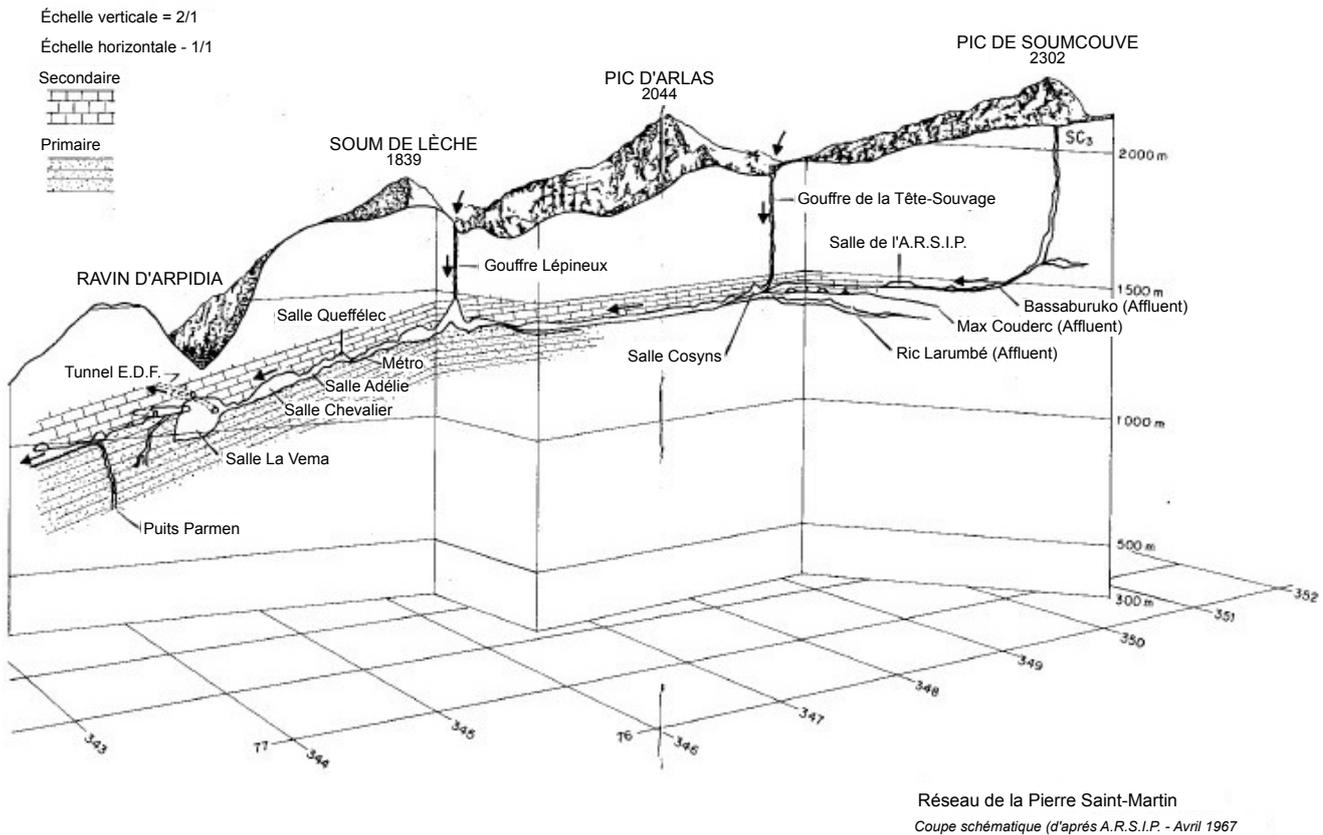
At this point it's worth a slight diversion to talk about the rigging of through-trips. Continental cavers routinely do big through-trips as 'pull-downs'. In other words, a rope at least double the length of the deepest pitch is rigged, used to descend and then pulled down behind the party. This requires a high level of technique and commitment from all involved, and also entails carrying a long rope (and at least one spare!) on the whole trip. There is huge potential to be left stranded if anything goes wrong – one party from Red Rose CPC had a narrow escape when their one pull-down rope jammed hard on a big pitch in Spain. Gary's philosophy with SWCC trips has always been to make the caving as accessible as possible, and of course most through-trips involve very little prusiking, making them achievable by those with limited SRT experience. So, when we've tackled big through-trips, we have usually hard-rigged all the pitches, leaving them rigged long enough for participants to do the trip, then de-rigged.



Pierre St. Martin, 1995. Sue Mabbett in Salle Queffelec. Cavers in the background are (I think) Dominic Wade and Pat Hall (©Tony Baker)

As at the Berger, the rigging of Tête Sauvage was accomplished with relatively little hassle, despite the presence on the upper pitches of irritating 'parrot-ladders' - lengths of scaffold with rungs protruding from either side that had clearly been installed (with, no doubt, some difficulty) before the days of SRT. Gary remembers, though: *"There was a slight cock up with the rigging of Tête Sauvage. As with the Berger, all the ropes were pre-cut to length from a new drum. Iain Miller painstakingly washed and soaked the rope and ran it through descenders to shrink it before it was cut and bagged up. Purpose-bought tackle sacks were labelled up with their pitches. In the PSM there was a small pitch unaccounted for and on the last rigging trip, the first through-trip, I came across 40m of rope laid horizontally along a passage. Martin Hoff tells the story very well but effectively, I was one pitch down before I realised what had gone wrong, and we were looking down a 20-something-metre pitch with only the final 100m rope left in the bag. That's when I shouted back up the pitch for somebody to cut the rope, or else we weren't going*

Cross-section of the Pierre St. Martin system



to get to the bottom. I didn't fancy ending up 20m above the floor of the final 100m pitch." Iain didn't take kindly to the idea of any of his carefully prepared ropes being cut up; an account of his exchange with Gary on the matter is often repeated, to this day!

At the same time boats and pumps were ferried in via the EDF Tunnel and up through the lower end of the system, ready to be used in the Tunnel du Vent. Although none of the pitches in Tête Sauvage were particularly impressive, the PSM turned out to be as fine a cave as the Berger. In particular, the huge passages and chambers in the lower end of the cave, the Metro, the Salle Chevalier, the Salle Queffelec and so on, are magnificent; not to mention the vast Salle de Verna. In those days we mostly used expedition carbide lamps, and the hassles of fettling the things at frequent intervals were amply compensated by the sight of a huge cave passage illuminated with five or six such lamps.

The Tunnel du Vent was a seriously intimidating obstacle, and the story of how two unfortunates took an unscheduled swim in its icy waters, when their dinghy capsized, is another oft-repeated anecdote. I was among those who so enjoyed the through-trip that we did it again before the de-rig commenced. We also explored some of the other caves the area had to offer, most notably Lonney-Peyret and Gouffre de Couey Lodge, both fine SRT trips. The 1995 PSM trip was another great success and again we asked the inevitable question – where could we go next?

One of the PSM participants, Mike Haselden, planted the seed of an idea in Gary's mind. "He knew of a place in Spain, on the north coast near Santander," says Gary. "MCG had run a summer trip there, camping in the fruit orchard of one Rafael Zorrilla, the mayor of a local village. There was a huge mass of limestone called the Sierra del Hornijo. Virtually un-explored by human beings... well, so it was suggested!"

Gary's eldest son, Josh, was born in the summer of 1996, and at just a few weeks old became an unwitting participant in Gary and Susie's recce trip to northern Spain. Gary continues the tale: "Rafael was a star, a proper 'diamond geezer' in his own Spanish way. He went out of his way to meet us and to arrange a meeting with the mayor of Ramales, and with the 'main man' in Cantabria caving: Martín González Hierro. The old fruit orchard had been built over but Rafael (and I suspect Martín) managed to swing us permission to camp at a small municipal park on the outskirts of Ramales." Thus began a relationship between SWCC and Cantabria that continues to this day, and we had a venue lined up for 1997.

Elsewhere in 1996, those of us who couldn't wait two years between foreign caving fixes went to the Chartreuse area of France and did the fine Dent de Crolles through-trip. This project was Iain Miller's idea and he and then-wife Tracey, with Martin Hoff, had done an Easter recce, braving snow to locate the numerous cave entrances. The Dent de Crolles is the subject of Pierre Chevalier's caving literary

classic 'Subterranean Climbers', and the story of how Chevalier and his companions explored the system on covert trips in occupied France during WWII is well worth reading. The 'classic' through-trip is from the Trou de Glaz entrance, at an altitude of 1697m on the Dent de Crolles mountain, to the Guiers Mort at 1332m, and most participants completed this, although Ian Middleton sustained a broken ankle during his trip; he made his way through but was confined to the side of the swimming pool for the rest of his holiday. Some also added through-trips from the P40 entrance at 1935m. Martin Hoff, Clark Friend and I made a traverse from the Trou de Glaz entrance to the Grotte Chevalier and had an epic late-night walk back via a vague footpath, from the far side of the mountain, that had been largely washed away by a thunderstorm.



Dent de Crolles, 1996. Martin Hoff in the Trou de Glaz (©Tony Baker)

In 1997, Gary's plan for northern Spain came to fruition. As well as the 'virgin' limestone just waiting for the attentions of eager cavers, there was the matter of another monster through-trip in the area: the Cueto-Coventosa traverse. The top end, the Sima Cueto shaft, was a mind-blowing 317m sheer drop, followed immediately by more pitches before reaching the Galeria Juhue at -581m. HMS Vaughan

and the other dinghies were brought out and patched up, ready to be used to cross a series of deep lakes at the Coventosa end of the system. This time the expedition T-shirt was a lurid yellow colour and, with some rather blatant national stereotyping, featured a caver wielding a cape at an angry bull.

As well as installing the dinghies and a series of pull-through cords at the lakes, via the Coventosa entrance, some of us travelled further up the system to assess another of the cave's challenges: La Turbina. This is a tight vertical rift, rigged with in-situ rope, that served as a pinch-point for all of the air movement in the huge cave system and so has a howling gale blowing through it. The draught extinguished carbide lights in an instant and blew dust into the eyes, so La Turbina was a seriously intimidating place to be. Having established that I could, with some effort, prussik up it, I found that travelling in the opposite direction was easier, giving me the confidence to take on the through-trip.

Once the pitches were rigged, the through-trips began. The steep, two-hour-plus walk up to the Cueto entrance was usually started at 6am. Any later and the Spanish summer heat took its toll, and with through-trips taking anything upwards of 12 hours to complete, the early start at least meant a return to the campsite at a reasonable hour in the evening.



Cantabria 1997. Ian Middleton in one of the lakes, Cueva Coventosa (©Tony Baker)

In 1993, 1995 and 1997, Gary Nevitt had continued in his role of caterer to the masses. Gary's dislike of heights meant that he never went near any of the caves, but his commitment to providing food for hungry cavers was remarkable. Andy Dobson remembers: "After Dave and I had shepherded Tim 'Nice-But' Clark through Cueto-Coventosa, we got back to the rough campsite at about 3am to find Gary N dozing in his deck chair waiting to serve up our meal. He was definitely going beyond the call of duty, but it was greatly appreciated."

I did the traverse with Bob Hall and Martin Hoff, and the trip remains a real highlight in my caving history. A few days later, Fred Levett arrived at the campsite

and was keen to make the trip; I didn't hesitate to offer to go through again. I wasn't done with the Sima Cueto pitches, even then. Jules Carter recalls: *"Tony and I had volunteered to start the de-rig of the Cueto pitches once the through-trips had been completed. Returning from the bottom of the 600m-deep hole with various tackle bags overstuffed with rope proved a steady affair, made the more memorable by the echoing rumbles of thunder rolling down the main shaft from a storm outside!"*

Gary was on a later de-rig trip: *"I was on a Cueto de-rig trip but only went as far as the -200m ledge. I remember prussiking the shaft with a 100m rope, which cunningly (I supposed) would involve less effort if I trailed it loose below me as I prussiked. What I had not envisaged of course was the 'rock in bottom of rucksack' trick that is sometimes played on unsuspecting cavers. It was open to some smart-Alec to clip another bag of rope to the bottom of the 100m rope and of course I would be powerless to do anything with it 100m up the shaft! Luckily everyone on that trip was nice."*

The bottom end of the system, Cueva Coventosa, was a fine trip in itself and the superbly decorated Sala de los Phantasmas ('Phantoms') drew the attentions of cave photographers. But this trip had a wider objective – the search for new cave. Crossing the razor-sharp lapiaz in scorching summer sun was hard work, but we found plenty of interesting-looking shafts, down which stones rattled away readily. Cordless drills and lightweight 'stud' bolts made rigging new finds quick and easy, and the hillside proved to be a fertile hunting ground.

Cavers used to a world where the GPS on your mobile phone will take you to any exact spot will

find it strange to hear, but back in the late 1990s GPS had a very low level of accuracy, thanks to the signal being 'scrambled' by the US military for security reasons. So, a GPS fix on a promising 'find' simply wasn't accurate enough to allow for proper recording; the error induced could be as much as 100m. Gary and Iain Miller devised a clever dodge – a 'differential GPS' set-up that saw one GPS unit left running on the campsite, 24 hours a day, and thus establishing an increasingly accurate 'fix' on that exact spot. By comparing the differential between the spot on the campsite at any precise time, and the location of any find recorded with a GPS elsewhere at the same time, a more accurate location could be recorded. Gary: *"This is the same technique used by the Ordnance Survey when mapping today. It was our 'Unique Selling Point', that we used to convince the AER to let us come and play."*

We logged any new finds and marked the entrances with letters and numbers sprayed in red road paint. Andy Dobson recalls being ribbed for his lack of a misspent youth: *"Having never sprayed graffiti in my life, I marked cave entrances with letters 3ft high. There was a standing joke that you could see the sites I'd marked from the campsite..."*

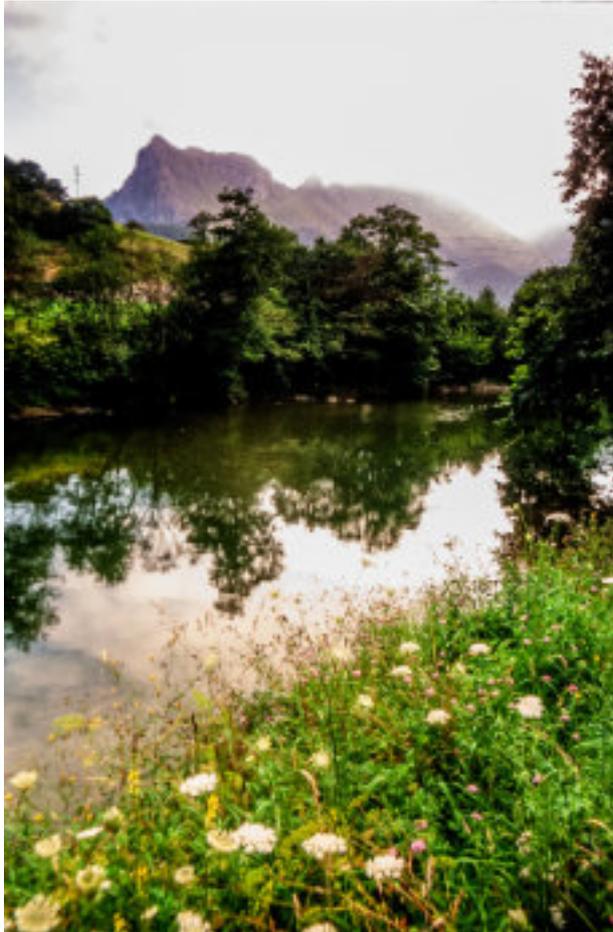
The sharp lapiaz pinnacles weren't the only hazards of prospecting on Spanish mountainsides. Andy Dobson again: *"A group of us were prospecting on San Vicente when Gary suddenly yelled 'sh*t - a snake!' (Very unusual as I have never seen one in all our trips there.) This was followed by the comic sight of Gary trying to run away over the karst while Jules sprinted towards the spot to identify it!"*

I distinctly remember that on our last full day on the hill in 1997, Martin Hoff and I found a number of

Cantabria 1997. Iain Miller in the impressive entrance to Cueva Canuela (@Tony Baker)



Cantabria 1997. Pico de San Vicente, as seen from our campsite in Ramales de la Victoria (©Tony Baker)



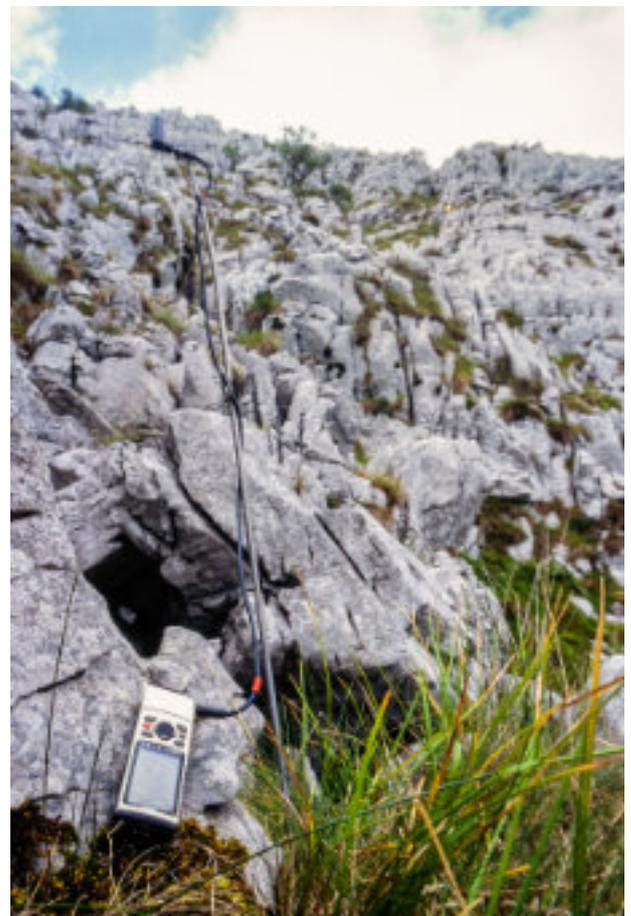
shafts that we ran out of time to explore, and we made the decision that we couldn't wait two years to come back. We enthused enough others to come back in summer '98, feeling distinctly guilty that, having set all this up, Gary was committed to family holidays in the even-numbered years between GV trips and wouldn't be able to join us. But in 1999 we were all back as a team and we threw ourselves full-on into the search for the deep, long cave systems that we were sure had to be there.

Sadly, our efforts over a total of five summers, from 1997 to 2001, were never rewarded with the finds we deserved. Frustratingly, had we had access to the digging technology we used in Wales (particularly explosives) then numerous exciting leads could have been pushed properly. One lead in particular, a small cave entrance that blew a gale of cold air across the adjoining hillside, still lives large in my memory, but that draught emerged from a narrow slot just inside the entrance that we had no means of working on. But Cantabria had plenty of other fine 'tourist' caving trips and the area has drawn SWCC members back time and again, mostly on Easter trips (see separate article).

While a small group of us went over in summer 2001 to continue the exploratory work, Gary had decided to look for some fresh challenges elsewhere and settled on the Reseau Felix Trombe

in the French Pyrenees. This remains the only 'Gary trip' I didn't go on, having used my available annual leave to go to Cantabria. Gary takes up the story: "The Felix-Trombe is a big multi-entrance system, with entrances on different levels. Think of a continental Ogof Ffynnon Ddu. It was also the local cave for Denise and Tony Knibbs' French club and as such there was an important inter-club element to the visit. There are various routes down to the collecteur (streamway) but it's no Starless River! We actually did the 'big' through-trip in two parts. I went from the top entrance to the middle one on one day, came out and then went and did the middle to the bottom the next day."

Two years later, in 2003, Gary planned a trip to the Ordesa National Park in the Pyrenees of northern Spain. Initial soundings were inauspicious; Gary made repeated requests for SWCC to take on the Sistema Badalona through-trip, receiving the same answer every time: 'There is no access'. It turned out that, somewhat curiously, caving (along with lots of other things) is forbidden in the Parque Nacional de Ordesa y Monte Perdido. Being outside the park boundaries, an alternative through-trip was settled on: the Sistema Arañonera. The most notable feature of this is a 100m pitch that descends only to a sump, so requires a traverse across to a ledge and then to a 50m pitch that follows immediately afterwards.



Cantabria 1997. A handheld GPS being used to record the location of a promising site (©Tony Baker)

My personal memories of the Ordesa trip are not great. Trying to maximise the use of my annual leave, I went for just a week but on the long solo drive out I went down with a horrible cold that laid me low for the rest of the week. I'm grateful to Martin Hoff, who accompanied me on the through-trip so that I at least did the trip rather than go home without having done it. I don't remember much about the cave, apart from that the entrance had a sizeable snow plug in it, with patches of snow and ice a long way down. There was quite a bit of traversing on in-situ rubbish rope above deep pools, something we were becoming accustomed to by now. Fortunately, Martin's memory, aided by his logbook, is better than mine: *"The snow and ice, the draught and then the aquatic gymnastics are all it is memorable for. There were no formations to speak of, no fun big shape passage like the Verneau (a through-trip in the Jura – see later description), just pitches, a bit of rifty passage and a walk in/on/above the river. You and I did the first through-trip of the system, finishing the rigging including the 100m shaft – I repeated the through-trip with Dom Hyland and Hywel (Davies) days later in seven hours underground without the rigging and with me knowing the way."*

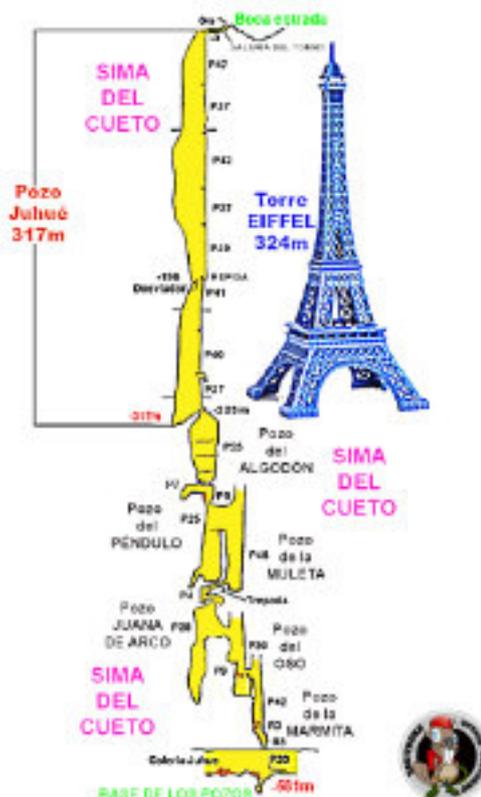
Andy Dobson has a memory from their trip: *"Near the top entrance, we met a Spanish lady doing research for the National Park. She asked us our ages but refused to accept the answers, especially Brian's, and we were much younger then!"*

"De-rigging from the bottom pitches up, I carried out the rope from the lowest shafts, including a 100m rope, sweating profusely as I prussiked, especially on the long, not-quite-vertical pitch near the top, only to cool down nicely on the three snow-covered little pitches at the entrance. As I surfaced, Denise, Tony (Knibbs) & Dom (Hyland) were waiting to help porter and were amazed I could look so fresh-faced. 'Just technique' I fibbed."

Gary adds another memory: *"It was Dom Hyland's first SWCC foreign trip. He recounted to me the time that he joined you and me to locate the lower entrance (our first full day). We walked through bushes and scrub across the hillside in rain and drizzle for two hours. When we eventually found it, sometime mid-afternoon, he thought 'great, we can go back to the campsite now', but was amazed when you and I started kitting up to rig the lower entrance pitch!"*

I also managed a particularly good walk on my last full day, which lifted my spirits somewhat. But others also found the Ordesa trip hard going; the campsite was a bit spartan and had no swimming pool, which made it a challenge to entertain young children, and the weather wasn't great either. I think it's fair to say that the idea of the 'Unexpeditions', foreign trips on even-numbered years with less focus on caving and more family-friendly, was born out of the difficulties of the

This diagram gives an idea of the scale of the Sima Cueto entrance pitch



Ordesa trip. Gary: *"I was told by my then-wife (Susie) that the Ordesa would be the last time she came along on an SWCC summer trip, unless things were more 'family friendly'."*

That said, it is a spectacular area for walking, but in the research for this article I came across this description of Sistema Badalona on the Speleo-Club Avalon website: 'One of the deepest through-trips (-1150 m) in the world and also one of the most beautiful. The cave looks more like an underground canyon with roaring waterfalls and white water. (12-17 hrs when fully rigged, 20 hrs when 'rappelling' (pull-down abseiling)).' Which makes the prohibition of caving in the park seem all the more ridiculous...

In 2005 we were back in France, and in a prime caving area without petty bureaucracy - the Jura mountains of south-eastern France, close to the border with Switzerland. As well as having the advantage that it's a modest day's drive from Calais (in contrast with Cantabria or the Pyrenees), the area has lots of caves that suit a range of abilities. Gary: *"Clive Westlake was the key source of caving data for this trip. He tipped us off about the campsite in Ornans, and the must-do trips."*

Once more a big through-trip was the main objective – the Verneau traverse, between the Gouffre des Biefs-Boussets and the Grotte Baudin. We started by rigging the lower end, the Baudin, whose muddy and uninspiring entrance series ends (via a tight descending tube) at the head of an airy pitch down into a fine streamway. Some deep pools

in the streamway are avoided by use of an exposed and overhanging wire traverse midway down the pitch (think Bolt Traverse on steroids). The clean-washed streamway was of impressive proportions and I earmarked it for a photo trip. Meanwhile the top end, Biefs-Boussets was rigged, the only hassle being a series of tortuous meanders that were a pain when carrying a bag of rope.

I did the through-trip with Jules Carter, and he still shares to this day the moment when the jet on my expedition carbide lamp was expelled with a loud bang and shot off into the air like a bullet, never to be seen again: *"After the tedious meander, and various ducks, we finally emerged in the Grand Collecteur, a masterpiece of geology and the first chance to stomp along. Suddenly there was a whooshing sound, and the whole cave lit up. I turned to see the remains of the flame shooting up from Tony's helmet from a sudden venting of excess pressure from his carbide generator, sending the carbide jet into the ether above!"*

I got my own back later in the trip, when I found a Petzl Pantin at the base of a pitch, which Jules must have stepped over without noticing. I still use it.

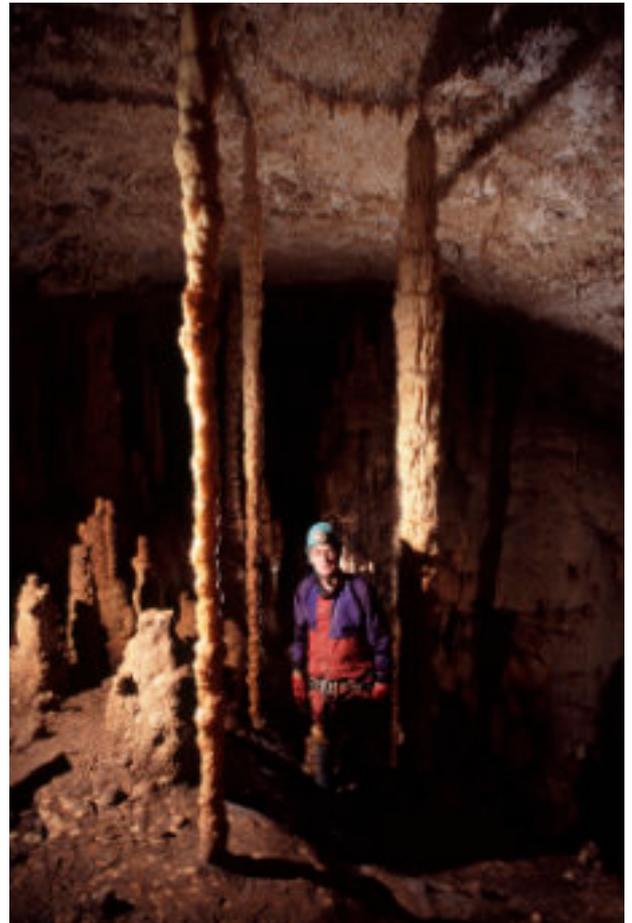
The through-trip is achievable by free-diving a short sump, but there's a dry(ish) alternative route, left permanently rigged, a 30m pitch up a muddy aven and down the other side via a series of shorter pitches. As we made our way through the system, we dropped into a lake at the Puits de Jonction (where the connection between the two caves had been made) that had to be swum across. Jules recalls: *"...we descended a fixed rope into deep water, and gained the point where a second affluent joined the main streamway. To our dismay this was polluted, and ahead of us the passage had become a stinking slime-ridden sewer that we now had to slither, slide and swim along..."* Andy Dobson remembers: *"We said that that bit of the trip was 'just going through the motions'."*



Jura 2005. Mike McCombe in the Grotte Baudin (©Tony Baker)

This wasn't something we'd expected, and we later found out it was a temporary problem, but it marred what should have been a classic trip.

However, the closer we got to the bit of the Baudin we knew, the bigger and more impressive the cave became. The Salle du Bon Negro and Salle du Petit Negro are huge chambers with spectacular domed roofs, as good as anything I've seen elsewhere. We didn't make the diversion to see the much-vaunted Tripod formation, but there was plenty more to enjoy in this fine cave. Eventually we came to familiar territory, prussiked up into the awkward tube, then made our way out into warm evening sunshine.



Jura 2005. Mike McCombe in Gouffre de Granges-Mathieu (©Tony Baker)

The Jura had plenty of other caving highlights: Gary, Martin Hoff and I went all the way to the end of the superbly aquatic Grotte de la Chauveroches, swimming and traversing the 200-plus gour pools. The Baume de St. Anne was a fine daylight shaft into a huge chamber. We somehow managed to get past the locked gate of the Gouffre de Granges-Mathieu, where the fabulous formations were only slightly marred by the rusting would-be showcave infrastructure.

By 2007 it was fourteen years since that successful Gouffre Berger visit, and Gary secured us another booking. This time we were ably assisted by students and alumni from Sheffield University SS, and their contribution to rigging, de-rigging and ferrying rope underground was invaluable. With

Jura 2005. Martin Hoff in Gouffre de Granges-Mathieu
(©Tony Baker)



camping at La Molière no longer permitted, we were based on a campsite in nearby Méaudre.

Gary remembers: "This trip was a measure of how much we had improved in those fourteen years. The errors made in the 1993 rigging were obvious to us

in 2007." (Some lessons were never learned, though: someone who should have known better ordered a quantity of the Berger 2007 T-shirts in a revolting green colour. I think they are still in the merchandise cupboard.)

This time I did my trip to the bottom and back without camping, in company with Sue Mabbett and Gareth Edwards. Once again, I was blown away by the awesome nature of the Berger. The Great Rubble Heap, the Grand Canyon and Hurricane pitch are truly some of the most remote and spectacular underground places on the planet. If you've never been to the Berger, you really should.

On our way out, Gareth opted to grab an empty sleeping bag at Camp One, but Sue had left the then-five-year-old Emily with other parents at the campsite and had promised she'd be back. She and I plodded out from the camp, emerging from the entrance at 5am after 20 hours underground. With Jules elsewhere (see below), Sue took on childcare responsibilities for the day. I went to bed!

Gary: "I bottomed with Martin Hoff and made the mistake of leaving my Petzl Pantin at the top of Little Monkey (two pitches from the bottom). Doh! It was quite a surprise to arrive at the pseudo-siphon to be met by several naked female Sheffield Uni students modelling for their annual calendar."

Meanwhile Jules Carter and Paul Mackrill were busy raising money for charity by bottoming the Berger at a rapid pace, then cycling to Chamonix through the night before climbing Mont Blanc. Jules remembers: "Following Paul, I emerged from our bottoming trip of the Berger a little over 9 hours

Gouffre Berger 2007. Le Grand Eboulis (the Great Rubble Heap) (©Tony Baker)





*Gouffre Berger 2007. The Salle Des Treize (Hall of the Thirteen)
(©Tony Baker)*

after entering the cave. Elated with the time and such an amazing trip, I soon had to remind myself we still had to cycle to Chamonix and then ascend Mont Blanc. A brief break to snack and change, and we were off down the path on a couple of knackered mountain bikes, meeting Iain Miller at the road to pick up the road bikes for the long ride ahead. We settled into a rhythm and steadily the miles went by, but as we passed a pizza van we realised we were starving! A forward order was put to Gillian (Mackrill, Paul's late wife, acting as support) and soon we were on the side of the road gnashing

through some huge pieces of carbohydrate and fat delight - perfect prep for the many miles still in front of us!"

The effects of altitude took their toll on Jules and he didn't quite make it to the summit of Europe's highest mountain; Paul did although he looked much the worse for wear afterwards. A fantastic effort and not something that's been done often, if at all, I suspect.

As I'd not needed to ferry camping gear to Camp One in advance of my 'bottoming' trip, I used trips into the cave to stash a large number of flashbulbs along the route to the Hall of Thirteen in advance of



Group photo of the Gouffre Berger team in 2007. See how many of the same faces you can see in the 1993 group shot! (©Tony Baker)

a big photo trip. This was duly achieved thanks to help from Gary Vaughan, Bill Buxton, Brian Clipstone, Dave and Andy Dobson and others. I was still taking underground photos on film in those days, so everything had to be achieved 'in camera'. A sarcastic remark from a keen Sheffield Uni cave photographer – "what's film?" was duly retaliated when he, charged with taking a vital 'naked caving' pic of a group in the Hall of Thirteen for the SUSS calendar, realised he'd left his digital camera's battery on charge at the campsite, rendering it useless. He had to borrow a cheap compact camera from one of his party.



Haute-Savoie 2009. Hywel Davies in the Grotte de la Diau (©Tony Baker)

Our combined photography and de-rigging trip led to an epic exit from the cave as heavy rain on the surface made the upper pitches impassable, and we spent an uncomfortable hour or more on the ledge on Cairn Pitch until the water levels above us dropped and we could emerge in the early hours. The last stage of the de-rig, later the same day, was done by Sheffield students in very wet conditions, and our last-night celebration barbecue was something of a washout, but we could still look back on another very successful trip to one of the world's most famous and spectacular caves.

In 2009 we were back in France to take on the Grotte de la Diau, in the Haute-Savoie. This is a

650m-deep through-trip from high on the Parmelan plateau to emerge in a massive entrance portal above the village of Thorens-Gliere. In a departure from usual practice on GV-trips, we were all planning to do this one as a pull-down abseil. Unlike many of the continental through-trips, there are pitches most of the way down the traverse and a 'hard' rig would have taken a lot of work to install and de-rig. With the cave being extremely cold, a proper Alpine-caving experience, it was clear that not everyone would want to do the 12–16-hour traverse. Earlier in the summer, Gary set up a little route around Top Entrance that included several pull-down abseils, so that we could hone our techniques in readiness.

Our base was a good campsite just outside Annecy, and the area offered plenty of cycling, canyoning and walking opportunities but few other caves of great interest. Everyone who wanted to did the through-trip and it was a superb, sporting excursion, but the cave's low ambient temperature marred the experience somewhat. As the trip was pretty 'aquatic', with wet pitches and deep sections of streamway at the bottom end, a wetsuit was essential, and even brief pauses waiting for a rope to be rigged or pulled down led to cavers getting very cold. I had looked forward to getting some photographs taken on a trip into the impressive bottom end of the cave, but even my willing models soon got deeply chilled and had to leave the cave. I ended up shivering in the water, holding flashguns myself, with the camera on a tripod triggered by self-timer. Others have memories of the cold water. Andy Dobson: "Peeling off his wetsuit after the long wade through meltwater all along the streamway, Dave looked down and commented: 'that won't impress the girls too much!'"



Haute-Savoie 2009. Family caving in the Grotte de la Diau. Paul Meredith with James, Jules Carter with Emily, Gary Vaughan with Josh and Ben, Dom and Barbara Hyland with Benedict (©Tony Baker)

The Diau traverse itself was a fantastic trip but I'm not sure that it compares to some of the other things we've done, and there's not enough other caves in the area to put it high on the list for a revisit. Gary disagrees: "The Diau was, in my view, right up there with the Berger, PSM and Coventosa.



Haute-Savoie 2009. Paul Quill in the Grotte de la Diau. (Composite of two separate images) (©Tony Baker)

I agree that, aside from the Diau, there was nothing else there, caving-wise."

In 2011 we were back on the campsite Les Eymes in Méaudre, in the Vercors, this time without a booking for the Berger but with the intention to explore some of the numerous other great caves in the area. Yet again a through-trip was the main objective; from the Trou Qui Souffle to Les Saints De Glace. The upper entrance to this is just a few minutes' walk from the campsite and is something of a curiosity. It's literally at the edge of a road and you belay the entrance pitch from a metal railing. It was a reasonable through-trip, if not on anything like the same scale as some of the stuff we'd done elsewhere. Andy Dobson remembers the Trou Qui Souffle as: *"the most uninspiring through trip I have done - seemingly endless traverse meanders, on tatty slack rope, with all the holes drilled to instal P-hangers but not yet done. Now we knew the true taste of Purgatory."*



Vercors 2011. Grotte de Bournillon. Self-portrait of the author (©Tony Baker)

We also ticked off Grotte de Gournier, which starts with a dinghy trip across a very cold, deep lake and features one of the finest streamways I've been in. Sadly, an in-situ 'up' rope that we were expecting to use to access the further reaches of the cave wasn't there.

Paul Tarrant and I went to the Scialet du Toboggan, and after some hassles finding the entrance enjoyed a fine streamway, most usually done as part of a through-trip from the Trou des Anciens. Grotte Favot also turned out to be an entertaining (and photogenic) diversion for an easy afternoon, and thanks to assistance from willing models I took some good pics of the impressive Grotte de Bournillon.

Anyone who has read the classic account of the exploration of the Gouffre Berger, '1000 Metres Down' by Jean Cadoux and others, will recall that the motivation for combing the Sornin plateau in search of cave entrances came from a desire to find the source of the underground river that the cavers had explored from the resurgence, the Cuves De Sassenage. This is now a showcave but caving access can be arranged via the local tourist office. Once beyond the showcave this turned out to be a real highlight, a superb sporting trip with some excellent stream passage. Gary: *"Cuves de Sassenage was a stunning cave. The entrance series was very much like the lower series in DYO, but on a much bigger scale with a much bigger river. At about 10 minutes in, an inlet is reached and a climb up to a higher-level series which is more like OFD. Route-finding wasn't too bad. That series tips out on a big ledge looking down into a narrow rift which nearly pinches out at the bottom. Once past the constriction the streamway is re-joined but it's a very squalid, stooping affair to start with. After 15 minutes or so it gets bigger, and then it gets bigger*



Vercors 2011. Grotte de Bournillon. Allan Richardson in the foreground, Denise Knibbs is one of the cavers in the background (©Tony Baker)

Cantabria 2013. Andy Dobson on the Cueto-Coventosa through-trip (©Tony Baker)



again and after a while it's like being in the bottom of the Berger. We stopped at the bottom of a 40m 'up' pitch about three hours from the entrance."

In 2013, it was time for another 'summer-months' visit to Spain, with the Cueto-Coventosa through-trip once more the main objective. Once again, we rigged this for the duration of the trip, and everyone who wanted to completed the traverse. I did the through-trip with Dave and Andy Dobson, and Dave remembers it thus: "I thought of the Cueto entrance pitch as 6 x 50m pitches, a much more 'friendly' option! We followed a party of Finns through and they weren't sure they'd be able to find their way. They left little bits of red ribbon in key places, so that we would know they were still ahead of us." Andy: "Miri used so much red tape, I named

it the Bureaucracy Through-Trip." We finally caught up with the Finns at the approach to the lakes – very much the 'home straight', as it was only a couple of hours from the bottom end.



Cantabria 2013. Gary Vaughan in the Sistema Gandara through-trip (©Tony Baker)

Since our last summer visits, French cavers had explored the enormous Sistema la Gándara – 116km of passage in total (as recorded in December 2020). The cave was first explored in 2003 and since being introduced to it in 2005, Gary and others had spent numerous Easter trips learning the way from either end of a monster 12-hour-plus through-trip. Their efforts had paid off and in April 2013, a party of Gary, Martin Hoff and Brendan Sloan completed what is believed to be the first one-day through-trip of the system. In the summer of 2013, we repeated this successful navigation through the complex system, although much of the upper end in particular was hard work.

Harvey Lomas (foreground) and Michel Bernard (background) in the Grotte Favot (©Tony Baker)



Vercors 2011. Gary Vaughan
in the Cuves de Sassenage
(©Tony Baker)





Cantabria 2013. David Mason in Cueva Coventosa (©Tony Baker)

Another big through-trip, in the Red del Silencio, was the scene of an incident. After a break for a bite to eat, Martin Hoff headed off ahead of the rest of the party and a mix-up over the agreed rendezvous saw the Dobsons and me arrive in the appointed chamber with Martin nowhere to be seen. With there being no obvious alternative route, we were convinced that he had to be ahead of us and we ploughed on, fully expecting to find him busy taking photographs in the well-decorated passages of El Sahara. The further we went, the more our doubts increased and when we finally emerged from the entrance, late at night, with no sign of Martin, we realised we had a problem. We'd been underground for more than 12 hours and were no position to go and start searching for Martin, especially since he was the only one of us with previous experience of the cave. Once back at the car, we made a phone call to the campsite and Ben Stevens, Brendan Sloan and Tim Webber managed to leave the site before the gates were locked for the night. They found Martin making his way out of the cave, having more than once changed his mind about where we might be and dashed back and forth along El Sahara looking for us. I'm still not sure how we missed each other in the same cave passage. Dave Dobson recalls: "We were convinced Martin was ahead of us until we got to the car, when we realized he wasn't!"

As mentioned earlier, in 1996 some of us had been to the Dent de Crolles in Gary's family-holiday year, so he'd never been to this historic cave. We were due a revisit and that's where we went in 2015. Through-trips between the Trou de Glaz and the Guiers-Mort were done with little hassle, and

Martin Hoff and I, with Paul Tarrant, revisited the scene of our late-night 1996 epic walk with a (daylight) visit to the Grotte Chevalier to take photos. Gary has a vivid memory: "I exited from the entrance near to Chevalier – Annabelle? with the boys, late one afternoon, straight into a bit of a thunderstorm. It wasn't raining as hard as the 1996 storm that washed away the track, and the path was good and firm, but that didn't help stop the dinner-plate sized rocks that were whizzing past our ears and were certainly cause for concern! An unfortunate tourist died while we were in the cave, falling off of the route to Trou de Glaz. Again, I think we were so much better at this in 2015 than 1996!"



Cantabria 2013. Paul Quill and David Mason in Cueva Coventosa (©Tony Baker)



Dent de Crolles 2015. Paul Tarrant on the walk back from the Grotte Chevalier entrance. The path Paul is standing on was the scene of a late-night epic for the author, Martin Hoff and Clark Friend in 1996, when a thunderstorm washed much of it away. This picture is a composite of several images (©Tony Baker)

Andy Dobson: “Velma joined us (Andy, Dave and Brian) for a couple of trips and we christened our group Velma and The Veterans. We could have been a Sixties band!”

In 2017 we were back at the PSM, along with many who’d missed the 1995 trip. Since that previous trip, the Salle de Verna has been developed as a showcave, and the development included the construction of a single-track concrete road from the valley right to the entrance of the EDF tunnel. While this made access to and from the EDF tunnel rather easier than the hour-plus walk on a zig-zag footpath that we’d done before, it was necessary to co-ordinate use of the road with the tourist minibuses, as there are no passing places.



Dent De Crolles 2015. The author in the Guiers-Mort. Composite of two images (©Tony Baker)

Once again, an epic trip in from the bottom end, *en masse*, saw us install inner tubes and pumps at the Tunnel du Vent, while this time the rigging teams concentrated on the SC3 entrance (although we rigged Tête Sauvage again as well). As an SRT trip, SC3 was vastly superior to Tête Sauvage, although the route from the base of the superb 54m Liberty Bell pitch to Salle Cosyns – where Tête Sauvage reaches the collecteur, was rather tortuous. Jules Carter recalls: “*Stu had quickly scuttled off down the ropes of SC3, and I was to follow. ‘Rope free’ soon comes, but I take a moment to reflect and to double-check my clips and Petzl Stop. My last big SRT trip in a French cave had been almost been my last, and it was not an experience I wanted to repeat...*”

Gary: “...we really missed out not doing SC3 in 1995! The SC3 entrance is vastly superior to Tête Sauvage and yes, there is a small amount of scrabbling around for 15 minutes or so at the base of the vertical stuff, but it soon gives way to fine streamway.”

I managed to fit in through-trips from both upper entrances. Jules again: “*Only a couple of days of battering my body on the SC3 through-trip, Tony suggests we do it via Tête Sauvage. ‘Why not?’ was my reply!*”

I also spent a long day photographing the magnificent chambers of the lower end of the cave, with the kind assistance of Paul Tarrant. Another consequence of the Salle de Verna’s development was that we were able to enjoy the spectacle of seeing the place illuminated by electric lighting; something that caving lights could never achieve. It’s by far the biggest underground void I’ve ever been in, and the showcave company’s clever placing of mannequins in caving gear reveal the true scale of the place. If you’re ever in the area, you really should go and see the place.

Meanwhile some had managed to locate the impressive Gouffre Bexanka, with a fine entrance shaft leading to a series of very well decorated chambers, linked with fixed ladders and metal fixtures. Frustratingly, my photo trip there was compromised by my flash trigger giving up and I had to resort to the old ‘3...2...1..fire!’ method of triggering remote flashes. Sadly, the cave’s popularity led to one group missing out on it, as they turned up for a final-day trip in only to find a queue of groups waiting to descend the entrance pitch. A long walk provided alternative last-day entertainment and, inevitably, the conversation was had – ‘where are we going in 2019?’

It was agreed that we were probably due a revisit to the Jura, and we arrived in the area in late July 2019 just as a weeks-long French heatwave broke. Our first night on the campsite had the soundtrack of distant thunder, and our first day of activity saw us hunting for the Grotte Baudin entrance in torrential rain. When we eventually found it (having failed to refer to the published material we wrote in 2005), Stuart Bennett managed to rig to the wire traverse, with the streamway below him in full flood. Gary: “I

remember getting about five body-lengths into the crawl to the pitch head, and lying there listening to this awesome roar coming from ahead. It was very 'exhilarating', so much so that I decided I had to reverse back to the base of the previous pitch. My claustrophobia had got the better of me for five minutes. 15 minutes later I was sufficiently motivated to give it another go, and soon joined Stu and Tony on the 'airy' wire traverse. It may simply be different comfort zones but the wire was fine and I couldn't relate to why others were finding it so exciting. Just goes to show that every caver has their own individual 'kryptonite'. Stu and I pushed upstream against the torrent for 5 minutes but thought the better of it. It was quite a contrast to be in the same passage a few days later under normal water conditions."

Fortunately, it took only a couple of dry days for water levels to subside and the Gouffre des Biefs-Boussets at the top end of the system was rigged ready for the Verneau through-trip.

This time, the Verneau trip was achieved without encountering sewage, and very good it was too. The 2017 PSM through-trip team of Gary, Stuart Bennett, Jules and I was reconvened and rattled through the cave in nine and a half hours. Later on, I managed to persuade Jules and Gary to help me with photos on the de-rigging trip.

Martin Hoff had been eagerly anticipating a return to the aquatic Grotte de La Chauveroché, and took the opportunity to do two trips. As well as his trip to the far end of the cave with Jules, he and I managed to get some photos done despite the challenges of deep, cold pools. Meanwhile Brian Clipstone and

Dave and Andy Dobson explored some lesser-known 'collectors' pieces', including Perte des Ravieres, the Grotte de la Baume de Mont and the Grotte des Faux-Monnayeurs. Elsewhere, the Gouffre des Ordons proved to be an excellent diversion, a short but superbly well-decorated cave with a straightforward entrance pitch.

The plan for 2021 is a visit to the Ardèche region of south-eastern France. The 2012 'Unexpedition' went to the area but this is the first time we've done a 'Gary trip' there – assuming that we can go. At the time of writing, January 2021, the coronavirus is still a very serious issue, all four countries of the UK are under strict lockdown and travel to France is restricted. Hopes of foreign travel in 2021 rely on the roll-out and efficacy of the various vaccines over the coming months. I've booked my place on the campsite and my fingers are crossed.

I can scarcely believe that it's thirty years since that trip to the Piaggia Bella. While there have been plenty of other foreign trips involving SWCC members in the intervening years, it's only the Gary trips (and the Unexpeditions) that can truly be seen as 'SWCC trips'. As mentioned earlier, the summer trips of odd-numbered years are open to all, regardless of experience or ability. There are always plenty of diversions available other than caving: walking, cycling, climbing, canyoning, via ferrata and so on. Or you can sit in the sun and drink tea! The nightly 'meetings', started on the Berger trip in 1993, ostensibly to establish caving plans for the following day but increasingly a social get-together, are the French-campsite equivalent of the Long Common Room. Beer and wine are consumed, caving stories and anecdotes are told, and our

Dent De Crolles 2015. The author and Martin Hoff in the Guiers-Mort (@Tony Baker)



Pierre St. Martin 2017. The author and Paul Tarrant in Le Metro, Pierre-St.Martin. Composite of three images (© Tony Baker)





Jura 2019. Jules Carter in the Grotte Baudin streamway (©Tony Baker)

raucous laughter has, on numerous occasions, brought reprimands from neighbouring campers; French campsites have a sort of unwritten curfew that we're somewhat prone to breaching.

A final word to Gary, on the subject of his nickname: *"It was the late Bob Saunders who came up with the nickname 'Fearless Leader'. It came out of my (perceived) relaxed approach at the head of big pitches. I never felt particularly comfortable with the nickname, because like everyone else on the expeditions I had my own demons to deal with on the big trips."* Gary is being a little modest here; none of the trips mentioned above would have happened without his organisational nous and his ability to make things happen. Many of us will be forever grateful for Gary's role in arranging and running SWCC trips to some of Europe's finest caves.

The bi-annual 'Gary trips' are a fixture in my calendar, and I'm fortunate that getting married and becoming a dad hasn't stopped me from attending. Sue and Harry use that two-week slot every other year to go on holiday with Sue's family. She'd still like to throw out those old T-shirts, though...

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Jura 2019. Gary Vaughan in the Grotte Baudin streamway (©Tony Baker)



Siete Semanas - An Overview of SWCC Caving in Cantabria

Gary Vaughan

A Little Background Information

Before you think to yourself that this is taken from the title of some sort of raunchy Spanish movie, allow me to explain.

Spanish was never an easy language for me to pick up. Most of my experiences in Europe before 1996 had been in and around France. I had organised my first ever expedition, supposedly to Italy and the Piaggia Bella, but in truth this had turned out to be a very French affair with the main campsite, shopping and restaurant partaking in the French town of Tende some 5km or so from the Italian Border. During the 1995 PSM trip, a chance conversation with one of the guests from the MCG, Mike Haselden, gave rise to what would become the Spanish trips. I can't recall where the conversation took place, but I suspect beer was involved and I suspect that it was late at night. The general thrust of the conversation was along the lines of "So, where to in two years' time?" Mike Haselden had a suggestion that seemed to tick a lot of boxes. He knew of a place in Spain on the north coast near Santander. MCG I believe had run a summer trip there, camping in the fruit orchard of one Rafael Zorrillia, the mayor of a local village called Riva. There was a huge massif of Limestone called the Sierra del Hornijo located in the Cantabria area of Spain. Virtually unexplored by human beings... well, or so it was suggested!

My interest was piqued. I planned a reconnaissance for the summer of 1996, late August in fact. My oldest boy Joshua was born in July of that year and by the end of the excursion to Spain the one Spanish phrase that I knew through and through was guess what?... yes, that's right, Siete Semanas!

Early Matters

Ramales was a good place to be based. Three or four supermarkets back in those days, a number of good restaurants and bars, and a bustling atmosphere not often found in small provincial Spanish towns. When I met with Martín in the agreed rendezvous, Mikes Bar, Rafael came and acted as interpreter. Martín's English was better than my Spanish, but we would have struggled without Rafael who acted like an ambassador for SWCC, extolling our virtues and telling Martín how good it would be for the area to welcome us with open arms. To be candid, I'm not convinced that Martín saw us in that light to start with. Understandably, I think he was a tad cautious about letting SWCC come in and start exploring on his patch. Nonetheless, Martín agreed that SWCC could come to Cantabria the next summer and help explore one of the areas that the local Spanish Club, the Agrupacion Espeleologica Ramaliega (AER) had all but given up on. Pico San Vincente was to be the 'SWCC patch' for 1997. I was thrilled.

Years later Martín confided in me that SWCC had not been allocated the area with the best potential. I think with hindsight, Martín wished he had given us something with slightly more potential to go at. That is just my personal reading of the situation. Irrespective of the potential, SWCC gave its all to the exploration area and for five summers, 1997 to 2001, SWCC mounted major summer exploratory expeditions to the area. Others will write, I'm sure, about those golden days, tales of Rafael frying huge pans of sardinas, and rocks literally falling all around you as you picked your way with care and attention over razor sharp lapiaz in baking heat.

One of the side attractions for the 1997 trip was a little through trip called the Cuteo – Coventosa traverse. Martín had supplied us with several copies

of a book called *Grandes Tránsidas*, a very useful guide to twenty or so classic through trips. Cúteu – Coventosa was just one of a number in the area. There was clearly massive caving potential here, not just for exploration, but also for general sport caving and simply having a grand day out. The summer 1997 trip ended, leaving lots of ‘leads’. Could we wait two years before returning? Hell no. And so was born the very first SWCC Easter Cantabria trip. It is so long ago now that I can’t remember who was involved and who wasn’t involved. The basic concept was to catch a ferry on the Friday a week before Easter, drive down on Saturday, cave through the week and drive back up through France the following Saturday to catch a Saturday night/early Sunday morning ferry back to Blyth. We did (read as ‘endured’) this for quite a number of years before we realised that flying and hiring a car at the airport took a whole lot of grunt out of the whole week. These were the ‘Driving Years’.

The main gang back in the late 1990s and into the start of the noughties were me, Iain Miller, Martin Hoff, Paul Meredith, Keith Ball, Brian Clipstone, Neil Weymouth, Tony and Denise Knibbs, Simon Lacey and Chris and Alison Payne, Dave and Andy Dobson, Bob Hall, Elaine Hall, Brendan Sloan, Ben Stevens, Bridget Hall and of course Mike Haselden. Apologies if my memory has faded and you were there as well. The vehicles used to get there ranged from various vans, sometimes mine or Mike Haselden’s, Chris Payne’s Landy loaded up with six or seven passengers (I was ill that year), and of course, cars of various members like Bob Hall, Andy, Dave, Brian, and I think Neil Weymouth used to have an estate car back in those days. My recollection of the travel down each year was watching spring unfold in one day. We would leave the UK in the grip of winter, but as we headed south, progressively more and more buds appeared until by the time we reached Cantabria, spring was in full bloom. It felt like something out of the Wizard of Oz, a magical warm sunny place with caves everywhere you looked. There was a lazy relaxed pace to the area, almost as if time had stood still. Donkeys were still the main form of transport for some households, and it would not be unusual to be walking down off of the hills late in the afternoon as the sunlight started to fade to find a lonely shepherd hut with a single Spanish guy sat outside taking in the last rays of light before retiring to the very basic facilities offered by those mountain cabañas.

The trips tended to be a mixture of sport caving, exploratory probes into old dig sites and sport caving with lots and lots of walking. It was a slow and deliberate pace. We discovered the way to walk into the various entrances, and we revelled in the Cantabrian caves. There was just so much to do. Each year would find us progressively deeper and further into each system as we negotiated our way

as best we could, learning each system a step at a time until the caves were as familiar as Top Entrance.

One of our early challenges was Red Del Silencio. For those who don’t know the system, Red Del is a beautiful cave with three distinctly different entrances. The highest entrance Torca Caballos is very much like a Yorkshire pot; it drops pitch after pitch after pitch with only the odd 10 or 20m of horizontal passage between. The pitches bottom out at about -250m. (by way of comparison a good deep Yorkshire pot will bottom out at around -170m). The middle entrance is Torca de la Canal. This is a Cwm Dwr style cave! I will get back to that point in a little while. The bottom entrance is the river resurgence which carries the cave name. It’s an archaeological site of great interest and in fact is one of the few caves in Cantabria that you need to get a permit for. It’s a bit like Dan-yr-Ogof but with the great north road five minutes from the entrance! I quickly fell in love with the resurgence cave and would spend countless hours exploring up system as far as we could. Eventually after a number of superb trips in from the bottom end and at about three hours in, we located the last connecting pitch down on the through trip, a relay pitch between Torca de la Canal and the resurgence - a pitch of about 8–10m in depth. Spurred on by our certain knowledge of the lower half of the system, a two-man team attempted a through trip from Torca de la Canal to the resurgence. Four to five hours according to the guidebook. Hmmm. One cave rescue later and I think an important lesson was learnt. Don’t underestimate the complexity and sheer size of the Spanish caves! Everyone was okay and the Spanish were extremely good about the whole thing. Upon reflection I think it was a good ‘team building’ exercise.

I think it was in 2003 that we finally cracked off the traverse from Caballos to Red Del. Ten or eleven hours of stupendous caving. Two teams on separate days, each negotiating the system with ease and style. Martin Hoff’s team included Tim Webber, Brendan Sloan and a very young Ben Stevens. I recall that one of them caved on a lamp with the output of one half of a glow worm! They had a fabulous trip through and re-assured us that all of the sumps were open for our trip the following day. I distinctly remember Neil Weymouth, Paul Meredith and myself in the second team but seem to recall we were accompanied by one or two others. Apologies, my memory lets me down.

We were moving into the mid noughties by these days, and somebody suggested flying down from Stansted. The second era of SWCC Cantabria at Easter had begun.

A Tale of Two Systems

We all have favourite caves. My favourite UK cave is Dan-yr-Ogof. I love the way the rock is carved in that

cave. The carving of rock by water has always been the feature that excites me in a cave; I was never particularly fussed about 'pretties'... or so I thought!

One of the caves we had visited back in 1997 was a cave called Vallina. The Matienzo crew refer to it as Vallini I believe, but it is one and the same cave. Vallina is a fascinating cave. It has two entrances and there is a very short traverse that can be done from the upper entrance to the lower entrance. Back in the early days we enjoyed looking in every nook and cranny in the upper series, but that involved a sordid little sump connection which mostly had to be bailed and mopped before squeezing through, yuk! The bottom entrance however, is very accommodating and leads directly to walking passage and a simply massive complicated system. Family Dobson took an interest in this cave in the early noughties and continued over the next ten years or so to press deeper and deeper into the cave with each subsequent visit. I visited with Neil Weymouth in or around 2005 and we explored down below Double Dutch pitch and the downstream sump, seeking the elusive connection towards the fabled Nova Dome. We failed. Family Dobson however applied science. Using the original survey data, they constructed a sort of route map through the connection. Armed with that route map they returned the following year and located the way on. That marked the start of ten years of successive storming trips to the far reaches of Vallina, trips that often put them way past normal 'beer-o'clock' time and sometimes into main course being consumed time (around 21:30-22:00). It became customary to greet their arrival back at base with a cheer, not least because it meant the rest of us could drink beer without cause for concern!

I view the enduring commitment that Andy, Dave and Brian put into Vallina with great respect. They progressively pushed deeper and deeper into the cave until they had developed a complete empathy and understanding for the system. I benefited from that understanding in 2018 when I joined them for what was an absolutely phenomenal trip to the bitter end of the cave as it was then. A truly stunning trip in a fantastic system.

But while Family Dobson's attention was focused on Vallina, my attention was focused elsewhere. Let me tell you about a cave in Cantabria called the Systema Gandara.

In or around 2003–2004, the Speleo Club Dijon dropped a pitch on the massif to the south west of Hornijo. They dropped into a major system that was clearly associated with the source of one of the main rivers of the area, the Rio Gandara. We knew nothing of this at the time until there occurred a bit of a caving crisis in Cantabria in 2005. The authorities had banned all caving in Cantabria until an effective cave rescue team could be created. Hmmm. I emailed Martín.

Martín's advice to me was that we should come to Cantabria and cave with him as honorary guests of AER. We bit his hand off. Martín was a splendid guide that week. The first evening he told us of a fantastic new cave, 100km long and only 14km from Ramales... or was that 14km long and 100km from Ramales! I'm not sure that we ever resolved that. The first day of caving however, found us caving on our own as Martín had to work that day. Dom Hyland and I dropped into the MTDE shop in Ramales and got chatting with the chap there (may have been a 'Pedro'). He gave us some surface directions to the location of the 'new' entrance to the Gandara System. It all sounded rather excellent, and so guided by directions given to us, we headed up to the head of the Gandara Valley and parked in the appropriate spot. This was where I did my 'obvious fossil resurgence' monologue like an arch villain about to place James Bond into some easily escapable death scenario. I stormed up the grass slope to the base of the cliffs above. Nothing. We actually stumbled on the entrance by the most simple and effective way of finding cave entrances on the surface; we followed the bleedin' path!



*Brendan Sloan crossing the lower entrance traverse 2012. The pitch below the traverse is about 70m deep
(©Martin Hoff)*

And so began the first SWCC venture into Sistema Gandara. We had no survey and no idea of what we might find. We dropped immediately into a massive passage, descending straight into the heart of the mountain and I fell in love with the cave immediately. The passage flattened out at a broad

ledge with a huge chasm alongside dropping into the depths below like something out of The Mines of Moria. A debatable collection of pieces of rope bolted to a slipper near a vertical wall guided us around the edge of the chasm to the passage continuation, it was all thrilling stuff. We spent four or five wonderful hours looking here and there with our mouths agape in amazement. I was completely hooked.



Dinner table shot 2006 at the Anjana. Lel Davies, Helen Brook, Neil Weymouth, Mandy Williams, Elaine Hall, Paul Meredith and Ben Stevens

The next day Martín was to be our guide for the day, and we rendezvoused in the car park in Ramales for the '14km drive to the 100km system'. We had a wry inner smile as we met with Martín as we thought we knew where we were going... or so we thought. Two hours later we finally arrived at our destination some 100km west towards the Picos de Europa. We had arrived at what looked like a construction site with JCBs and dumper trucks buzzing around a railway tunnel entrance. This we were told was Cueva El Soplao. There were about eight of us in two cars I seem to recall. We were ushered into the cave as honoured guests to witness the construction work taking place inside. Martín's job was to check for the growth of moss and lichen as a result of the newly installed cave lighting system, but by that date there was very little else by way of infrastructure in the cave. We wandered at will marvelling at incredible formations in the main gallery of what was to be the showcave. Even I was impressed, and I don't 'do' formations. Others on the trip were simply awestruck by what we encountered on that day. Martín Hoff's elation was clear after the trip and that pretty well summed up how we all felt.

Back at base the dinner conversation topic was all about the caving for the rest of the week. We were well fired up now. Martín was going to guide us through the Tonio – Canuala down pull abseil through trip. We were to meet at Socueva the old drop off point for walking up to Cueto Shaft which we knew well from our 1997 trip. We arrived at the

meeting place and all kitted up with SRT kits and sandwiches for the day ahead. Off we go. Five minutes later Martín casually asks if we have the 100m rope. We reply, "No, thought you were bringing the 100m rope." We didn't do Tonio – Canuala that day!



April 2005, entrance tunnel to Soplao - construction works in progress

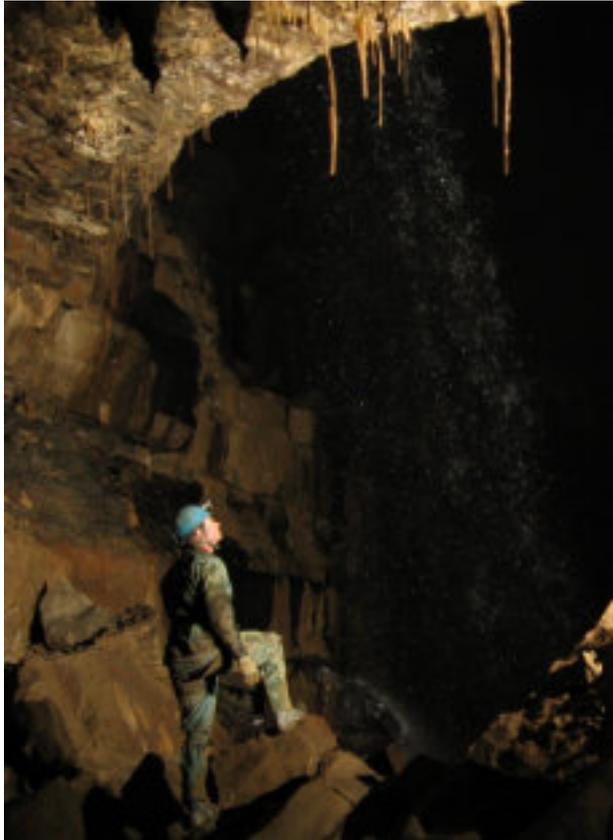
The next day we awake to find it raining quite steadily. The snow is melting higher up on the hill tops. Luckily today we are going to Sistema Gandara, the 100km cave only 14km away. We know the first part of the trip already. The next bit is twenty minutes of hands and knees and stooping passage before it lifts into more comfortable going. We slither down a steep inclined polished slot (fun on the way back up) and soon we arrive at a 40m pitch down.



Post Soplao trip April 2005. Martin Gonzalas to the left with his assistant Hector I believe centre and rear

From the base of the pitch, we can hear a distant deep rumble. Very deep! We progress down another three tiny relay pitches to arrive at a ledge looking out into a maelstrom of dark and spray. The noise is deafening. A waterfall, seemingly the size of the River Wye is thundering down in one corner of the chamber sending spray everywhere. This is no small chamber. Even under 'dry' conditions a 1200 lumen lamp will have difficulty picking out the other

Salle Angel taken in summer 2013 with the Waterfall level at just a trickle. In 2005 there was a solid wall of water from where Martin is stood to the furthest visible calcite flow (©Martin Hoff)



side of the chamber. On this, our very first visit with the roar of the water and the vast clouds of spray we can't gauge what the flick is going on. The rock is vibrating! We pick our way steadily down and to the left and around a ledge about 20m or so above the base of the chamber. We can now see the wall of water off to the right, dropping without pause as it enters a huge chaos of van sized boulders which make up the chamber floor. We pick our way carefully up to a small grotto with a vast array of helictites of amazing complexity covering the ceiling of the grotto and from here we peer across at the sheer volume of water passing through the chamber.



Brian Clipstone in April 2005 - walk to the base of the Ason Waterfall on a glorious sunny day

I asked Martín where the way on was. Martín shrugged his shoulders. He apparently didn't know at that date. By the end of that week however, another trip to Salle Angel had located the way on and SWCC were under 'starters orders'.

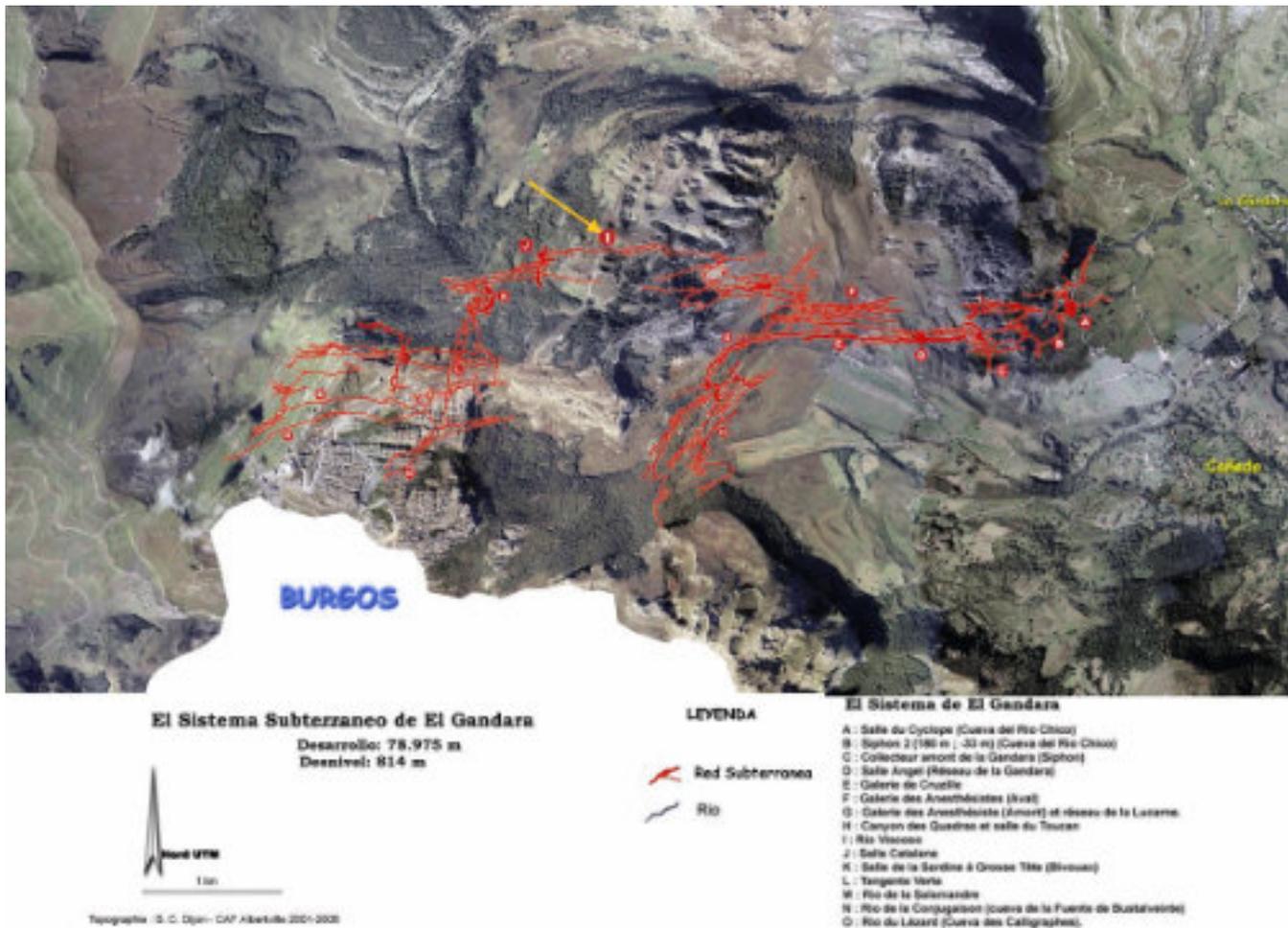


Keith Ball, the Expedition Geologist, April 2005 walking the base of the massive limestone beds in the Ason Valley and pointing out beds of limestone about 100m thick

This trip in April 2005 to Salle Angel rates in the top ten of most exhilarating trips of all time for me. Back at dinner that night, Brian Clipstone and Keith Ball told of what they found at the resurgence. A huge jet of water of hundreds of cumecs forced into an airborne arch under hydrostatic pressure, which in itself must have been quite a sight. I know which sight I preferred from that day though.

The following year, 2006, we were back. We had been doing research on Gandara and had picked up some snippets from the Speleo Club Dijon website about their ongoing exploration of the system. There was no survey available. A few of us contemplated a simple compass and pace survey just to give ourselves something to work from. Neil Weymouth had found some sort of outline image of the system superimposed on the surface terrain. From that we knew the system mostly trended west. We found the exploration camp 1 that year close to a significant junction. A fixed handline up a short distance from the camp was a helpful signpost that led into a labyrinth of complicated galleries. I think we may have spent a significant period of time exploring around the area of the camp occasionally bumping into the odd French or Spanish caving group. There was tension afoot between Spanish and French cavers. The survey of the system was still a closely guarded secret for a few years from 2005 to around 2008. It was round 2008 and the year of Paul Makrill's first Easter trip that we had a

This was an updated version of the original red skeleton diagram that we used for navigation prior to 2008. This version had certain chamber names added which assisted greatly with identification. The Elusive Rio Viscoso is marked by the letter 'I' (produced by Speleo Club Dijon)



breakthrough in that respect. That year we had decided that some of our rope was of Berger 93 vintage and was getting a little tired. We felt it best to bin it and dropped it off at Matienzo who were thrilled by the donation. I suspect some of SWCC Berger 93 rope is still in use in Matienzo! We splashed out on a new 45m rope at the caving shop in Ramales, the perfect length for the Gandara 'entrance' pitch as we referred to it (albeit 45 minutes caving from the surface). Shiny new smooth blemish-free rope. It was an absolute pleasure to rig the pitch with it. I loved that rope!!

We exited the cave on that day to bump into the crew from Speleo Club Dijon just arrived for their annual Easter cave camp. They had a problem. No rope for the entrance pitch. We chatted with them for a while, of course Paul Makrill has excellent French, and we could really converse for the first time. Could they use our rope to continue with exploration? I dwelled on the request.

"Yes, but in return for a copy of the survey."

There was a pursing of lips with a sharp intake of breath. My ask was obviously a very big ask! He would have to ring Dijon and talk to the main man, Patrick Degouve. The telephone conversation unfolded there by the roadside as we waited eagerly for the outcome.

"The man from Dijon, he says yes!"

We were elated. There was ceremonial unfolding of the survey over a French car bonnet in the blistering Spanish sun. Paul photographed it (the first time I had seen this done), before it was rolled up and handed over to us. The second part of the agreement was that we would leave our rope in place all week and the French would drop it off at Anjana on the Friday night before we were due to fly back to UK on Saturday. It was a win-win result. The French cracked on with their camp and we cracked on with our route finding, now armed with a survey. I was amazed at how Paul would get his camera out at a junction and zoom in and in until the junction we were at could be seen in perfect clarity. Nothing could stop us now.

Friday night a rather sheepish French caver appeared at the Anjana.

"Where is the rope?" I asked.

"The rope, she is still in the cave!"

I loved that rope. To this day I do not trust any other club to de-rig SWCC rope!

By about 2007 or 2008 we were aware that the Gandara system had been connected through to the other side of the mountain. A truly colossal through trip was available. I resolved to complete the through trip. I made it my mission in life. Each year now myself and several others; Neil

Weymouth, Martin Hoff, Dom Hyland, Brendan Sloan and John Cliffe, started to locate and explore different passages in an effort to link up the system. We pushed very hard. The key to the connection, a streamway named the Rio Viscoso. Even armed with a survey some of the connections were difficult to find!



2009 post caving cup of tea at the 'Tea Van'. Helen Jenkins, John Cliffe, Dom Hyland and Bob Hall

Several anecdotes spring to mind. We were aware that the Rio Viscoso was the only way to connect upper entrances (plural) to the lower system. Our first mission was to locate the Rio Viscoso at each end before attempting a through trip. We also knew that in terms of where we were at that time with regards exploration of the lower system, the only connection we had with Rio Viscoso was by dropping stones down one of two parallel 100m deep shafts and hearing them go splash as they entered the stream way deep below. There was clearly no pitch down at that location and we reasoned that there was a reason for that. It was probable that there were sumps and boulder chokes interspersed along the Rio Viscoso, meaning that you couldn't just drop into it anywhere - you had to enter and leave it at the right place. What we were looking for in the period 2009 – 2011 was 'the' pitch down into the Rio Viscoso from the lower end of the system.



Gary before another pushing trip into the lower entrance in April 2012 (©Martin Hoff)

We pushed hard. Very hard. It was not uncommon to be pushing a passage looking for the way on to realise that the passage we were in was virgin passage. Each time we realised that we were pushing virgin passage we concluded that we were obviously not 'on route' if we were the first, and accordingly, we would backtrack. This happened on numerous occasions and we had become accustomed to finding 'new stuff' that was a little off-piste. Towards the end of the week on the 2012 trip (I think), I realised that a particular long meandering passage, which seemingly took you miles out of your way (the Gallery Myote), was the simplest connection. The start of that passage was a seemingly impossible connection between major passages on the bridge of rock that separated the two 100m shafts down to the Rio Viscoso. This connection was as improbable as the connection to Lost Johns on the rock bridge in Boxhead Pot. Neil and I went directly there the following day, the slot was found, the passage was entered and instantly we started to find the odd handline here and fixed rope there. We had cracked it, or so we thought. The main passage was easy caving and we romped along to the 60m pitch that dropped us down to what we believed to be the right level for the connection to the Rio Viscoso. A continuing passage led off from the base of the pitch, but still no sound of water. We pressed onto a junction with a rift down and there at the bottom of the rift was a stream. We were elated. We climbed down to the stream and started to push upstream. We had a good idea of how far it was to the upper system. After ten minutes, I had realised that if this was the right place, I was never going to make the connection. It was tight and tortuous. Neil was seemingly happy, but I wasn't. I had enough and returned to the main passage. Neil was not long after me. In his view 'it didn't go'. It was just another one of those side passages that we had seen so many of, the only difference being that this one had a streamway in it. We checked the survey and realised that we were actually about 100m short of where the survey showed the connection to Rio Viscoso. We had been a little premature.

On we went again; we had been exploring now for around eight hours. The passage was a good trunk sized passage and a little way on we located another camp (this must be right) and then up into an alcove with seemingly no signs of footfall on the floor. However, around a corner, a handline down and around a bend we popped out on a fine ledge over a magnificent large streamway. Proper stuff! Agen Allwed lower main streamway sized streamway. Excellent. We headed up stream for ten minutes to a small constriction, but above the constriction, we saw a fixed rope going up. We called it a day at that point, confident that we had located the Rio Viscoso from the downstream entrance. All we had to do now was to locate the Rio Viscoso from the upstream entrance and then follow the streamway through! What could possibly go wrong?

Selfie up alongside the military base in 2006. Valley to the left is the upper Ason wherein are located the upper entrances of the Gandara



So, a lot of people may not know this, but I suffer from Claustrophobia, quite bad at times, and my close caving friends have sort of got used to this over the years. It was the year of the Icelandic volcano, 2010. I was fired up to start pushing into the upper entrances. It was sort of potluck as to whether trips could be made at the upper end of the system. The lower system entrance is at an altitude of about 800m above sea level and very close to a good road. Access is relatively easy, and I don't ever recall not being able to get into the bottom entrance. The upper entrance is a different story. First you have to drive up and over the mountain and drop down into a parallel valley. From time to time the connecting col gets shut by snow. We have had a few exciting drives over that col. Once in the right valley you then have to climb again to another col, the Col de Lunada. It's from here that the fifty or so minute walk takes you up and over yet another col to drop you back into the uppermost reaches of the Ason valley and it is on the high slopes of that valley at an altitude of about 1100m or so that you can find the upper entrances to the system. Numerous years we would arrive at Anjana and simply not be able to get to the upper entrance because of snow.

In 2010 I was keen to finally locate the upper entrance in order to prepare to make the connection through. Then on the Friday night before we were due to fly, EasyJet cancelled all of its European flights. I started ringing around. John Cliffe was going to meet us in Ashford, Martin Hoff arrived bright and early at mine and Neil and Lesley lived just around the corner. Dom Hyland made us a group of six I seem to recall. Without thought of breakdown cover or anything, we headed to Dover, booked a ferry and then shared the driving through the night to arrive at Anjana early Sunday morning. We hadn't really lost any caving time as yet. Andy, Dave and Brian had similarly hopped in the car and caught a ferry. Bob and Elaine had taken the lengthier ferry from Portsmouth to Santander I believe.

So, in 2010 at the start of the week, we found the road to the Col de Lunada blocked with snow. Bugger. We continued consolidating our route finding in the lower system which was all excellent caving in any event. The lack of access to the upper entrances was a little frustrating. I just wanted to get on with finding our way into the upper end of the system, but snow was preventing us. On virtually our last day the snow had melted enough so that we could get over to the far side of the mountain, about an hour and a half's drive. Off we set to prospect for the upper entrances to Gandara. Luckily the snow had melted enough, and we could park at the Col de Lunada and trek the fifty minutes or so across to the slopes below the military base where the upper entrances were located. Without too much difficulty we located one of the entrances and we were kitting up, eager to push into new territory. Neil was gone in an instant and I pushed into the constricted draughting hole to follow on behind when suddenly I became completely overtaken by claustrophobia. I couldn't follow. *Bugger!*



Dom Hyland at another upper entrance to the Gandara in 2010. By the time this photo was taken Neil Weymouth was probably already lost in the upper system

I spent the rest of day checking other entrances with Dom Hyland, John Cliffe and Elaine while we waited for Neil to return and report. And we waited. And we waited. It started to get dark, and we thought it better to return to my van where tea and toast was on tap. We waited some more. It got completely dark and just as I thought we were going to have our second Spanish cave rescue call out, Neil arrived safe and sound. He had well and truly found his way into the upper system, so much so that he had actually become lost and was following signposts left by the French. These had eventually led him out of another entrance, one of the other entrances that we had looked at that afternoon. I was relieved on a number of counts. Neil had inadvertently done the first SWCC 'through trip' in the Gandara System, albeit a minor traverse from one of the upper entrances to another upper entrance. I was relieved that we could all eat dinner

together that night and then drive the twelve hours or so back up to Calais. It was quite noticeable that we had become accustomed to flying down and the 24 hours travelling that driving involved took a much harder toll on everyone than the eight hours or so that it takes by flying. We arrived in a service station just outside Calais to stop for fuel when my van broke down!! Turning the ignition key was met by a dull click (fault common in transits of that era, metal fragments from a breakdown of the flywheel had killed the starter motor). With six on board however, we had enough manpower to bump start the pig and we kept the motor running all the way until we were parked up on the car deck of the ferry. A nice man from the AA got us going again at Dover.

The following year, 2011, we were back travelling by air and set to explore the upper system in some detail. I don't think Neil was with us for some reason. The main gang that year I think were Martin Hoff, Brendan Sloan, Dom Hyland, John Cliffe and myself. I do recall that my oldest boy Josh was with us in 2011 and that the weather was brilliant. We were also joined by a small group of French cavers, Jean Marc, Agnes and Pascal. The lower system drops straight into proper passage. Not so the upper system. The upper system entrances are all a bit small and squalid, descending passages on a bedding that are too low to stand up in, yet tantalisingly bigger than needed for hands and knees crawling. Progress up-dip is actually easier than down-dip as your body feels more comfortable with the roof rising in front of you. In one particular place the roof lowers to flat out and you have to post yourself through a hole in the left-hand side of the bedding to enter another bedding which enlarges down-dip rather than getting tighter down-dip.



2011 assembly in the morning before setting off from the Anjana. Dave Dobson, Brendan Sloan, Stevie West, Allan Richardson, John Cliffe and Josh Vaughan

A small streamway develops towards the bottom of the entrance series. This is about forty minutes in. At this point, a sandy passage on the right leads to yet another flat-out crawl, 'leg ripper crawl' as I call it...

"Dom, I don't think you are going to fit..."

"I will fit!" Followed by a grunt and a thrash around and then the tearing sound of an oversuit leg being ripped clean away from the main body of the over suit. *"Bugger!"*

We were all through and the streamway increased in size for five minutes to drop you at the first major junction of the upper series. We were in the passage known as 'Tangent Verte'. We knew this because the 'signpost' told us so.

The Speleo Club Dijon had come up with a very cunning way of assisting navigation. Sections of tackle sack cut into little maps, hilti nailed to the rock floor at key junctions telling you exactly which passage you are in and the names of the connecting passages. Too easy I hear you say. Hmmm, not so fast. Again, this part of the Systema Gandara is amazingly complicated from a navigational point of view. I marvel at anyone who simply goes at this and finds the way through. Having spent many, many hours exploring many galleries and many passages I can confirm that there is ample scope to trot off down a passage for a good half an hour before you realise that it's not the way on!



Dom Hyland and Neil Weymouth in the snow in 2012. Deep snow stopped exploration in the upper system for us that year

I think it was our second proper trip (past leg ripper crawl) that saw us arrive at the main camp in the upper series Salle Sardinias. This was a relief in that it fixed us for sure on the survey and from that we could confirm we were only about thirty minutes or so from the upstream end of Rio Viscoso. Seemingly simple we thought. Three or four trips later we had yet to dip our toes in the streamway. It was to be 2013 before we found Rio Viscoso at the upstream end of the system as in 2012 the upper entrances were snowed out.

One of the more frustrating navigational problems was to be standing in a particular passage at a particular junction peering at a solid rock wall. The usual explosion of cavers then ensues with cavers squeezing down holes and climbing over boulders trying to find the way on. The particular obstacle that was the challenge at the start of the week in

2013 was like a giant version of 'Poetic Justice' in County Pot. The hole connecting the passage to the big chamber (Salle Scooter I think we were trying to find) was way up in the top of the passage, gained by a complicated series of climbs, rifts and traverses. With that connection firmly under our belts we quickly arrived at the chamber which we knew to be the connection point; Salle Catalan I think it may have been called; a small 'ruckle-ish' climb down led to an uninspiring small passage, but up ahead a stream could be heard. It wasn't a very impressive streamway at this end of the system! Nothing like the grand streamway found at the lower end of the system. This sordid little streamway was a twisty constricted streamway but at least it was heading in the right direction. Time was running out again, but I wanted to explore it for a little distance. As it turned out, five minutes or so of thrutching along the constricted streamway and the tiny passage dropped into a sizeable railway tunnel sized passage heading off down-dip and on the right compass heading. This had to be it. We had cracked it. Or so we thought!



Dom Hyland admiring one of many such complicated speleothems to be found in Gandara. Taken on the same day we found Salle Catalan so most probably taken in the upper part of the system. April 2013 (©Martin Hoff)

We exited the cave in about three hours from that point now that we knew every duck and turn and junction by heart. On the surface though, things were looking exciting. It had got very dark and very cold and rocks the size of footballs were whizzing down the hillside from the crags high above us. Our usual route was to contour left from the entrance and not loose elevation but that would leave us like sitting ducks at a fairground shooting stall. I opted to use my bottom and slide to the base of the slope

away from the flying rocks. It was surprisingly effective. I was down in less than a minute and was soon joined by the rest of the party, Martin, Dom and Brendan. We started the trudge back to the Col de Lunada as a big electrical storm drew closer and closer. It was all very exhilarating stuff! Nobody got struck and we all hurried to get changed at the cars and headed back to the Anjana. My thoughts were only of one thing. The big through trip!!



Shows the team on the trip of 14th April 2013 making a breakfast stop in Salle Sardinias on the way to making the connection to Salle Catalan and the Rio Viscoso, last trip prior to through trip (©Martin Hoff)

Something was nagging at me. I can't remember now what it was, but it may have been something to do with route markers and a route marker in the wrong place seemingly guiding us away from the railway sized passage that we were sure was Rio Viscoso. I checked the survey. Sure enough, at that very location a blind side passage running virtually parallel with Rio Viscoso but about twenty metres west of it. I thought about my experiences with Neil at the downstream end and how easy it was to just assume the passage was the right one just because it was there. The problem, if problem it is, is that there are so many passages in Systema Gandara that it is exceptionally easy to trundle off down the wrong passage. The proof would now be in the through trip. The thought of another long hard recce trip was just too demoralising.

And so, one morning, bright and early 16th April 2013, our little intrepid team set off for the first ever SWCC through trip of the Gandara System. There was Martin Hoff, Brendan Sloan and me. Dom Hyland was our drop-off and car moving support for the day.

Sure enough, when we reached the furthest limit of the previous trip, rather than taking the wide-open railway sized down dip tunnel we scabbled up to a small hole on the left where a route marker had been strategically left by the French. We were soon dropping down into another equally impressive railway sized tunnel running parallel with the first. This was the first of a couple of strategic left-hand turns. The next was not far along. The nice tunnel got lower and a small window on the left offered an enticing entrance into yet another parallel passage.

Post through trip photo trip, possibly de-rigging the 'entrance pitch'. Showing the grandeur that is the lower Gandara system. April 2013 (©Martin Hoff)



This was more of a bedding than a tunnel and it slowly continued on and on down following the dip of the beds. A parting of the bedding some quarter of an hour later saw us taking yet another left-hand turn and I recall this brought us eventually to a rather exciting move over the top of what looked like a blind pot in the floor about three metres deep. Staying up in the roof on ledges brought us into some small rifty passages, and then with a surprise, we popped out into the left-hand side wall of a very nice grand streamway. This was more like the Rio Viscoso Neil and I had found the year before. Things were looking good. We followed the streamway for a short distance to a boulder choke, passed low on the right over a small pool with tiny cave shrimps. Back in the main stream again, the roof plummeted to leave a flat-out bedding crawl which could be exited early on the right into a series of dry galleries. Very pretty galleries. These dropped back into a large streamway once again and directly opposite a rope up. I knew that somewhere ahead there was a rope down. It seemed like the obvious thing to follow. A slippery high-level gallery lasted for about five minutes to arrive at the aforesaid rope down and two minutes later I was stood on familiar territory with a firm grasp of the route out from that point. The trip was the culmination of eight years of caving in Cantabria at Easter for me and was one of the most satisfying achievements of my caving career. The trip took Martin, Brendan and me 11 hours entrance to entrance which was only marginally longer than a subsequent traverse which took 10.5 hours fully knowing the route.

In April 2014 we returned to traverse the Gandara system, again with John Cliffe, Claire Vivian and Chloe Francis. Numbers of attendees were steadily increasing through the mid 2010s and the SWCC contingent was from time to time bolstered by friends from abroad. Another highlight of the 2014 trip for me was finally making the Tonio – Canuala through trip. Beware of the spiders at the bottom of the entrance pitch but apart from that, a simply stunning 'must do' pull-down abseil through trip.



2014 planning a through trip of the Gandara over a beer or three. Claire Vivian, Brian Clipstone, Chloe Francis, John Cliffe, Allan Richardson, Andy Dobson, (back to camera I think Allan's ex Christiana)

In 2015 we were joined by a group from Bavaria for the week and one of the exercises was intended to be a revisit of the traverse from Caballos to Red Del. This trip started off so well but at the mid-way point we were stopped dead in our tracks by a temporal sump which forms downstream of El Libro, forcing us to exit at La Canal and endure a long walk back to the cars parked at Red Del. This was prior to my hip replacement and in fact although whilst in the cave I was coping well, once on the surface, I simply couldn't make the walk back to the lower entrance due to excessive pain. Luckily, John Cliffe was happy to get the car and rescue me and the rest of the team from the roadside.



Velma Aho with her bruised arms after the abortive Red Del Silencio through trip. 2015

By 2016 the pain of just walking for thirty minutes had become too great, and so in late February 2016, I had an upgrade fitted. This effectively put a bit of damper on my caving in 2016 and I spent the week doing modest walks. Cueva Mur was the focus of a lot of the caving in 2016, a cave that I have yet to visit.

2016 pre-dinner beers in the Anjana. Paul Tarrant, Miri Suvi, Duncan Simi, Dave and Andy Dobson, Allan Richardson, Brian Clipstone and Dom Hyland



By 2017 things were back to normal and we were repeating the Red Del through trip and the Rubicera to Mortero through trip. This might also have been the year that we did the other through trip to Mortero via the rather aquatic route from Cuivo. Nice pitches but rather muddy and wet and tight in places! We were joined in this year by Malcolm and Helen Stewart, Phill Thomas and Paul Tarrant. Also by this year, Allan Richardson was consolidating lots of information about the mines in the region which added another dimension to the possible excursions. This was also the year when I finally managed to get to the further reaches of Vallina with Andy, Dave and Brian in a stunning trip beyond the Novadome.

The Anjana was now becoming booked to capacity every Easter trip and we were having to fall back on nearby accommodation to fit everybody on the trip.



Dave Dobson and John Cliffe measuring ropes outside the Anjana in 2015

2018 saw Neil Weymouth and Lesley accompanied by Angie and Aaron make a trip to the furthest reaches of Vallina. I took advantage of one of best years for weather in a long time to spend much of

the week walking with Dom Hyland and Paul Tarrant. I was also having renewed interest in a cave called Cueva Fresca which is the exit cave for a through trip from an upper entrance known as Torca Tibia. This has long been on our 'must do' list of trips and as yet we have not ticked this one-off.



Typical Cantabria walking, 2018 with Dom Hyland and Paul Tarrant high up above Matienzo

2019 was the most recent trip and again it was full to capacity. A renewed interest in some of the locations looked at in 1997 showed interest and these are to be re-visited again as soon as COVID-19 allows.

Sadly, the one year that we have failed to get to Cantabria at Easter was 2020 by reason of the world event that is Coronavirus. It is of note that something as large as a volcano failed to stop the Cantabria Easter trip but something as small as a microscopic bug succeeded where the volcano failed. As I type this, I would like to hope that I can get to Cantabria in 2021 but I have to say that things look a little bleak. The likely outcome is that borders will be closed in April 2021.

Caving in Cantabria at Easter has been a major part of my life now since 1996, the best part of a quarter of a century. I have shared those experiences with a number of SWCC members over the years and built firm friendships as a result of the shared experiences. For me, the Easter trips are about including SWCC members and other friends from around the world to share in what is surely a most incredible caving area, an area which still offers so much more that I have yet to explore. If you love caving and fine walking in limestone scenery, please feel free to join us on the next Cantabria Expedition.

Prehistoric Cave Art Around the World

Peter Francis

During my early caving life, whenever I thought about prehistoric cave art I thought of those caves in France and Spain where there are epic frescoes on their walls of Magdalenian art. Whenever I looked in books on the subject I was led to those same locations. Altamira in Spain and Lascaux in France dominated, with Chauvet and Cosquer later joining their ranks.

Then in 1980, with five other SWCC members, I went on an expedition to Ecuador, and was led by

Auturo Albert of the Acardio Campus Club based in Chone to the Devil's House cave. We could see why it had been given that name as it's walls were covered in deeply incised engravings, some abstract some of recognisable human figures.

Its name, given to it by local people, must show their superstitious fears, as they had no idea who had done them. We did an accurate survey of the cave for them and in return they took us to an open air, jungle fiesta that night. It was full of elegantly



Altamira, Spain (©Pete Francis)

The Devil's House cave, Ecuador 1980 (©Pete Francis)



dressed men with beautiful women dressed in clothes that would not have been out of place in an elegant hotel in any of the world's capital cities. There was a twenty-piece Latin American band there with an astonishing rhythm section. The only alcoholic drinks were Whisky, bought by the bottle and, at £30 a bottle we desisted, deeply inhaling the wondrous atmosphere we were enveloped in instead.

During our time there we found many caves with prehistoric remains and with the help of John Hoopes, an American archaeologist, were able to ascertain that people first lived in the area a thousand years earlier than previously thought.

Further archaeological work has pushed it back still further.

Sadly, we heard no more about the site.

Many years later I was to come across other New World cave painting sites, such as the one shown, in Southern Utah, USA, made by the indigenous American people. This time showing more fully formed human figures accompanied by minuscule animals.



Utah Cave art, USA (©Pete Francis)

We now know that humans migrated across the Bering sea by a land bridge formed by lowered sea levels during an ice age and migrated south along an ice-free corridor until they eventually populated the entire Americas as far south as Cape Horn.



Cave art on the walls of the Devil's House Cave (©Pete Francis)

But I am getting ahead of myself in the story of this art.

It is now recognised that humanoids left Africa in waves probably caused by climate change. At first it was thought they came north and then west to settle in Europe, but now it is thought they went east into Asia much earlier than this, when Europe was still smothered by the vast ice sheets of an ice age. I called them humanoids as they included branches of our ancestral tree that later became extinct. The most successful of these ancestors were the Aborigines that managed to migrate as far as Australia before, later crossing to the American continent.

True, sea levels were much lower then due to them living in an ice age, but they still had to cross a considerable stretch of dangerous water to get there. It was thought for a long time that they couldn't possibly have done so until much later in history, but opinions have now shifted to think that they did make this journey very early on.

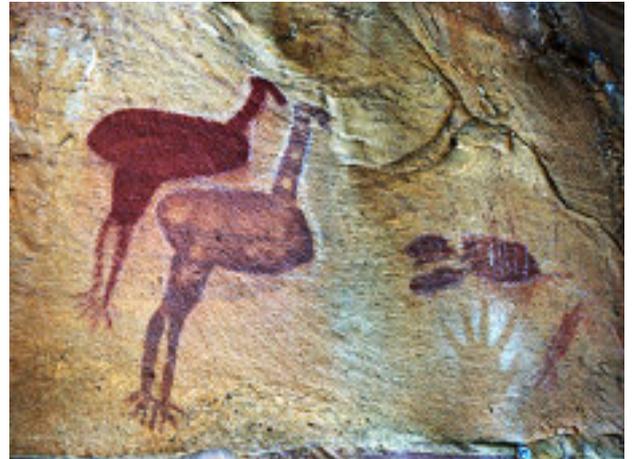
I led an expedition of teenagers there in 2003, going straight up the middle, from Adelaide to Darwin. As we journeyed through the 'Top End' we did a five-day trek in the Katherine Gorge area. On day three we came to some rock shelters that were covered in Aboriginal paintings. I later discovered that Australia has thousands of them. A Living Aboriginal



Australian aboriginal cave art (©Pete Francis)

explained that they were associated with their 'Song Lines'.

As they have no written language, they have recorded their histories and beliefs in an oral tradition – 'The Song Lines' - to help them to preserve this they have performed rock art over millennia. He stated that it was not the art itself that was important but the act of impressing it onto and into the rock.



Australian aboriginal cave art (©Pete Francis)

Human female figures as well as animal figures were seen here. There were also human hands silhouetted on the rock by blowing ochre over them.

The extent of this westward migration was illustrated to me when in 2005 I was lucky enough to visit Easter Island.



Easter Island (©Pete Francis)

Here, Polynesians had sailed to, and set up a community that had managed to survive on one of

the remotest islands in the world. They used the volcanic caves there as refuges in times of inter-clan warfare and as ritual sites. In one in particular were cave paintings, though they had become indistinct over time. Unsurprisingly they seemed to be of aquatic animals and other more distinct petroglyphs on the island showed turtles and fish. Of particular interest to me was one of a 'Bird Man' figure. Part of their ritual life was, during each spring, when ocean migrating birds returned to a rock pinnacle island some distance offshore, for the young warriors of the tribe to swim out to it to try to gather and bring back an egg. The first one to do so (and still be alive) was given the prestigious title of 'Bird Man' alongside all the privileges that entailed (I'll let your imagination do the hard work on that).

I had to explore these caves alone with only a very feeble pencil torch that threatened to go out at any moment and, in fact, in one cave it did, making me have to grope along the walls to find my way out. It made me very conscious of how far away I was from the comfort of the SWCRO and how much it would cost me if I had to get them to fly out to rescue me from there.



Easter island Rock art cave (©Pete Francis)

You'll notice that I haven't called these images Prehistoric Cave art as it is much harder to date them but in my next examples of cave paintings maybe prehistoric and present paintings have intermingled.

Whilst in Ecuador we were also exploring a theory that people migrated there by boat across the Pacific Ocean. This is still seen as a very controversial theory but if they did so then they may well have found Easter Island on their way.



Easter Island petroglyphs (©Pete Francis)

Prehistoric cave art has been found, in fact, on every inhabited continent, dating from the Palaeolithic period (two million years ago to the last ice age); the earliest European examples date from 65,000 years ago to 10,000 years ago. Recently it has been recognised that Neanderthals were capable of creating this art and it is now speculated as to whether other extinct branches of our hominid family also did so. Around 36,000-37,000 years ago the first figurative art was created; before that it was symbolic and abstract. In Europe there were few drawings of humans, landscapes or plants. In many caves, paintings were laid out on top of one another, often over a long time period.



Easter Island cave paintings (©Pete Francis) ▲



▲ Easter Island bird-man petroglyph (©Pete Francis)

▼ A human figure and herbivores, Egypt (©Pete Francis)



The 2nd Cataract on the Nile, Sudan (©Pete Francis) ▼

▼ Antelope, Egypt (©Pete Francis)

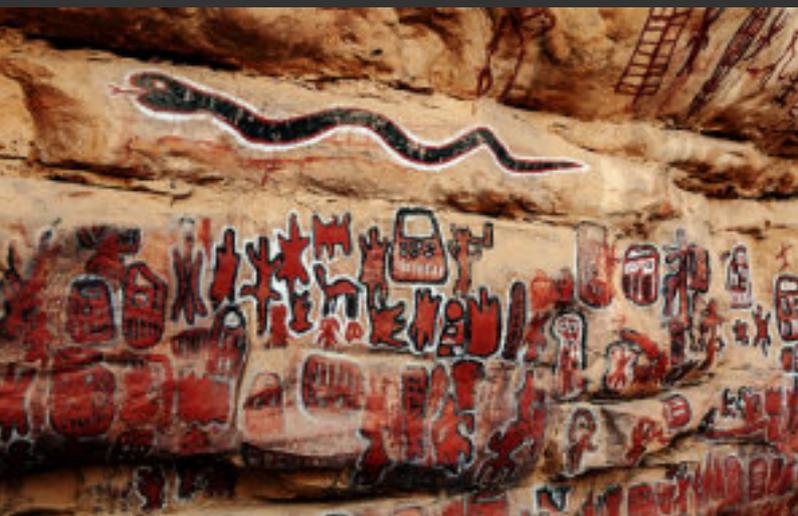




▲ The ritual platform with the ceremonial altar stone, still with traces of blood on it (©Pete Francis)

Dogon Plateau rock paintings (©Pete Francis) ▼

▼ Dogon Plateau rock paintings (©Pete Francis)





About fifteen years ago I took a journey to Timbuktu. I'd heard about it since a child; how it was a legendary city, deep in the Sahara Desert, right at the end of the world. I never thought I'd get there but when the chance arose, I grabbed it with both hands. The journey involved a few days travel along diminishing roads, a four-day trek on foot along the base of the cliffs that fringed the Dogon plateau, another five-day journey by boat along the Niger River and a final camel ride into the city. Luckily it was just before Al-Qaeda overran the area.

During our trek along the Dogon escarpment, we slept at night on the rooftops of the villages located there. In one village we were taken to a rock shelter high above the village. The people living there belonged to the only tribes that the Arabs had failed to defeat and conquer when they swept west through North Africa. The simple reason for this was that the Arabs fought on horseback and the Dogon people simply retreated up the cliffs forcing the Arabs to dismount if they wanted to follow them and thereby losing the advantage.

On those ledges and caves above the villages were houses where they interred their dead. In the cave we were led to, they still held regular initiation ceremonies. Unfortunately, we'd just missed one, but we could plainly see the remains of it.

Every few years the village elders gathered up the pubescent boys and led them there for a month-long indoctrination rite where they were initiated into the secrets of manhood. During that time, they repainted the ancestral symbols painted on the rock walls to give them new life. So, though these were newly painted on a regular basis, the underlying paintings could have been there since prehistoric times. Certainly, looking at them they seemed to conform to other prehistoric cave paintings from around the Sahara region.

After all this was done to the satisfaction of the elders, the boys were led to a special ritual platform (see photo on previous page), seated on the blocks of stone against the wall, and then led out one by one to be seated on the stone in the middle to face an elder seated on the stone on the other side and at a given signal, had to stretch forward so that they could lay out their penis on the ceremonial altar



Egyptian war vessels (©Pete Francis)

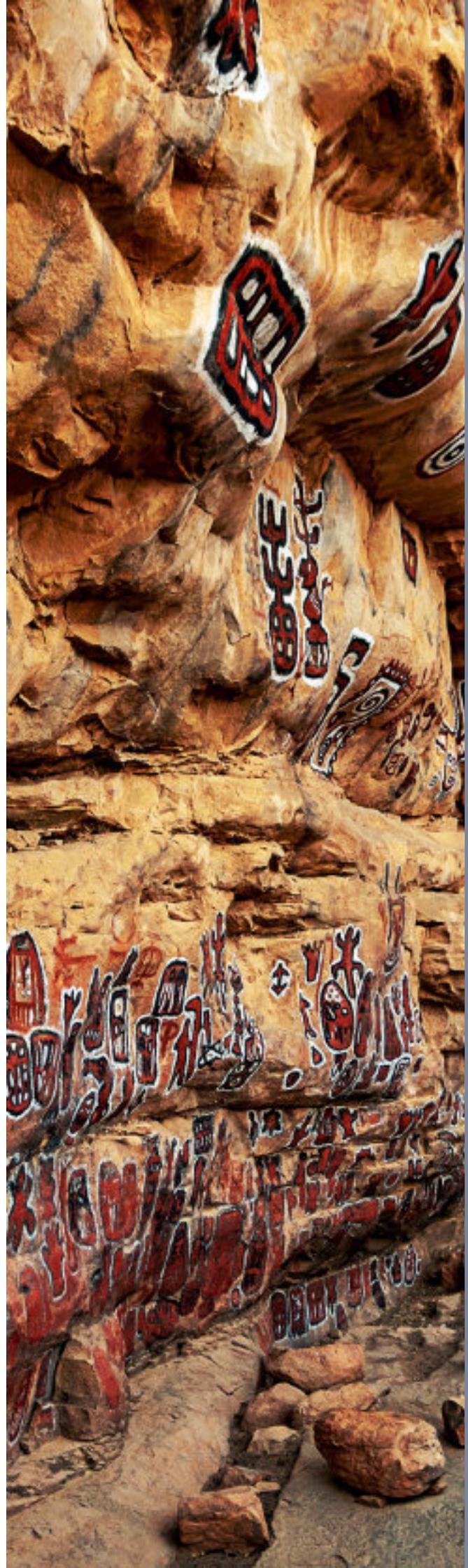
stone, so that the elder, with a sharpened obsidian blade could circumcise them, signalling that they had reached adulthood.

More recently I visited The Sudan, spending about a month there, mostly off-road in the desert. I found a lot of prehistoric art deep in the desert but mainly on free standing rocks in the open. These sites are all unprotected but do not suffer from vandalism as virtually no one visits them and the only damage done to them is from the sharp grains of sand that erode their surfaces, driven onto them by the ceaseless desert winds.

When we got to the second cataract on the Nile, we found a shallow gorge running parallel with it and here we found abundant rock art. These were all etched into the rocks under overhangs and in rock shelters. They showed the huge variety of animal life that once thrived there, antelopes and other herbivores, Giraffes and maybe elephants as well as a scattering of human figures. In one rock shelter were representations of Egyptian boats recording an invasion their pharaoh initiated to conquer the lands to the south. Later, the people living there were to attack north and conquer Egypt and start the dynasty of the Black Pharaohs.

I've done a lot more travelling in Sub Saharan Africa since, finding hundreds more examples of Prehistoric Cave art but, due to lack of space, will have to hold them back for Part Two on the subject.

And, of course, we still haven't covered Wales!



Dogon Paintings, Mali (@Pete Francis)

Travellers Tales – SWCC

Beyond the Valley

Martin Hoff

Early SWCC Newsletters are composed largely of notices of housekeeping about membership, management of the Club and so forth, as well as articles about caves in and around the Swansea valley. That said, you have to go back as far as SWCC Newsletter 19 (published in May 1957) to find an article called The Irish Trip, which appears to be the earliest example recorded within the Newsletter of Club members caving further afield.

Newsletter 22 (published in January 1958) follows with David Jenkins' account of a trip to France, including visits to Lascaux, Padirac and a trip in the Aven Orgnac with Robert de Joly, founder and then president of the Speleological Society of France, among other delights of that part of the world.

Both of these articles contain observations about the quality of road surfaces encountered but by Newsletter 30 (published in October 1959) we have Seaton Phillips dealing with more prosaic matters of logistics and arrangements, from which I quote:

"We arrived in Perigueux the largest town in the Dordogne, which surprised us by its size, a good two miles from the outskirts to the town centre. We made for the town centre first, hoping to find a Post Office which could tell us where to find our friend Robert de Faccio, President of the Speleo-Club de Perigueux. This contact, made through the Cave Research Group of Great Britain, was the reason we were in Perigueux at all. I had written to de Faccio and he seemed only too pleased to welcome us on our arrival, so we hoped that now he would be all ready to receive us."

The tale continues:

"We had to buy a street map before we could find his address, but when we called there we found that he had left weeks before and no one knew where he was now living. So I asked about the only other

name I knew in Perigueux, M. Francois a former president of the Speleo Club to whom I had written first. Luckily he lived only a few doors away, so we called, and met his mother. He himself was working, but she gave us long and detailed instructions how to find him. He seemed quite pleased to see me and was able to tell us where de Faccio now lived, so we felt that this time we were really on to something. He lived in a tiny street in the shadow of the Cathedral, and, of course, was not in."

The entertainment to be had in relying on people being in places that can only be found by a succession of enquiries is a fading delight for modern cavers, as efforts continue for technology to make everything and everyone accessible at any time. All the same, there's some work to do yet to ensure subterranean network connectivity via miniaturised survey station wifi repeaters.

The Phillips party also make it to Lascaux, a trip recorded in greater detail this time, including details of the air conditioning plant which turned out not to be equal to the volume of further decades of visitors. It is for this reason of cave conservation that a member of SWCC towards the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century will not have the same opportunity to see Lascaux proper that those in the middle of the twentieth century did.

This is only one of the lessons to be learned from SWCC's recorded history.

Newsletter 38, published in December 1961, brings us Clive Jones' introduction to the 1961 expedition to "Jugoslavia" in which he states *"We were not by any means the first party from this Club to go caving abroad, but we were the first to make a large quantity of equipment for this purpose. Most of this equipment has been purchased by the club, and is*

now available for use by anyone wanting to organise a similar venture in the future."

Sixty years then since the Club first retained a stock of equipment for use in distant parts, a fine tradition, though making equipment is a practice now largely lost to the ages.

Demonstrating another tradition that SWCC Newsletter Editors have had to contend with, Newsletter 44 bears the publication date of June 1963 and includes Dennis Kemp's article detailing parts of the 1958 Minapur (Karakoram) Expedition which relate to snow cave construction and usage at significant altitudes above 5000m. Some background reading of Shigeharu Inouye in the Alpine Journal provides a fuller picture of how Kemp and Walter Sharpley, also of SWCC, may have had good reasons for taking their time to reach a stage where writing anything about their experiences on the 7257m peak Diran (formerly known as Minapin Peak) would have been productive.

By 1965 and Newsletter 50, Dennis Kemp has managed a brief foray into the caving area around Taza in the Middle Atlas mountains of Morocco, concluding with the appeal *"This area of Morocco is fascinating and is three days hard driving from Penwyllt. Can we not go one year?"*

John Osborne, writing in August 1967, provides one of several overseas pieces in Newsletter 57, detailing the excitement of The Trans France Expedition (Or The Poor Man's Balinka). Among other delights, on their way as far south as northern Spain, this party manages to fit in a too short trip to another cave of great repute which I suspect the modern caver may find it even more difficult to gain access to than to face the cross-examination recorded here. And after all that, John Oz and co were turned back by high water levels early in their trip, though you can see something of what they missed in Sid Perou's Realm of Darkness film about the Grotte de la Cigalère. Go youtube it for yourself.

The next edition, Newsletter 58 (published in February 1968), has Noel Dilly caving in the United States, with a fun tale written only a few months later. Here an illicit early hours pushing trip down a cave lacking a welcoming land-owner leads to contemplation of how techniques vary between nations and a chilly prussik out on prussik loops under ongoing snowfall for added freshness.

Rounding off the first quarter century of SWCC's recorded history, the publication in 1971 of Newsletter 69 brings us a cover photo and short article titled A Trip To Northern Spain by one J. J. Rowland. As well as reminding us that Club members have been making continental travels for many years, this article brings us right back up to date although I suspect that the young Jem who wrote this piece and provided the photos didn't necessarily imagine that fifty years later he'd have

been serving the Club as its president well into the twenty-first century or that his digging partners on the other side of the valley would include another SWCC caver who has spent nearly half a year in the same part of Spain, on a nearby mountain plateau less than a good day's walk away. I guess SWCC members have always had a good eye for caving areas.

By the time you get to the third quarter-century of SWCC history, the continental caving works of the Fearless Leader were already well underway and you can read much more about those elsewhere in this publication or even talk to a good number of people who have enjoyed them in the past and who expect to join them in the near future. Nevertheless, this article is intended to provide a healthy reminder that SWCC had found its way round the occasionally troublesome issues of foreign caving logistics and making connections with our fellow cavers in countries nearby and further away a long time before then.

As for me, for all that 2020 turns out to be the first year I haven't caved outside the UK since 1994 and gains brief respite from the expansion of my global carbon footprint, there remain plenty of reasons to dust down the passport and look forward to taking a place in a longer queue at customs and immigration somewhere or other. Now, where's next? Can you not go one year?



Bermuda Caving

Noel Dilly

In 1971 I was fortunate enough to be given a research grant to study at the Bermuda Biological Station. One of the scientists working there was Tom Iliffe who was an ardent caver. When he discovered that I was also a caver who enjoyed surveying I was recruited to teach cave surveying to his team. Many of the caves that we were to survey were closed and abandoned show caves. Little did I realise the fascinating journey into the history and the early arguments about the science of cave formation that this adventure would bring.

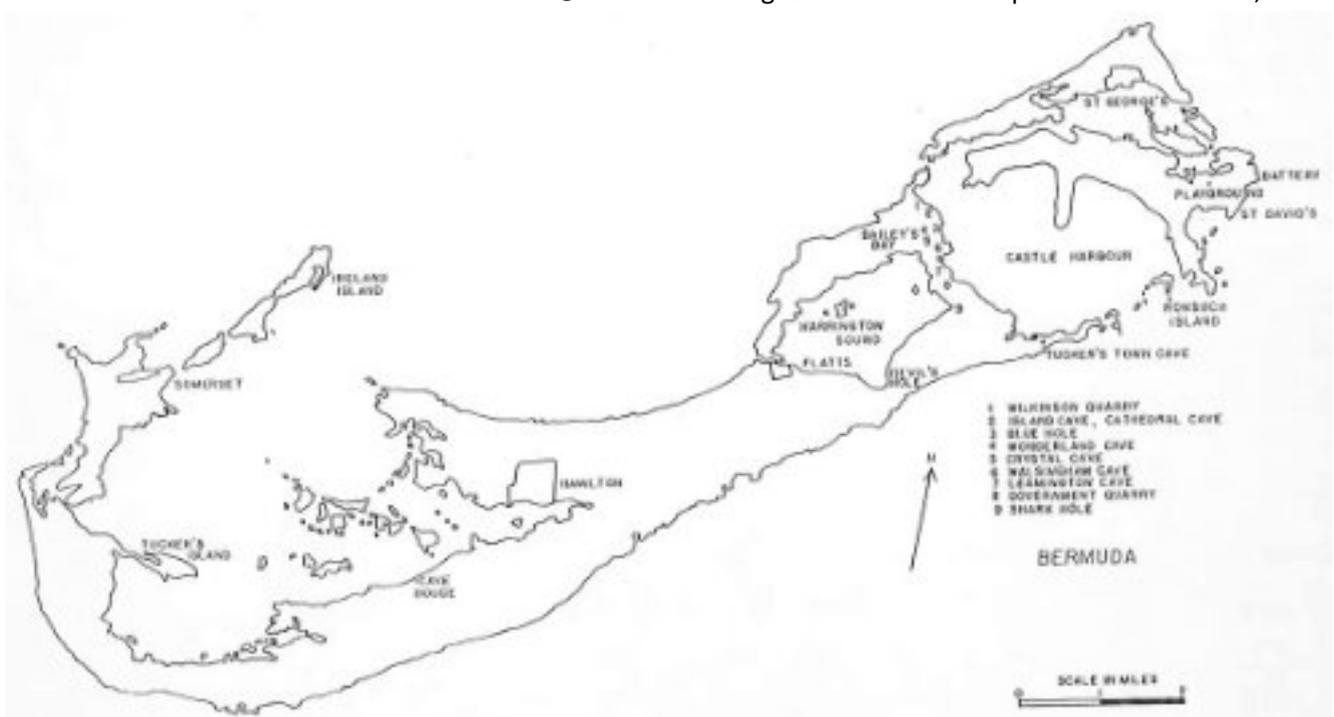
I was encouraged to survey as many caves as possible and was helped by many keen pupils. For the early part of the teaching, we surveyed most of the abandoned show caves. This was an ideal introduction as the floors were level and the ceilings high. I learnt something immediately from one of the volunteers. When I started to triangulate

using my compass, he produced his sextant and demonstrated convincingly that taking horizontal sextant angles was a far more accurate and reliable method.

First some history...

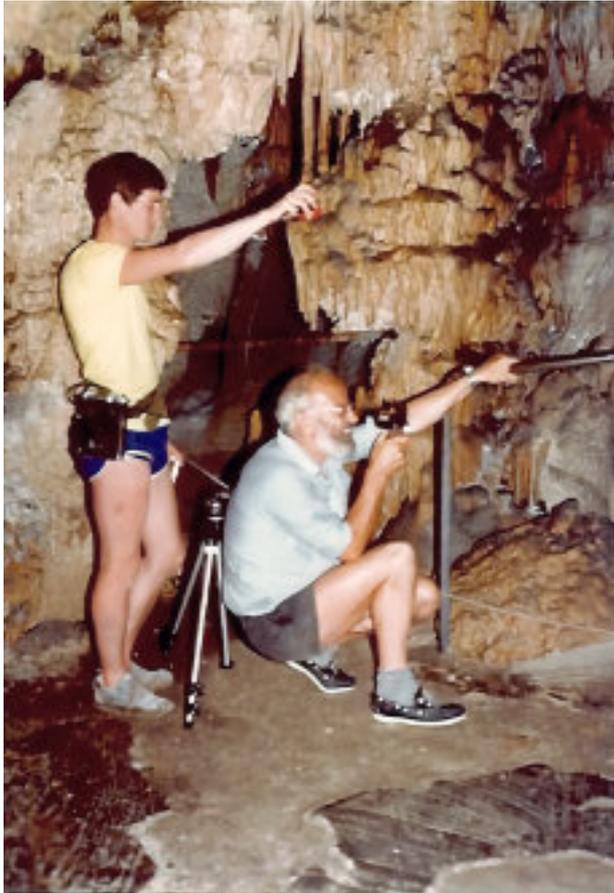
Serious building of a Dockyard in Bermuda began in 1790. The British needed a base from which to keep an eye on some troublesome expats who called themselves Americans. It was during the excavations for the dockyard that undersea caves containing stalagmites and many other decorations were discovered. A Navy base in Bermuda was also useful because it blocked the easiest route for sailing ships to return to Europe from pillaging in the Caribbean.

In 1813 the French poured oil onto the fire by selling Louisiana to the upstarts. At the time, the



Map that Tom Iliffe gave me. There are many more caves in Bermuda, but most are small and as yet uninteresting

Surveying in ideal conditions complete with assistant holding the spotlight to illuminate the compass



geography of Louisiana was actually unknown. It was in fact, all the territory West of the few habitations on the Eastern seaboard of the US.

The Brits were a bit miffed as they considered America to be a colony. Because of this insult, Britain declared war on France and Admiral Sir David Milne was dispatched to take command of the Dockyard with a detachment of some 5000 troops and Royal Marines.

In 1814 we invaded America with this force and won the battle of Bladensburg. Because the Americans would not surrender, we set fire to all the administrative buildings in Washington. This included the White House. Further retribution and destruction were ended when a fierce tornado and storm put out the fires and killed many belligerents on both sides. After a 26-hour conquest of America the Brits returned to their ships and sailed back to Bermuda.

By this time Britain was fully engaged in the Napoleonic wars and had few ships, men or materials with which to bother the rebel Americans. We did, however, manage to irritate them further by putting a tax on all the goods that they exported to France. A real trade-war.

By 1813 we had signed the first peace treaty with France, and Admiral Milne had time to do some pillaging of his own. He took to having interesting

objects found in Bermuda shipped back to his friends in the UK.

One of these objects that he sent to his friend Professor Robert Jameson in Edinburgh was a 3.5-ton stalagmite that he had had cut down and taken from a cave. His young son watched the destruction in the cave. The cave is today known as Admirals cave. It is the nearest reasonably sized cave to the Biological Station.



The seawater was warm. The Stal an excellent survey reference point

His friend who was the curator of a museum put the stalagmite on display in an upper floor of the building.

Some 44 years later the small boy had become Admiral Sir Alexander Milne, and he was stationed in Bermuda. During a return visit to the cave, he noticed five small blebs of fresh stalagmite on the cut surface of the stump of the stalagmite. He



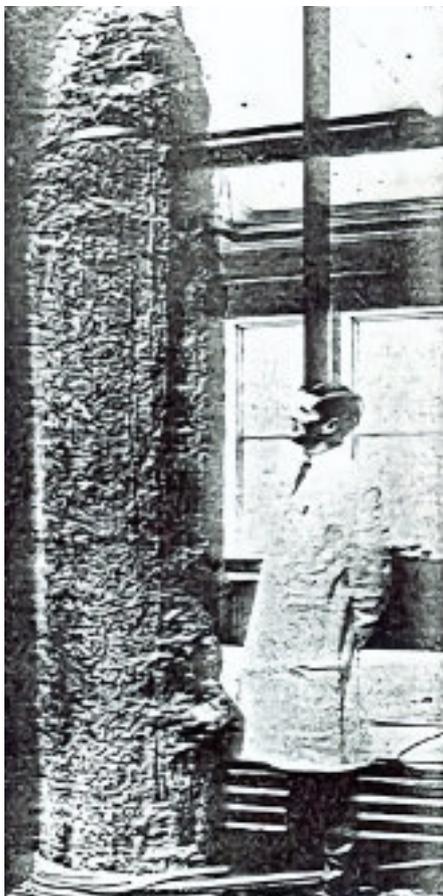
I felt surrounded by athletes. The lady nearest the camera was a local GP

The surviving twin of the Admirals cave stalagmite about 10ft from the stump of its pillaged twin



estimated their volume as 5 cubic inches. Alexander told his brother David Milne-Home who was awake and clever enough to realise that here was potential method of measuring stalagmite growth rate. His initial response was to consider that the rate of deposit varied throughout the life of the stalagmite. He persisted, however. He decided that the density of the deposit was probably the same as that of the stalagmite. With these caveats, comparing the volume of these blebs with the total volume of the stalagmite of 76,000 cubic inches of calcite, an estimate of 600,000 years was obtained.

Just to make sure that the destruction was complete, during the HMS Challenger survey of Bermuda in 1873 Sir Charles Thomson had the stump removed.



The stalagmite in the Scottish museum

The final blow of the saga occurred in 1973 the stalagmite was destroyed in one of those convenient accidents associated with builders and developers. The stalagmite 'accidentally fell over' and crashed through several floors of the museum and was smashed to little fragments. The museum was being developed and moving a 3.5-ton stalagmite intact from an upper floor would have been very expensive. The 'accident' saved the expense!

When I visited the cave about 115 years after Thomson there was yet another set of blebs on the stump of the stump. I could not resist the call of science, whilst I was not willing to vandalise the evidence I did measure as well as I could the diameter and heights of the blebs. I assumed that they were segments of a sphere and calculated their combined volume. I was very tempted to collect just one and measure its density, but I did not. The combined volumes were rather more than those reported by Admiral Alexander Milne but dividing my result by three to adjust for the time difference there was little to choose. I am of course unaware of how accurate the Admiral's measurements were.

When I got home and discovered that the stalagmite had been destroyed, and that I would have had nothing except the result of dividing 3.5-tons by 76,000 cubic inches to estimate the density of the column, I felt vindicated. (About 3.5g/cc) As far as I could ascertain the museum did not keep even a small fragment of the giant stalagmite. So, there was no chance to pursue my interest.

Underwater stalagmites, when first discovered in Bermuda back in 1807, became a source of much scientific debate. Was the discovery proof that stalagmites could form under seawater, and not as was already established, by mineral rich droplets of fresh water falling from the roofs of dry passages?

The consensus was no. So how had they formed? Presumably when the cave was above water. Next question; 'why had the cave sunk beneath the waves?' Two obvious answers. Either the land had sunk, or the sea had got deeper. Both sides of the argument had their protagonists. The 'land sinking lot' blamed the volcano that had formed Bermuda being too heavy for the underlying strata and had squeezed them, allowing the island to sink. The opposition, the 'sea depth increasing' supporters were having a tough time countering this argument. Where had all the extra water come from to increase the depth of the Atlantic?

Their argument got much stronger once the idea that the sea had become deeper was supported by the concept that the end of the ice age had caused many glaciers to melt and that they were the source of the extra water. Hard to believe initially. However, the research on glaciers in Europe by the great French scientist Louis Agassiz demonstrated in

1840 in the Alps there had been vast glaciers filling the valleys. Then as more became known of the Polar Continents the diluvial flooding idea became accepted.

During the next ice age, the underwater caves of Bermuda should emerge again. I do hope that the descendants of the vandals that have done so much damage to some of Bermuda's dry caves will not destroy the beauty that is at the moment preserved beneath the surface of the sea.

There are about twenty or so named dry caves known in Bermuda. Most of them soon terminate when the cave depth reaches present day sea level. There is no standing or flowing water apart from sea lagoons in Bermuda so there is little active development of the systems.

Drilling for water sources on the island has shown that the limestone layer extends to about 150ft below sea level where it meets volcanic debris, which itself rests on basalt.

The most extensive caves in Bermuda are still submerged and exploration by the local active cave divers has resulted in the discovery and exploration of over 3.5km of caves. Two of the most extensive are Green Bay cave with over 2km of surveyed passage and the Walsingham and Palm cave system. These caves are situated in the limestone strip between Castle Bay and Harrington Sound. A region with a remarkably high density of cave. Green Bay cave is remarkable for its wide passages and a depth of about 20m below the surface.

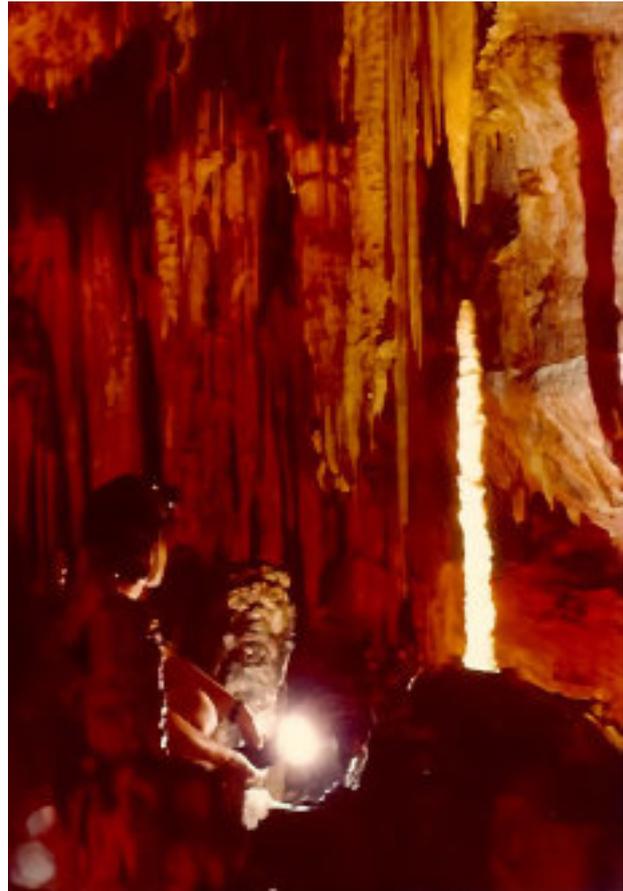
These caves have some regions of rich stalagmite decorations proving them to be of above ground origin. It is probable that they were formed about one million years ago when much more of Bermuda was above water, and much rain landed on the Island. Then the ice age ended and much of Bermuda including the caves became submerged.

One of the joys of cave diving in Bermuda is that the upper thermocline temperature is about 20+ degrees. I only managed two experiences of exploring underwater caves. The first, an approximately 45m long, almost circular richly decorated passage with some splendid columns. The passage was good for cave diving novices as it had an entrance at either end. I was so enthralled that I did the return journey almost tourist style. Then a completely different experience; a narrow passage in which it was necessary to remove the aqualung in order to squeeze through, where I was not at all comfortable. My discomfort was mainly with all the extra pipework associated with the octopus fitting, but also in having great difficulty in controlling my buoyancy.

The fate of caves in Bermuda has been very varied. Some have become show caves, others have morphed into bars or underground swimming pools. One large chamber in Hamilton has suffered

the ignominious fate of becoming an extensive cesspit for an office block. A recently discovered cave on Tucker's Island was immediately used as the spent oil dump for the American Air Base that was until recently active on the Island. A few have been totally destroyed by the developers.

These travesties combined with the rather extensive vandalism to the more accessible caves should serve as a warning that caves are not an unlimited source for adventure and beauty. Preservation that is pursued with such gusto on the surface should extend its protection to the island's rich caves and their not insignificant history.



Surviving beauty

Spelunking USA!

Noel Dilly

My most recent caving trip was in 2018, with my partner Sandie, in the Lava Beds National Monument situated in Northern California. A vast high wilderness area of recent and not so recent volcanic activity. A most fascinating place to visit for any schoolboy regardless of age.

Magnificent raptors, great flocks of snow geese, relics of WW2 internment camps, Indian war battle grounds. Especially poignant was Captain Jack's stronghold where a small group of the Modoc people under his leadership hung out against the US Army for several weeks. They were not defeated in battle but had to abandon their fortress amongst the lava boulders when the Army managed to cut off access to their water supply. So great was their stealth that they all managed to escape the area. A most moving exploration of the battleground made more so as with typical American genius, free guide sheets were available.

There is usually a fee charged to enter National Parks and Monuments and it is worth paying for the amazing experiences that these places inevitably provide. Lava Beds was no exception, the price \$20. The only place to pay was at the Ranger Station where there is an honesty box in the car park. Fortunately, we asked first; my pretence at being youthful was immediately rumbled and I was told that Seniors were only charged \$8 for a week-long visit.

Sandie and I were just about to leave the Ranger Station when a gaggle of ill-dressed teenagers filed by. I recognised them immediately as cavers. Back to the desk.

"Where are the caves?" Such a pity we didn't have any gear.

"No problem if you don't mind hiking 110 yards you can visit our show cave."

"But we don't have any lights."

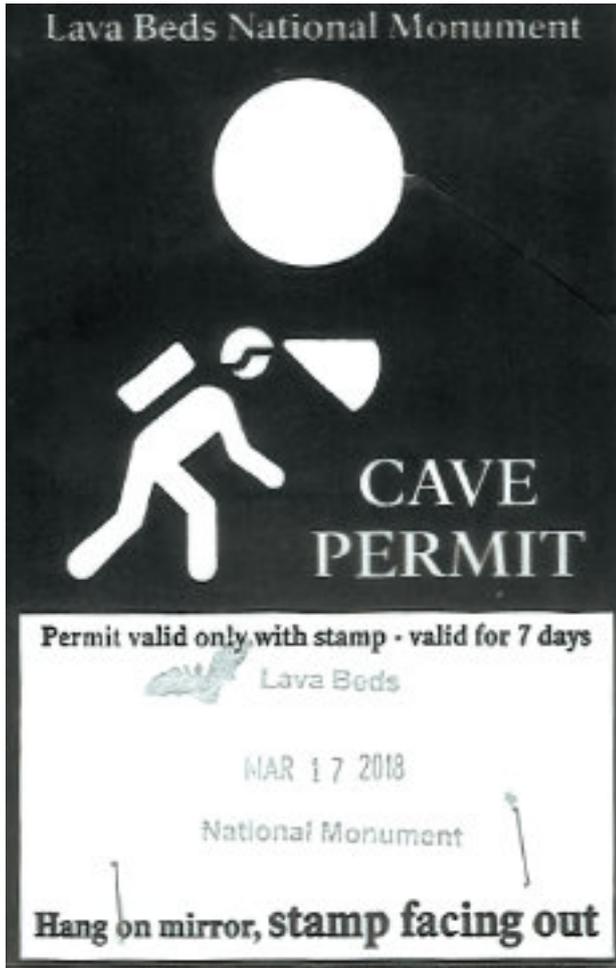
"You won't need them!"

I imagined that we were to find a rock shelter of some sort. We arrived at the location to find an iron staircase that would have been more appropriate as a fire escape complete with double handrails leading down about 15ft into a dark hole. Oh well, pity we had no lights but thought, *"let's just have a look into the entrance!"*

We reached the entrance and stepped inside. Like magic, low lighting came on for the first thirty or so yards of the lava tube. We could see that a surfaced path led between the lights. Well, we did have our mobile phones and they had a light that we could use in an emergency. So, in we ventured. As we started in more lights came on until the whole of the first section of the tube was fully illuminated. As we came to the gloom ahead a fresh set of lights came on, and slightly unnervingly, the lights behind us faded. We progressed onwards past splendid information boards that described the geomorphology. After about 250 yards the roof of the lava tube descended to the floor and the lighting went no further. The lights came on in sequence as we wandered back towards the entrance, and we could only marvel that such a splendid experience was for free.

Full of delight we returned to thank the Ranger. She seemed very happy that we had enjoyed ourselves and thought that we might like to visit another site. They would lend us flashlights! However first we must be issued with a caving permit! The price of the permit was included in our \$8 Monument fee. No deposit was taken for the flashlights, but we were asked, would we please return them when we had finished.

The shape of things to come in the UK?



Lava tubes are formed when lava flows either under a previous lava flow or on the surface. The exposed surface of the lava cools and the crust solidifies forming an insulating jacket that keeps the enclosed lava hot. This lava then drains out further down the hill, and a tube remains. The lining is of basaltic rock and since the lava has cooled relatively slowly the crystals that form huge boulders are large.



A small lava tube showing the classic circular structure © Noel Dilly

Because often the walls of the tube are deposited in sequence concentrically as different flows traverse

the tube, the wall of the tube is layered. When the walls break down, large rectangular boulders fall from the layers. I was reading this explanation deep in the lava tube when it crossed my mind that we were not many miles from the San Andreas fault. Now if that slipped whilst we were in the tube, as it is predicted to do in the near future, we would probably be treated to an unsurvivable roof fall. Some of the walls of the tubes had flow marks, scallops just like in OFD stream passage. But really exciting was to see the score lines as lava flows of different heights had traversed the tube.



Ice crystals that are permanent year-round features of many tubes © Noel Dilly

We were told that our second tube would be 'wild'! A euphemism for a floor of large boulders that had fallen from the roof and completely obscured the tube's original smooth surface. A notice nearer the entrance added meaning to the warning, giving it another dimension; we were in the area of bears and rattle snakes! Plus of course, the even more dangerous Lyme disease bearing tics. We took heart that it was deep frozen mid-Winter, and we were at 6000ft and they were likely to be hibernating.



The trip to this entrance was a real hike following an unmanicured track. It was exciting enough in itself to walk past surface lava flows, highly coloured rocks and great black obsidian boulders. It is these black glass boulders the natives fractured into small sharp pieces to make arrow heads.

Surface view of a collapsed length of tube, illustrating the large individual blocks of basalt © Noel Dilly

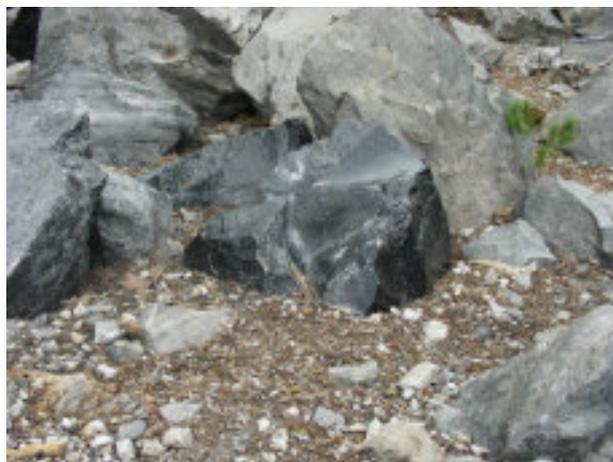


Arriving nearer our destination, we followed a line of shake holes where the roof of the lava tube had collapsed. Climbing down into such a hole, a reflex response from any SWCC member, I was able to see through the surviving roof section to the next collapse.

We climbed down into the recommended tube. Sandie was the first to notice the Native American pictographs decorating the walls, some thought to be several thousand years old.

A strange sensation standing in the same place as the artist of all those centuries ago. We both

enjoyed trying to give an interpretation to the symbols that we were seeing. Sometimes they seemed obvious but how could we know with a modern mindset? In reality they all maintained their secrets. Progress along the tube was much like a long scramble across the top of a boulder choke. The exercise certainly kept us warm in the near freezing surroundings.



Obsidian boulder, volcanic 'glass' fragments were used as cutting devices by Native Americans © Noel Dilly

Deeper into the tube we came to an area of ice stalagmites, and an ice floor. Then all too soon the



Summit of a volcanic cone entirely composed of basaltic rock © Noel Dilly

passage became blocked with ice. Remarkable, especially as we were told later when we returned the torches that the ice and snow persisted all year round, so efficient was the thermal insulation of the lava walls.



Lava stained by volcanic gases contains coloured elements © Noel Dilly

We asked for a recommendation for a further trip.

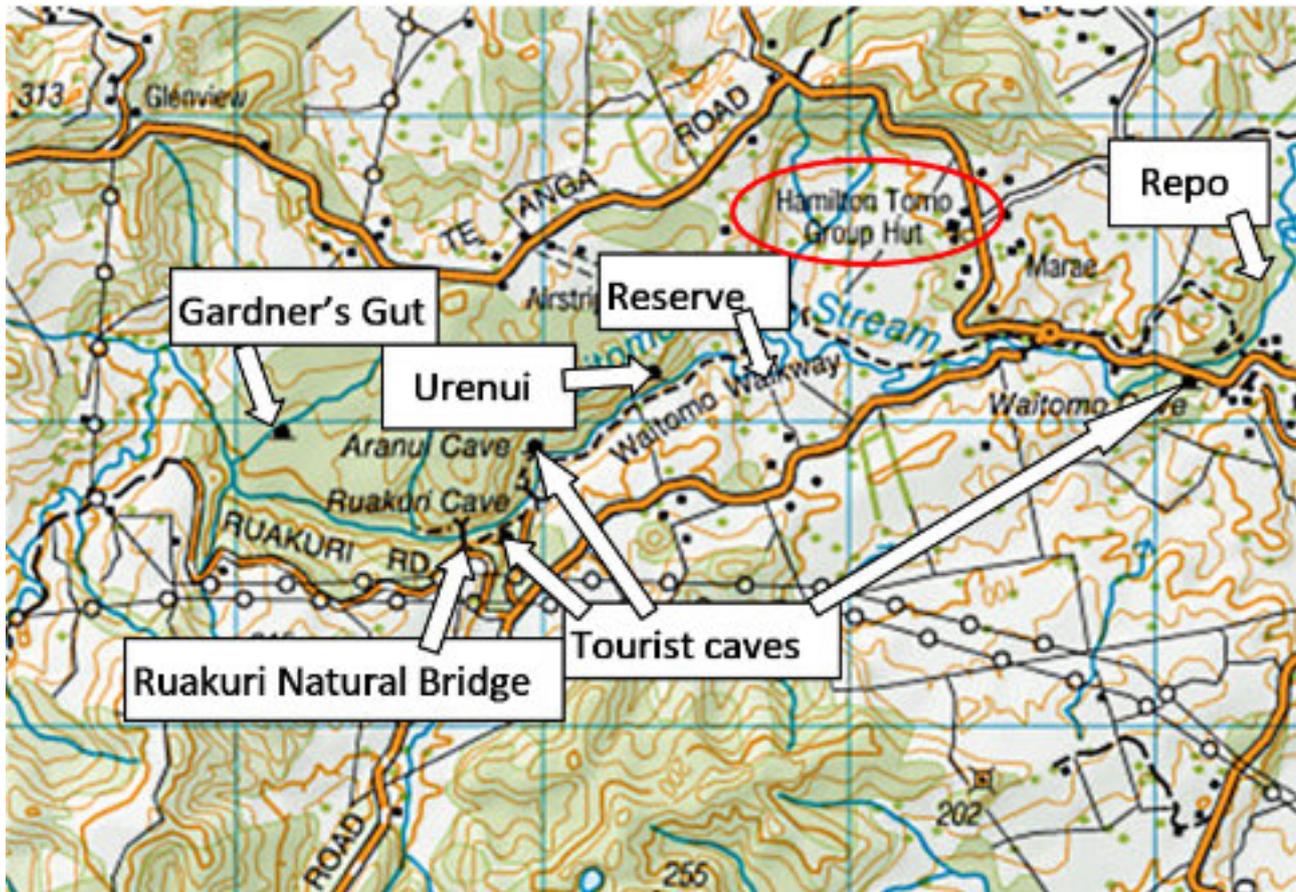
“Sure,” said the Ranger. *“However I know that there is a severe blizzard coming in a couple of hours-time and you will likely get snowed in! I suggest that you use the time to get to the main highway.”*



Pictographs © Noel Dilly



Entrance of the lava tube that has the pictographs © Noel Dilly



Strait, cars are left in Wellington. This means that with a bit of planning and early booking it is often possible to get very cheap rental-car relocation deals if you fly into Christchurch or Wellington. Last time we rented a car in Christchurch, we paid \$1 per day plus insurance, and better still, the car's ferry crossing was paid by the rental company. Just a couple of things to remember when taking a ferry across Cook Strait. Passengers are not included with the car cost, so although the rental company pays for the car, they don't pay for you; this applies to all motor vehicles. In addition, although the car might cost \$1 per day, you still need to pay insurance. You should also pay insurance on excess costs because a separate excess is payable on every fault when the car is returned, whether it be scratches, dings, has damaged tires etc. However, this didn't seem to be the case in 2020. I just stumped up for a full no-excess policy and then had total piece of mind.

You might be considering using public transport? What public transport? Kiwis drive everywhere and you can't go anywhere with caves by train. If you wanted to make a quick trip to Nelson for a bit of Alpine caving, flying might be an option, but you'll need to be flying from a hub such as Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin or maybe Queenstown; otherwise, you'll be paying a fortune and then you'll need a car to get to the caves anyway. Also, the domestic weight luggage limit is 15kg! Coaches are an option and there are various packages that allow you to get on and off within a

given period but again these are expensive and the websites difficult to navigate, but you could get to Waitomo this way. Also, if you're planning to be there for a while, consider buying an old car. There is probably still a second-hand car buying fair each Saturday at the Avondale Racecourse in Auckland and AA inspectors are there to make sure you're not buying a liability. Finally, unless things have changed since writing this, you don't need insurance in NZ! You can just lay down your cash and drive away.

Where are you most likely to find a simple trip?

So, you have a car and you're hoping to possibly get underground, and I'm assuming not in a tourist cave - either concrete walkways or the Adventure (pay-an-absolute-fortune) type of affair. Your best bet is Waitomo. Here, there are hundreds of caves you could walk into with very basic kit. The problem with Waitomo and pretty much everywhere else is that you will need some local knowledge to find the caves and know what you'll find in them. The thing about caving in New Zealand is that entrance locations, with very few exceptions, are not published. This is for conservation and rescue practicalities. The number of gates in NZ caves can be counted on the fingers of one hand and this is in a country where a large percentage of the population would feel happy to enter caves but also with a very limited number of cavers who could rescue them. Also, many caves are very well decorated and hold large quantities of fossil and

massive fossil passage until you get to some water entering from an aven.

Back at the walkway, if you keep following it, you will arrive at the Ruakuri car park. From here you take the track up into the bush past the Ruakuri resurgence (this is where the original Black Water Rafting trip exits) and carry on up to the Ruakuri Natural Bridge. The track splits and takes you through a number of tiny caves (no lights required), although a light is advisable if you wish to enter the natural bridge itself.

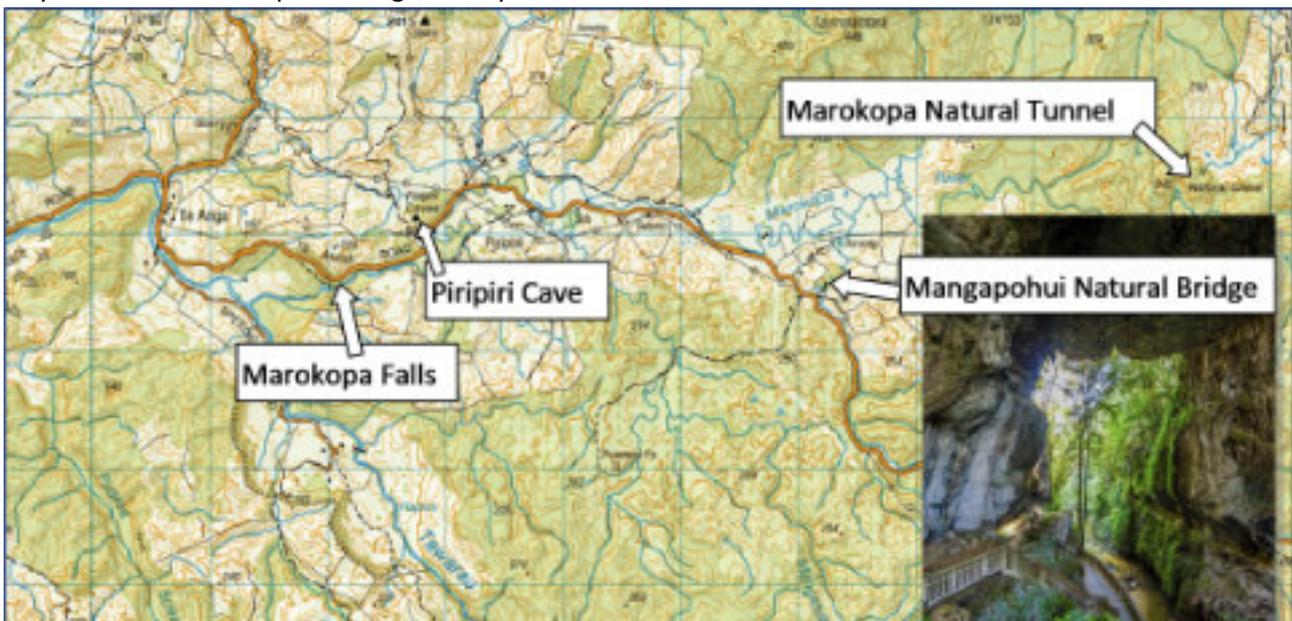


few hours to spare and didn't find yourself looking up the Cleft Of The Orks entrance pitch. Parts of the stream are very well decorated, and the stream has a good population of Glowworms, freshwater crayfish and the obligatory eels (although the eels are smaller and friendlier in here). Gardner's has some rather special upper levels and above the resurgence you might find the Zweihöllen entrances into the Henry Lambert Levels or the smoke connected Coincidence Cavern. You could go looking for these, but chances are you'll probably become horribly lost in the bush. Just remember,



Birthday candle

Beyond the natural bridge, if you walk the loop of track, when you get back to the Waitomo Stream, you'll see a worn track heading further up the valley. Taking this muddy, slippery track will bring you to the Gardner's Gut resurgence. This is well worth a visit and you could follow the water all the way to the Helms Deep submergence if you had a



Marokopa

Gardner's is over 14km long and with all these caves, don't enter unless someone knows where you're going.

What else is there to do in Waitomo if you've arrived midweek and are maybe looking at sights while waiting to join a Club trip on a weekend? If you drive west toward the coast, you'll eventually see a car park for the Mangapohui Natural bridge. This is a must.

Following on along the road past some interesting entrances on your left, you'll come to the Piripiri Cave car park. You'll need lights for this one, but you can just enter in your shorts T-shirt and trainers. Eventually you'll find yourself looking at a roof entirely made of giant fossilised oysters.

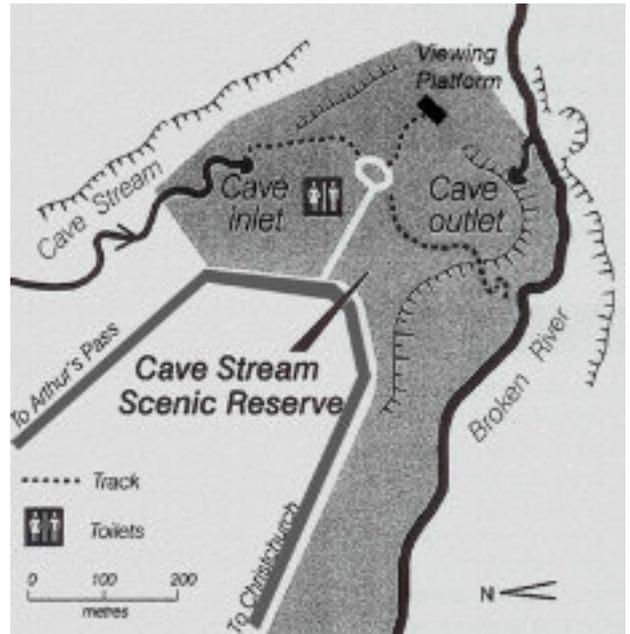
Carrying on still, you'll pass the Marokopa falls. In days past this was a popular open air SRT training site for cavers. Nothing beats a 57m waterfall for SRT practice on a hot sunny day.



Maropoka Falls

What about the South Island?

Here you don't generally have anything that would be advisable to just walk into, but there are a couple of exceptions. If you're heading over Arthur's Pass,



you'll come to the Broken River reserve. If you have proper kit, then you can do this through trip. However, don't even consider it if the water is much over your ankles and definitely not if it's raining or thunderstorms are looming.

If for some reason you have a couple of days to spare and you get to Westport, head up the coast beyond Karamea and visit the Oparara arches/Honeycomb Hill area. This cave has a cavers' hut, but you'll need to talk to the Buller Caving group to find out details or possibly the Karamea Department of Conservation (DoC) office. The arches and cave are spectacular and well worth a visit, even though much of the system is gated due to sub-fossil deposits. One bit of advice: sleep in a tent with good insect protection and make sure you have some proper heavy-duty WW2 army surplus insect repellent.



Oparara Arches

Mines

Kiwi cavers don't bother with mines but if you're touring the Coromandel there are a couple of options you could visit on a day trip from Tiarua or Pauanui. A trip up the Puketui valley will take you to the DoC Broken River campsite. If you walk further

up the road, you'll come to a track that heads up the hill, and if you follow the signs, you can walk through the Golden Hills Gold Mine. This was opened up after my old man pushed through a collapse in the late 70s. If you're feeling more adventurous, there's another mine on the other side of the valley called (from memory), Boom of the Gem Creek, or something like that. This has not been opened up to walkers and is no longer marked on maps. This mine is more complex and contains several levels, only the top one of which has been entered since the mine closed about 100 years ago. When partly descending one shaft, which we estimated to be well over 100m deep (we dropped a piece of track rail down it) my old man came across a drive with a truck abandoned sitting on its tracks. Due to the nature of the rock here, rhyolite and quartz, the passages a fairly stable, but be wary of getting in any water; it can be highly toxic from heavy metals and burn your skin.

The important stuff: beer?

I will warn you now, drinking in a bar in NZ is expensive. If you ask for a pint, unless you're drinking Guinness, a pint means a glass and it could be an American pint or even less. The breweries think that people should pay international prices and that means central London prices. Best bet? Buy at an off-license or as they're known in NZ, wholesalers, or go to a supermarket and drink with friends while out in hills looking at the view. Also, for historical a reasons your duty-free allowance, for spirits is 3 x 1125ml bottles! Enjoy. These days, NZ has a massive microbrewery culture. Although hand pumped real ale is rare, don't be surprised if a city pub sells 20-30 different beers on tap and the good ones will sell you several glasses of different beers (possibly 6 x 100ml glasses) with tasting notes. And another thing: Don't be surprised to find



IPAs and the like that are over 7% ABV, so be careful if you don't want to wake up with a little man running around inside your head with a big hammer and embarrassing photos all over Zuckerberg Inc.

Drink Driving? Don't!!! You will be caught.

By law, if you're stopped while driving, you must be breath tested. Also, The NZ police are allowed and are encouraged to set up roadblocks/check points and breath test everyone. There's a good chance you will be stopped if driving on a Friday or Saturday night; it could even happen on a rural road.

Food

Personally, I think it's awesome, but I would. The cafés sell awesome cakes and salads, and the coffee is amazing. They also do the 'Full English' in the morning (if you need something British) or how about going American with pancakes, crispy bacon and maple syrup. They pretty much supply all tastes.

I often joke about vegetarianism and veganism being a criminal offence in NZ, but actually, the vegan food is so good it could convert Genghis Khan or even Arwen. The thing about the NZ restaurant culture is that it has become part of the Pacific-Rim



fusion food culture, so expect to find crocodile on pizza and avocado and brie in your burgers. In a city's business district, you'll always find a sushi bar within 100m and possibly a curry outlet, Turkish, Chinese or pretty much any cuisine you can think of, but not French.

If you're out with kiwi cavers, expect to visit a café after caving and before visiting the pub, returning to a hut or their home. It's also common for cavers to visit a café for breakfast, thereby guaranteeing awesome coffee. As for normal meals, it's pretty much the same as the UK although with an emphasis on greens and 'Whole Foods'.

If you're self catering, unless things have changed, fresh is cheaper than canned and meat can be very cheap compared to Britain. If you're looking to grab a very cheap meal while on the go, just drop into a small supermarket and grab a six pack of meat pies. The locals will think you're odd eating cold pies, but they also think your love of warm beer is odd, so who cares. They taste great and unlike British pies, they actually contain meat.

Caving Huts



Waitomo pub

There are a few caving huts but unless you meet up with local cavers, I doubt you could get access. The Hamilton Tomo Group (HTG) can be used by anyone and is very cheap and only a 1 mile walk from the pub; just keep driving towards the coast and it is sign posted on your left. However, you will need to get a key code for the door. Hopefully Peter Chandler will still be your man for this. Auckland Speleo Group (ASG) has a stunning hut overlooking the whole Waitomo valley. It's a long way from any pubs, shops or anything other than caves and sheep but a fabulous place to stay if you contact the Club for access. The Hut sits on Awatiro Station and the 'Family' (the Stubbs) have been caving and involved in caving for 70 years plus, and if you're looking for



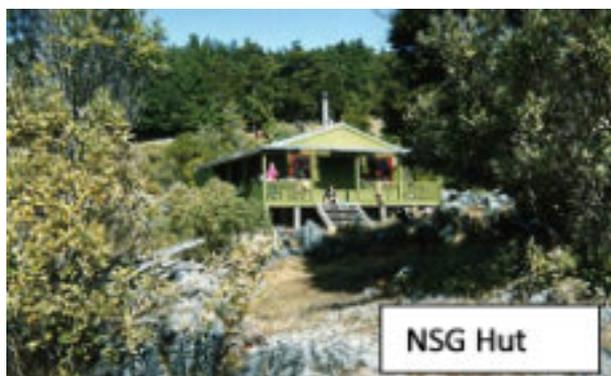
HTG Hut (Photo from Hamilton Tomo Group website)

something more upmarket, they have some nice B&B cabins and Glamping.

An hour south of Waitomo, the Taranaki Caving Group has a hut (or did have). Last time I visited, it had no electricity and was lit by gas (which you had to take with you). I doubt you'll ever get to Mahoenui but again, if you wanted to stay there, you'd have to contact TCG.



The Nelson Speleological Group (NSG) has a fabulous hut high on Takaka Hill. I'd consider this hut a must, but you'll need to contact NSG.



As stated previously, The Buller Club has a hut near the Oparara Arches/Honeycomb Hill Cave. There are cavers in Karamea who could be contacted and probably found by talking to whoever is in the Karamea/Department of Conservation (DoC) information office. Also, I think DoC also jointly run this Hut.

A final note on club huts (or any mountain hut): it's always wise to have a very warm sleeping bag.

Department of Conservation accommodation

DoC provides lodges, cabins and cottages in scenic settings throughout New Zealand. They are accessible by vehicle, boat or short walk. They also manage a network of over 950 huts of all shapes



Ellis Hut

and sizes. They provide unique places to stay, refuge from bad weather, or rest and recover when you're out exploring the outdoors. Backcountry huts are more basic than backpacker hostels. They don't have showers, hot water, cooking and eating utensils or bed linen. You can't buy food or equipment. Many of these buildings can be used with a Backcountry Hut Pass. This pass gives you unlimited use of most Serviced and Standard huts, as well as most campsites outside Serviced huts, for the period you buy the pass for.

If you're planning on making multiple stays within a 6- or 12-month period, a Backcountry Hut Pass will save you money.

Lodges, cabins and cottage facilities

Time period	Adult 18+ years	Youth 11 - 17 years	Child 5 - 10 years	Infant 0 - 4 years
6 months	\$92	\$46	Free	Free
12 months	\$122	\$61	Free	Free

Department of Conservation prices

Always supplied:

- Cooking in a basic kitchen
- Beds, bunks or sleeping platforms with mattresses, table and chairs, tap water, toilets, toilet paper and a broom and brush to keep accommodation clean and tidy

May be supplied:

- Electricity, hot water, showers, lighting or candle holders and heating

Kitchen Facilities:

- Full kitchen: Electric or gas cooking (fuel supplied), hot water, pots, pans, cooking utensils, crockery and cutlery. There may be a barbeque (BBQ), fridge/freezer or microwave (listed under 'facilities' on the individual lodge, cabin or cottage page if supplied)
- Simple kitchen: Electric or gas cooking (fuel supplied). There may be hot water, pots, pans, cooking utensils, crockery and cutlery (listed under 'facilities' on the individual lodge, cabin or cottage page if supplied)
- Basic kitchen: Gas, coal range or barbeque cooking (fuel supplied). Bring your own pots, pans, cooking utensils, crockery and cutlery

You need to bring:

- Bed linen or sleeping bags, tea towels, candles or camp lights (where lighting is not provided), food and personal items

Fees:

- Refer to the individual lodge, cabin or cottage page on the DoC website for specific fee information as they vary in price

Bookings:

- All lodges, cabins and cottages need to be booked prior to arrival. Some can be booked online using DOC's online booking system. Check the individual lodge, cabin or cottage page for booking contact details

Huts have:

- Bunks are often sleeping platforms that allow a width of 75cm per person
- Toilets are usually long drop or composting (not flush)
- Candle holders are provided at most huts where lighting is not provided
- Where heating is provided, fuel is either gas or wood and available at some huts in peak season. An axe or saw are often provided at huts with wood heaters
- Water is often supplied from rainwater or streams. The water borne parasite Giardia may be present. Boil water for 3 minutes before use if you are unsure of the quality
- Intentions (hut user) book is provided in huts. Always fill it in, as it may assist in search and rescue operations and also assists the Department to know how often a hut is used
- Meat safes and/or dog kennels away from the hut, at some huts popular with hunters
- Broom, brush and pan are provided to keep huts clean and tidy

Huts don't have:

- Any food, cooking utensils, pots, pans - take your own
- Sheets or blankets - take a sleeping bag
- Rubbish collection - take all your rubbish with you
- Showers
- Toilet paper - take your own

Kit

Sadly, the days when you could fly via America with 64kg of toys have long gone. These days you'll probably be flying via a far-Eastern or Middle Eastern hub and depending on the airline, you'll have a weight limit between 25 - 35kg plus 7kg-ish hand luggage, so if you're planning to cave, or do anything in the hills, then some planning will be in order. Also, don't forget to load your pockets if need be.

Personally, I don't need a load of everyday clothes; I'll wear my tidy stuff while flying, have one set of casual/rough stuff and rely on a wear one while washing the other policy. To be honest, you can get away with being very casual in NZ; very short shorts,

vest and Jandals (flip-flops) but it is handy to be able to dress in a tidy fashion sometimes. If you're really strapped for weight, buy clothes from charity shops when you get there. Last time I was there, I picked up an almost new unworn pair of jeans for £2.50, which retail in the UK for £200 as well as several other amazing buys.

As for hardware, work out what's the minimum you need. You might be able to borrow a helmet and light, but I'd definitely pack a couple of Fenix HL55s or similar (plus charger and spare cells).

You won't be able to borrow SRT kit, so if you need it, work out what's the minimum you need.



Arwen wandering off in the bush

NZ cavers tend to wear polypropylene thermal underwear rather than undersuits and just add a fleece top if/when need be. If you're with exploratory-type cavers, you'll die in an undersuit from heat exhaustion as you run to keep up, but when you stop, you're likely to freeze. Also, if you're there in summer the, North Island Caves can be very warm, even over 30°C, if a warm breeze is blowing through, whereas in an Alpine South Island caves you could experience 4°C in summer or even sub-zero if negotiating a snow-plug. Don't wear woollen undergarments if you're intending to camp underground; you'll freeze.

Last time I went I took a PVC suit; this was useful because it was easy to clean and dry. Other fabrics might be too heavy to bring home if you can't dry them. For Waitomo, a cotton boiler suit is perfect and it's cheap enough to leave there.

Boots: no one will think you odd if you walk in the mountains wearing wellies (or flip-flops) but the caves will destroy walking shoes/hiking boots; although crossing a 6000ft mountain covered in snow during the height of summer while wearing wellies can be a bit disconcerting.

And now back to that title (borrowed from Crowded House), Four Seasons in One Day: don't be surprised if you experience major changes in the weather, very quickly. If you're in the mountains and the wind changes from the northerly half to the southerly, the temperature could change from being 30°+ to sub-zero very quickly. Likewise, a sudden change could bring torrential rain, hail and snow. Don't visit river caves if there is a chance of thunderstorms and that includes Broken River (as mentioned above, people have been killed in there by flood pulses). The important thing is to be able to add or remove multiple layers. For everyday use, Merino thermal underwear is good for walking in the hills, but you will freeze if camping underground, hence why Kiwi cavers still wear polyprop. Carry a fleece layer and also a light weight down jacket (preferably one with a breathable waterproof shell); finally, don't forget a good raincoat.

Sunglasses are a must! The southern hemisphere has much lower levels of pollution and so the UV levels are much higher, and your eyes will burn without them, luckily the ozone layer has improved over the last 20 years. Also don't forget that you'll be at an equivalent latitude as southern Spain when in Waitomo or the Pyrenees if in the South Island so take some good sun block.



It was a nice sunny day until...

A final point

You're a caver so that means you visit rural areas. Chances are that when you fill in your entry card, you'll have to tick the box that says you've been on a farm within the previous 6 weeks (or whatever it is). Don't worry. For you, the Agricultural queue will probably be quicker than the queue for other foreign nationals; just remember to pack your kit so that it can be inspected. The first time I went through this queue, I had packed my rucksack so that my caving kit was easily accessible. I unzipped the bottom access panel and Swildon's mud went everywhere. I apologised for not having been able to clean it and they thanked me for making inspection easy and a few minutes later my sanitised caving kit was returned.

Hopefully the border will re-open for you and you'll get to experience that trip of a lifetime and maybe I'll have to write Part Two: an article on Kiwi caving expedition prep.

An important afterthought

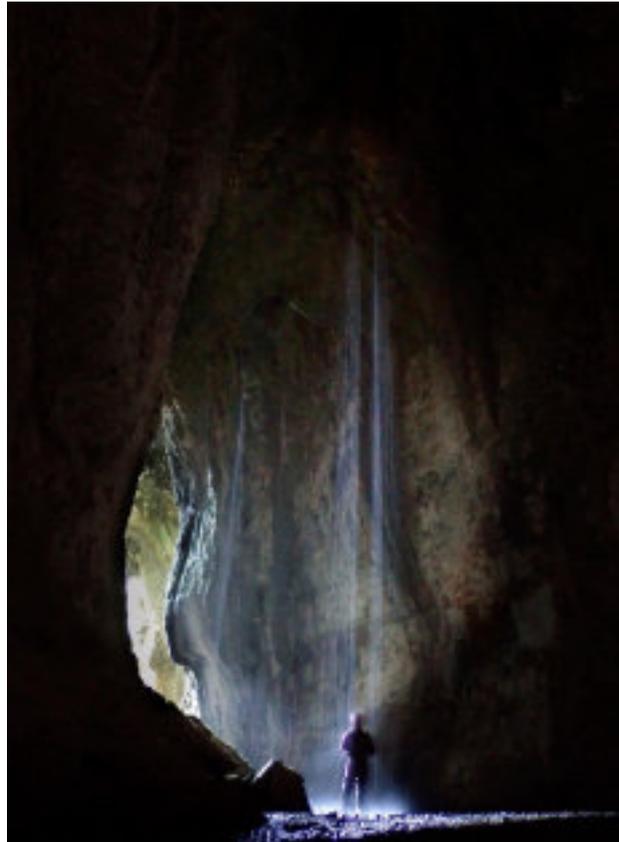


Urtica Ferox (@Krzysztof Ziarnik, Kenraiz, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>>, via Wikimedia Commons)

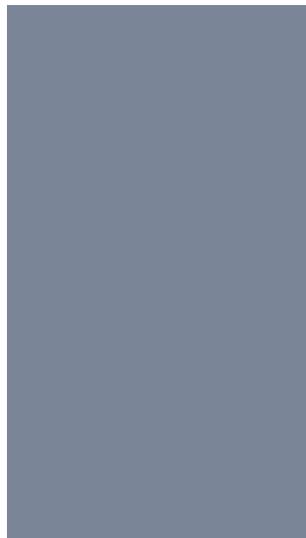
Since initially writing this, I came across an article about a mystery death of a walker up in the hills (behind where Andy Jopling lives). It was only years later when the Coroner was talking to someone who had also investigated a death and near death of a pair of trampers that the cause came to light: *Urtica Ferox*! Commonly known as tree nettle, or Ongaonga in Māori, is a nettle that is endemic to New Zealand. The spines contain the toxin triffyidin, (named after Tryfidis). This toxin contains histamine, serotonin and acetylcholine, the last of which causes powerful stimulation of the parasympathetic nerve system. Multiple stings can have a very painful reaction which causes inflammation, a rash, itching, and in high concentrations loss of motor movement, paralysis, drop in blood pressure, convulsions, blurred vision/blindness and confusion. Acute polyneuropathy (damage or disease affecting peripheral nerves) can occur due to *U. Ferox* stings; and there have been several recorded human deaths from contact, for example,

a lightly clad hunter who died 5 hours after walking through a dense patch. From personal experience, I have only ever found *U.ferox* growing around caves and in limestone areas, so be warned. Avoid at all costs! If you have to walk through it, make sure you're completely covered by thick clothing, impenetrable by the spines and protect your hands, head and face.

Finally, don't wander off marked tracks unless with a local



Marokopa Natural Tunnel near Waitomo (©Kevin Jose, Auckland Speleo Group)



Caving in Vietnam, the Easy Way

Susan O'Reilly

Last winter, before we'd ever heard of COVID-19, I was at home in Dublin considering travel plans for 2020. South East Asia, a part of the world I'd never visited, was emerging as the most attractive option. I knew very little about how best to plan a month connecting up the dots across Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. Then an article in the Guardian caught my eye! Guided caving and camping trips in the Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site in central Vietnam, on the border with Laos. I thought, *"What a great objective to centre my trip around!"* Lonely Planet had useful information on this amazing area, informing me it was the oldest Karst area in Asia, formed more than 400 million years ago, riddled with hundreds of spectacular river caves with stunning calcite formations, only first explored by the British Cave Research Association and Hanoi University in the 1990s. Tourism is growing in the region: caving, jungle expeditions, Vietnam war history. Apart from stunning show caves, access to wild cave systems is tightly controlled and limited to approved Vietnamese tour agencies, the best known of which is OxalisAdventure.com, the only one approved to run expeditions (for £2,300 each!) to the remote Hang Son Doong river cave, considered to be the biggest cavern in the world. I wasn't planning to do that one!

Oxalis has English speaking guides, trained by British cavers Howard and Deb Limbert, and an excellent reputation for safety. What better for an old, no longer bold, retired caver! When I scrutinised the Oxalis web site, they offered a dazzling choice of one, two, three or four-day trips, ranging from easy to hard, all involving jungle trekking, some requiring abseiling and most requiring swimming. I signed up for the two-day, moderate difficulty, Tu Lan adventure, a fully catered and fully equipped 12km jungle trek to a

camp site by an impressive resurgence, then exploration of four river caves, for a modest £140 Sterling. My greatest concern was that I might be a liability to other participants in the trip as I am 73 years old and not as nimble as I used to be. I'd only just recovered from multiple pelvic fractures incurred skiing a year earlier, as well as a smashed kneecap, two years ago, in an accident that was so stupid I'd be embarrassed to admit how it happened. It's difficult to judge what you are getting into on a caving trip until you are there!

Next, I recruited my friend, Brenda, to join me on the trip. She was definitely NOT doing any hiking or caving, but as a retired Irish language school principal and now a documentary filmmaker, she would make sure we balanced the art, culture and history on the trip to offset my optimistic plans for physical activities. As our departure on February 1st, 2020 approached, COVID-19 spread out of China into adjacent countries. Borders were closing and cruise ships were already stranded with surging infections. Brenda worried whether to cancel her trip: I said, *"I'm going anyway, we won't get our money back!"*

Her husband and daughters said, *"Go! You can always bail out if you have to."*

My sons, Finbarr and Donal, said, *"Try not to break any bones this time, Mum."*

Louisa, my son Finbarr's partner, a public health doctor, offered to send the latest WHO COVID-19 information in case we had to make a quick decision to abort the mission.

As a retired physician, I've perfected my travel emergency kit: Band-Aids, moleskin and drugs - an assortment of analgesics and antibiotics for all treatable infections: malaria and any other bacterial or parasitic infections. Except of course, nothing for

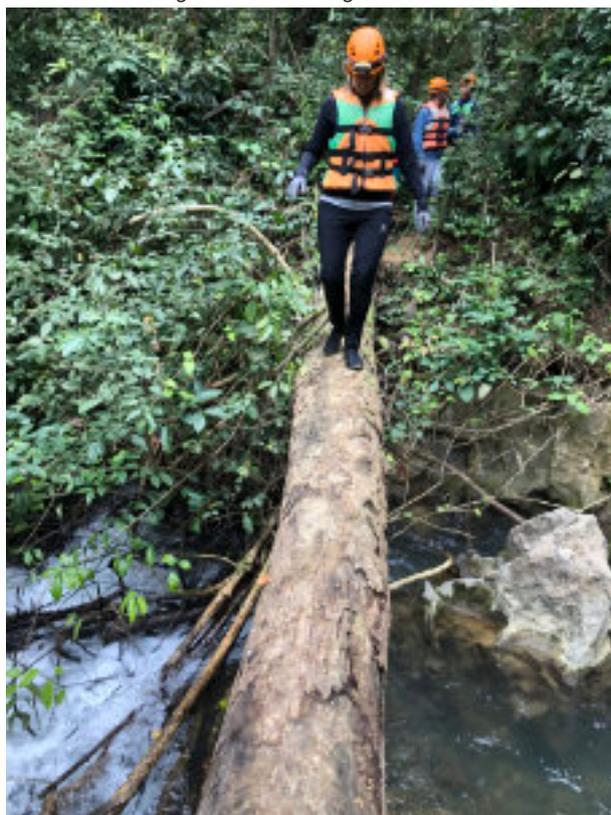
COVID-19, so as an afterthought, I bunged in a new steroid inhaler and some ancient decadron (steroid) pills I'd kept as emergency therapy for high altitude cerebral oedema. I must have had them years, since I hiked up Kilimanjaro, so they were probably useless; maybe they might mitigate the acute respiratory failure described with COVID-19 infections? I was later proven right that decadron is a useful treatment for serious COVID-19 lung disease as it seems to calm down the cytokine storm thought to contribute to respiratory failure. Fortunately, I never needed to put my old pills to the test!

It's pretty easy to reach Phong Nha; there are flights from major hubs in Vietnam to the little airport at Dong Hoi in central Vietnam, where taxis or a bus will take 45 minutes to reach the caving area in Phong Nha-Ki Bang National Park. Outfitters will also arrange to pick you up and may offer their own accommodation. We were travelling overland by car, exploring the coast, so it was straightforward to turn inland to Phong Nha. This broad, fertile river valley is centred around a wide river which arises in Laos, flows through various caves, including the huge Hang Son Doong, and resurges from Phong Nha show cave. Downstream from this massive resurgence, the small town along the river has plenty of recently built hotels, restaurants and adventure tour companies. In October, much of the valley floods in the monsoon, farmers drive their cattle to high ground, abandon their riverside homes to the flood, load essential possessions aboard a raft with a hut atop and float up with the



Vietnam jungle trek en-route to caves

Jungle river crossing between cave entrances



rising waters to higher ground until the flood subsides.

We settled into Phong Nha Lake House hotel, which is reasonably priced at £50 per night for a twin room. It overlooks lovely mountains and a lake and has a good restaurant, bar, small pool, kayaks and bikes. I abandoned a rather worried-looking Brenda and set forth early in the morning in an Oxalis van. After an hour driving along the wide, pastoral valley, we arrived at their HQ, outside the boundaries of the National Park. An excellent orientation and safety briefing followed, then we sorted out helmets, lamps and gloves to protect our hands from nasty thorns and other critters on the jungle trek. We were each fitted with a lifejacket for later use in the river caves. Boots were offered, but you are better off to bring your own. Ankle boots and thick socks are best in case you step on a snake. Our local caving guide had only just returned to work after a snake bite which required antivenom treatment in hospital and a few weeks recovering from a very swollen leg. He explained he preferred to hike, swim and cave in light runners to avoid getting 'trench foot' from fungal infections, but he paid the price when he stood on that snake! There were seven lively paying guests in the party, two couples from Israel and Spain, Swiss honeymooners and me, all of them turned out to be very good company. We had a caving guide from a local village, a swimming expert from the Mekong Delta, far to the South, and a third support man. Porters had gone ahead with our personal gear and food. A waterproof box was available for phones and cameras, if required.

Our caving guide looked quite worried when I enquired if there were any crawls to do, and if so, should I bring my knee pad, as my recently operated on kneecap did not appreciate kneeling on rocks. I can easily see it from his perspective. He had six fit-looking, much younger people - then me! A short, chubby, grey haired, older lady! He admitted later that he'd thought I wouldn't make it. Anyway, he soon got over that, as I didn't have any difficulties and there were no crawls!



Entry to Ken Cave on first day

We set off up a concrete trail towards the jungle, past water buffaloes in mud wallows and local motorbikes laden with long grass to feed livestock. The valley trail had been laid only a couple of years earlier by an American film company making a King Kong movie. The locals really appreciated it! The mountain scenery was remarkable: blue, pointy hills unlike anything I'd ever seen. Once we crossed the river, we reached the dense jungle. We slithered up and down the slimy route, winding our way over or around muddy rocks, trees and undergrowth, up and down three hills, for several kilometres. I think they were called Baby Hill, Mamma Hill and Papa Hill. It had rained the night before, so you couldn't risk taking your eyes off the slippery ground. The jungle was impenetrable; even this path, used frequently by Oxalis, wasn't obvious. We sweated our way along, often hauling ourselves up on thorny branches. Now I appreciated the gloves! The jungle trek was an insight into how the USA never had a hope in hell of defeating the VietCong! It also explained why it takes so long to discover and explore caves in this remote and hostile terrain.

Ken cave entrance (@Jo White)

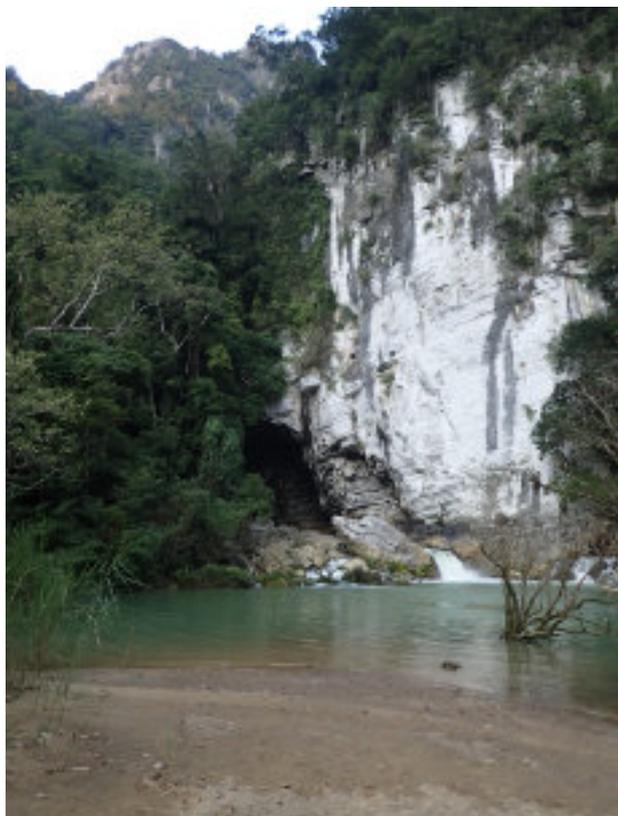


Halfway to our destination, we paused at the yawning entrance to Hung Ton cave. There, laid out on a tablecloth on the floor, guarded by a porter, was a delicious lunch. Yum! We pressed on to our campsite, a glorious location beside a waterfall rumbling out of Ken cave. Our tents, dining area and toilets were neatly laid out under rain shelters. We donned helmets and lights and immediately went into Ken Cave, traversing around the resurgence. The formations in this cave were photographed and published in National Geographic about four years earlier, a photoshoot which won an international award. The cave was easy, there was even a raft, so we didn't really need to swim. Bats flew by to investigate, their wings whirring by our faces, but never touching. Clever creatures! The river was impressive, especially the flood marks! There are no caving trips in October, the rainy month. The dry sections had amazing formations. I took no photos! My iPhone was tucked into the guide's waterproof box.



Ken cave (with bat trails and water line) (@Jo White)

When we emerged, there was a very inviting splash pool below the resurgence which was delightful to swim in. Then a fantastic multicourse Vietnamese dinner and some Vietnamese rice 'wine' (a strong spirit resembling Slivovic). Surprisingly, there were no mosquitoes. The rest of the convivial gang settled into a raucous series of word games, whereas I retired to my tent with a book and a dram or two of single malt Scotch. Aaahhhh...



Ken cave entrance and pool (©Jo White)

Up early the next day for another delicious meal, then life jackets on for Tu Lan cave, a very short distance across the river. To my considerable pleasure, our guide explained that the three river caves and dry passages we were exploring would take us underneath and through two of the three hills we'd sweated over the previous day, back towards the main valley. How convenient is that? The day was an absolute delight! Although the total swimming distance adds up to about a kilometre (in a couple of caves there was a raft), the river sections were never longer than about 200m each. Even though I'd adjusted the crotch strap on my lifejacket, it always rose up to push my helmet over my eyes, so I paddled along upstream in the general direction of the passageway, periodically pausing to shove my helmet up to see where I was going, thinking I'd be better off without the jacket. The swimming guide travelled last to make sure his flock all landed. We clambered out of the water into rifts we scrambled up, or onto easy shores. Again, lots of lovely calcite formations. Some passages were huge, others had sporty, short scrambles. No

crawls, but my slightly damaged knee was deployed to help chimney up some of the climbs.



Tu Lan cave dry section (©Jo White)

Hung Ton cave had an easy, steep 30ft fixed ladder to the upper levels: great trouble was taken to lifeline us all up. The harness was too tight for my waist (Hmmm), so a trusty bowline came in handy. Very appropriate precautions for a tourist trip far from civilisation, as an accident would have been problematic, and a helicopter would not have been much use in the dense jungle.

Our caving guide was very well trained and had a good basic knowledge of the international science of cave development and calcite formation. Since I was the only experienced caving guest on the trip, I was amused to be asked by all to provide even more information about caves and their geomorphology.



Lan Cave Streamway and entrance (©Jo White)

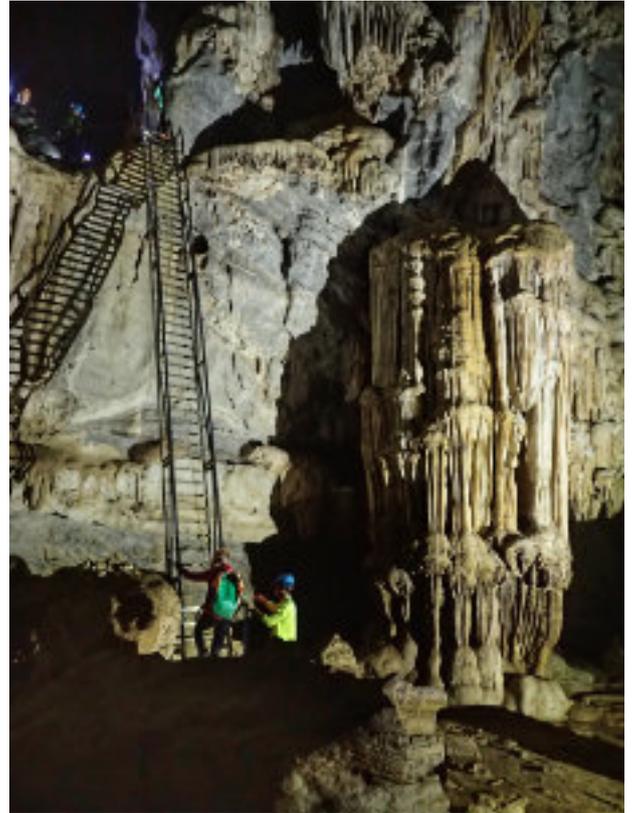
Tu Lan cave dry entrance (©Jo White)



Everyone wanted to hear about the history of karst landscapes, gour pools, cave pearls, stalactites, stalagmites and helictites. I was also happy to speculate on the origins and probable spread of COVID-19 as a sidebar! Good fun!

When we emerged from Tu Lan, Kim and Hung Ton caves, into the To Mo valley, more food awaited us at another camp site. Yum, yet again! And another

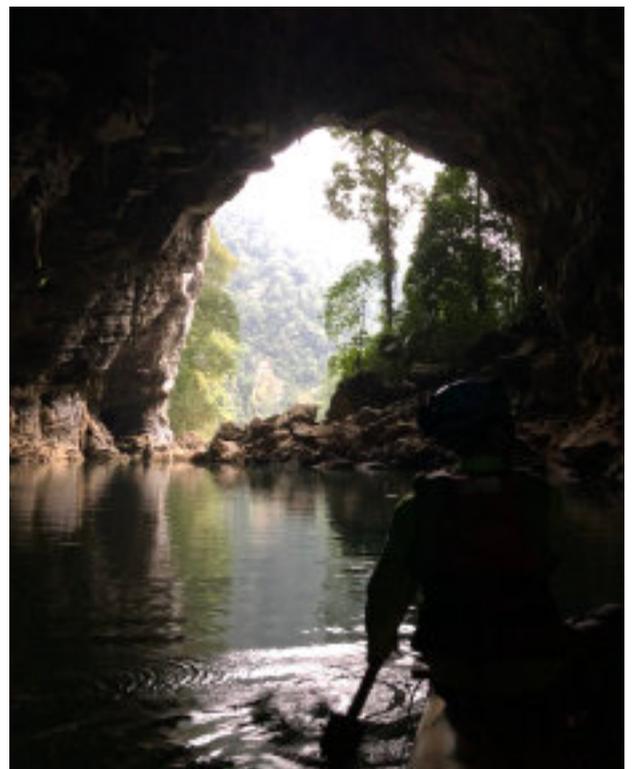
Ton cave ladder (©Jo White)



swim in the sunshine. The porters had carried our dry clothes to this site, but I'd stupidly packed my dry pants into the bags they'd taken out. I squelched back along the last section of jungle and the King Kong trail to a hot shower, a very welcome meal and a cold beer at the Oxalis HQ. A great trip. My only regret is that, since I enjoyed myself so much, I should have signed up for a three or four-day trip, but I didn't know that at the time!



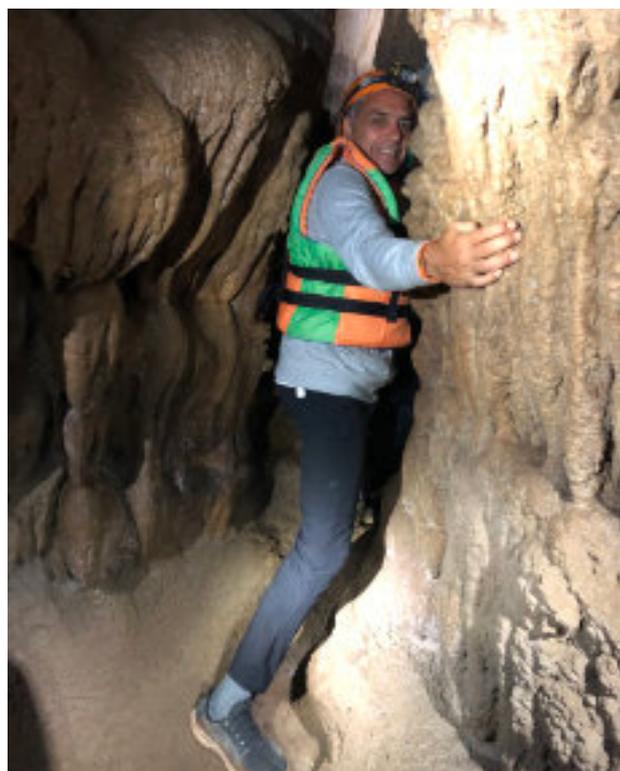
Ton cave streamway (©Jo White)



Resurgence in Tu Lan Cave System



When I returned that evening to my hotel, I was relieved to discover that Brenda had enjoyed her time on her own, other than worrying I might never return. She'd ventured into the stunning Phong Nha show cave but declared that all these holes in the ground looked the same to her and she couldn't understand why some people are fascinated with caves! Then she'd learned that Phong Nha is a cultural outlier in the People's Republic of Vietnam,



Rotam Katz, from Israel, emerging from a tight rift



amidst atheism (the Communist Party's official stance) or Buddhism (practiced by many); this community is devoutly Roman Catholic, converted by Iberian missionaries, followed by French Jesuits, in the 16th and 17th centuries. Whatever we now think about missionaries, you have to hand it to those boys for 'gutsiness'. So off went Brenda, by taxi or on foot, to explore exotic churches, decorated with Christian iconography and extraordinary oriental ornamentation, to wander back lanes festooned with papal flags and to interview anyone she met who spoke English about the extraordinary history of art and religion in the region. She was in her element. Each to her own!

Finally, it's worth knowing that the Phong Nha show cave is brilliant. Your ticket buys a great boat trip, up the river for 20 minutes, right into the into the massive river cave, where the boat engine is switched off and you are poled silently along, ghosting by returning boats and curious bats, followed by a self-guided walk through a very impressive dry cave with huge formations. If you want a good cardiovascular workout, buy a ticket to the upper-level dry cave and plod up 300 steps, out of doors. Along the way, buy some cold drinks, ice cream or a coconut, with its top chopped off, from the smiling ladies who await the panting, sweaty tourists, then your efforts will be rewarded by an impressive cave with even more remarkable formations.

There are several more excellent show caves worth visiting, such as Paradise cave, as well as interesting war history and cultural activities, so it is a very suitable holiday for families and friends who are a mix of cavers and non-cavers. I discovered, much later, that SWCC cavers Jo White and Andy McLeod were there at the same time, doing some work for Oxalis and planning to stay much longer, but COVID-19 intervened. They know the area much better than I do. I was there only five days, but I was very happy to have experienced this unique karst region. Highly recommended!



Ken cave (©Jo White)







Unexpeditions

Introduction by Dominic Hyland

The idea, like all truly great ideas, had belonged really to Winnie the Pooh, when on a gloomy Friday evening in October, summer long since passed. Barbara and I decided that what we really needed was a holiday, somewhere warm, somewhere cheap, with some decent friends and definitely somewhere French.

We'd been going on Club expeditions for several years but, I am reliably informed, the bit we enjoyed the *most* wasn't the bit where Mr H was below ground for 12 hours and Mrs H was stuck in a tent with a three-year-old in the pouring rain; no, it 'seemed' that the bit we enjoyed the best was the bit where wine, sunshine, laughter and kids all sort of came together.

The thought was remarkably simple. Why don't we have our own adventure, like a caving Club expedition, but perhaps more of a holiday with some caving? We need four things; a decent swimming pool, somewhere that was actually comfortable to stay, a high wire rope course and some local places to visit. The thought was that Club expeditions were all a bit 'daring-do'. The only requirement for coming on an '*Unexpedition*' was a corkscrew, which was optional and some swimming trunks, which weren't.

I decided to call it the Unexpedition because it's what Winnie would have called it and it definitely wasn't going to be the sort of thing where people got in helicopters and stretchers or anything like that. And, really, that was it, I mean obviously we had no idea how to organise such a thing but luckily Denise and Tony helped out tremendously and we certainly didn't have any idea how we might manage with emergencies and rescues and the like but that didn't happen for years and years.

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Looking back, though what strikes me most was the ability of people to self-organise. We thought that perhaps Gary and Susie and maybe a Mabbett or three might turn up but loads of you did. Year after year and not just families either or even people that perhaps were especially fond of kids, but everyone. Even those of us who have a reputation for perhaps being a little grumpy were found to be laughing with everyone else when canoes got involved. Members came from Yorkshire and Norfolk, Wales and the home counties to strange little campsites in odd bits of France. We woke up in the mornings and drifted off to caves and grottoes big and small or went to museums, show caves or snail farms. We ate out as a large gang in restaurants, we looked at meteorite showers, we scared ourselves on via ferratas and no one really fell out or fell off anything for simply ages. We swam in rivers or canoed down them, and all our kids roamed the campsites and ate at different tents and made new friends.

It was all rather splendid and now that my knees ache and all those kids are soon to start having kids themselves, I rather miss the simplicity of it all. But you know what? If there was a couple reading this who thought to themselves, I wonder if anyone would turn up if we organised an Unexpedition, I *can* tell you something. You might just be rather surprised by how simple it was and how much fun it would all turn out to be.

Dominic and Barbara Hyland, Denise and Tony Knibbs and others ran three Unexpeditions in alternate years from the official clubs Expos and loved every single one of them, and hardly anyone got rescued or fell off anything at all. Except when they did....

The Lot 2010

Introduction by Denise Knibbs

Rocamadour, The Lot

This Unexpedition was set in the Lot near a town called Gramat at the campsite Le Teulière. This was an area that Tony and I knew quite well as it was only about an hour and a half from home. The Lot is in the region of Occitanie and named after the Lot and Garonne rivers. The area of course is composed of limestone hills and has some beautiful towns and villages such as Rocamadour set into the limestone cliffs. Tony and I had been caving in the area with our French club several times. There was a really good turnout of SWCC members and children with over thirty present and over forty when the French chums joined us.

There was something for everyone including, canoeing on the Dordogne, caving, climbing on a

rope course ('Accrobranche' in French) at Figeac, sightseeing and watching people try out SRT on the tree followed by evenings of group meals and lots of chat – and a few drinks. This usually happened outside Iain and Lel's tent and appears to have started a tradition for future Club trips. They can't get rid of us!

Many classic caves were visited such as Igue de Sol, Revéillon and the aquatic Saut de la Pucelle. The French friends were able to lead the more adventurous to Gouffre des Jonquilles, Mirandol and Foissac. There was also a girl's trip to the Igue de Sénaillac which Andrea describes in her piece, 'An SRT Virgin'.

The Lot group







Feeding time at the Lot campsite! ▲



▲ Beth Lewingdon on the rope course

▼ Thumbs up Dom!



A local showcave ▼

▼ Rocamadour





Lisa, Arwen and Emily looking excited preparing for Réveillon ▲



▲ Rhys Lewingdon and Emily Mabbett in the Réveillon entrance

▼ Family caving in Saut de la Pucelle



Iain Miller 'lighting up' and thanking Jean-Marc ▼

▼ Pete Hobson taking a few risks...





▲ The 'ladies' left to right – Denise Knibbs, Andrea Lewingdon, Claire Flahaut-Apers, Sue Mabbett, Lisa Williams



▲ Preparing the kit

An SRT Virgin Experiments in The Lot...

Andrea Lewingdon

It was a lovely place to try out newly trained skills. Warm, sunny and surrounded with professionals all willing to help out and provide 'constructive' comment... I'm sure the snorts and giggles at my practice efforts in the tree were constructive. Made me more determined anyway!

I had actually already played in the trees at the Club – just straight up and down over and over again. Thought I'd 'got it' but I do have a terrible memory and had to relearn all over again just before the trip (reminds me of my cramming technique during exam days...).

The planned trip was a ladies trip to L'igue de Senaillac. A short cave but with an amazing open drop from a small entrance right into the centre of a large void – a bit like a pot. It was to be my first SRT trip in a real life cave.

I had my straight up and down technique in the tree down to perfection. I felt I could go anywhere. The only additional 'trick' I needed to learn was how to cross a rebelay – simples? Hmm... Now this definitely presented a challenge for me and it took me a long time and a lot of tutoring (thank you Jules, Sue and Lisa!) to finesse my technique. I got it in the end, managing the precise positioning of the equipment to ensure I wouldn't get myself stuck.

So, ready for anything, we set off 'girls aloud'. All the professionals (Lisa, Sue, Denise and Claire) and the amateur...me!

We got to the entrance and all was busy-ness around me. Not a lot I could do so I sat and watched the action, feeling only slightly guilty. Once rigged, Lisa led the way and waited just below the entrance whilst Sue helped me get trussed me up in my gear.

I was off over the edge – easy. Well, the first part was easy! It all went a bit pear shaped when I got to the rebelay! I'm sure I did exactly what I'd done in the tree – several times. Somehow though I got into that well known tangle with too much weight on the rope, stopping me from changing over ropes. Sue was very patiently guiding me from the top. I was hot, scared and worn out but after about 30 minutes, and I'm sure to the huge relief of the others (patience of saints...), I finally managed the crux move and got myself out of my self-made pickle.

After that I had a lovely straight drop into the cave – phew. The others quickly followed, and we had a fun potter around before prussiking back up – fortunately without event!

So, I know I am surrounded by SRT experts who may not even remember their first SRT trip. Try and take a moment to remember how it was for you!! For me it was a big deal and did represent a significant personal achievement. I look back on my photos of the trip with fond memories with a lovely bunch of supportive ladies.

▼ The easy bit

▼ Struggling with a rebelay





Gary Vaughan admiring the formations ▲



▲ Lisa Williams enjoying a paddle

Caving in The Lot

Denise Knibbs

There was caving for all ages and abilities. French friends from the Airbus Caving Club (SCA) joined us for several days and they organised some interesting trips in local caves which needed permission for access. One was by a railway line – Mirandol. The steam trains were still running so our cavers became a tourist attraction.

Another cave visited with the French cavers was associated with the show cave at Foissac. This was a

through trip and the exit was by a road where some of the rest of us enjoyed watching them all coming out covered in lovely sticky mud!

Another classic cave in the area, Saut De La Pucelle – a nice wet cave, was visited including a trip for the children. Réveillon with its large porch entrance was another good trip for the children and some of the older members.

Inside Mirandol... the streamway ▼



Jules Carter exiting Mirandol ▼

▼ Pete Hobson posing for the tourists



Bobbing along the Dordogne

James Meredith

SWCC can stand for many things, and on two occasions on this first Unexpedition, this came to mean South Wales Canoeing Club. The first trip was a more leisurely paddle down the Dordogne River (Saint Sozy to Souillac) with the majority of those in the Lot boarding a canoe or kayak. With little in the way of rapids, this made for a pleasant excursion with the stunning gorge rising above our little canoes and kayaks. Whilst some were able to get their caving fix in the cliffs, others preferred to sit back, relax and let her 'servants' paddle her down the river (yes, I am referring to my own mother). Nevertheless, this trip was thoroughly enjoyed by all and many of us left with the desire and hunger for more.

And that is what we did. Later in our two-week stay, a smaller number of our party ventured to the waters of the Dordogne for a second time. However,

this time we were after some more thrills and spills. This route took us from Argentat to Beaulieu and featured a few class 2 rapids. After spending the first trip in a canoe, I took on this challenge solo in a kayak and in doing so learnt a very important lesson: don't follow a Hobson in a canoe! If you do, you'll probably find a rock they just avoided and capsize and get rather wet. Despite this, the trip was also very funny with many other rapids challenging our very amateur water-based skills and many laughs to be had along the way.

In addition to the canoeing, splashing and crashing, there was another game that was played on these voyages: fitting small children into small places. In second place were the Lewingdons, trying to fit Rhys into the footwell of a two-man kayak. In first place was definitely Emily Mabbett in a daren drum (I think I remember someone being able to close the lid as well, but she was let out). I wonder whether she'd still be able to do this now?

▼ *Lady Meredith of Ferndown with her servant boys, James Meredith and Josh Vaughan*



Rhys attempting to hide in a Canoe ▼



▼ *When putting a small child (Emily Mabbett) in a daren drum was legal*





Entrance to Réveillon ▲

▲ Emily Mabbett looking cool in Réveillon

▼ 'Ooo look, a cave!'



And Finally....

Denise Knibbs

There is so much to do in this region – something for everyone. Plenty of choice for cavers but there are also some wonderful show caves and then the canoeing, via-ferrata and of course the sightseeing. There is a wealth of history and wonderful local dishes to sample and let's not forget the wine! This, the first of Dom's Unexpeditions. It proved to be a

great hit and a wonderful family holiday. Of course, before we all set off home it was decided to repeat the experience and the next destination was chosen – The Ardèche in 2012.

Photos sourced from SWCC members along with Jean-Marc Apers (Mirandol) and Michel Souverville (Réveillon)

Ardèche 2012

Introduction by Denise Knibbs

The summer of 2012 saw a large number of SWCC members arrive at the campsite Camping De Briange near St Remèze on the Ardèche plateau. The Ardèche is part of the Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes, characterised by the beautiful Ardèche gorge and river, mountains, limestone plateau with many standing stones and, of course, caves, several of which contain Paleolithic cave art.

Over the two-week period there were around forty-five of us including some Shepton members and Michel from our Airbus club. Everyone liked the campsite which had a large pool, plenty of activities for the children, friendly owners and the pitches were well spaced out. It was so popular that it has been chosen for the next Club trip in 2021.

There is abundant and varied caving in the Ardèche. Aven de Noël, described by Andy Dobson is among the classics of the region, renowned for its awesome abseil entrance, sizable galleries, chambers and varied formations. Grotte de St. Marcel is part showcave and with around 50km of surveyed passage, different types of trip were enjoyed, mostly in shorts and t-shirts! Other caving included the Grotte du Déroc, Event de Peyrejal, Aven des Pebres and several others.

Alongside the many and varied caving trips, the group enjoyed sightseeing, canoeing, a high wire rope course, via ferrata and the obligatory evening activities! The following articles describe a selection of activities enjoyed by the group.

▼ *Caving in Grotte de St. Marcel* ►





A Cultural Day Out in the Ardèche

Susie Conway

Whilst Josh went off to enjoy his first ever via-ferrata trip, I took Ben Vaughan and Rhys Lewingdon on a cultural excursion designed to keep everybody happy!

First stop was the Forteresse de Mornas, situated around 40k from Saint-Remèze where we were based. Perched high on the cliffs, this 11th Century fortress is an imposing sight as you approach from the main road. We were joined on this part of the trip by the Garmans and Arwen Hobson. Together we made the long steep climb from the medieval village of Mornas. It was well worth the hike for the spectacular views over the Rhone river and beyond. Everyone enjoyed exploring the ramparts and climbing the tower, and the kids also enjoyed taking turns in the stocks! The experience was brought to life by the animated tour, complete with weapons and armour, which despite the language barrier was both educational and fun for adults and kids alike.

▼ *Théâtre Antique d'Orange*

We then left the others and headed a further 10k south to take Paul Tarrant's recommendation of visiting the Théâtre Antique d'Orange – a UNESCO World Heritage Site situated right in the heart of the town. After a quick pit stop in a local café to refuel, we entered through the gate of this magnificent Roman theatre. We chose to have the audio guide, which was very informative and enabled us to go at our own pace, spending around 2 hours inside. Constructed in the 1st century AD, it is one of the best-preserved theatres of Roman times, with its entire stage wall intact. In the Middle Ages it was abandoned and began to deteriorate. Reconstruction began in 1825 and by 1869 shows began once more. Today it hosts concerts and theatrical performances including the summer opera festival Chorges d'Orange.

I can safely say that young and old thoroughly enjoyed both visits, so if you are ever in this part of France, I would suggest you take the opportunity to see both.



Rhys Lewingdon and Ben Vaughan at the amphitheatre ▼

▼ *The town of Orange*





Ardèche ladies ▲



▲ Ardèche kids

▼ Ardèche kids at the campsite



The Social Side...

Susie Conway

It will come as no surprise to SWCC members to know that the social aspect of Club trips is a key part of what makes them so successful. I have enjoyed all the expeditions/Unexpeditions that I have been on, but the one that sticks in my mind the most for the camaraderie is the Ardèche in 2012. We were only there for one of the 2 weeks, but from the barbeque held on our first night (where I finally met the lovely Christine Williams), to the highly

enjoyable group canoeing and high-wire ropes course days, and finally the group meal towards the end of the trip, I can safely say a great time was had by all. I enjoyed catching up with friends I hadn't seen in a while (Tony and Denise Knibbs, Lel Davies etc ...) and making a few new friends. Ben had lots of friends his own age and really hit it off with Albert (cousin to the Robjohns). Josh enjoyed being with the teenagers and being led on his first via ferrata trip by the lovely Steve Tomalin. I have included a selection of photos which show just what a good time was had by all.



Steve Tomalin and Josh Vaughan on the basalt pillar ▲



▲ James Meredith crossing the rope bridge

▼ Top of the via ferrata with Steve Tomalin, Andrea Lewingdon, Sue Mabbett and Josh Vaughan (left to right)



A Short But Airy Via Ferrata in the Ardèche - Pont du Diable

Andrea Lewingdon

Whilst on the Ardèche Unexpedition and taking some time out from caving, Steve Tomalin (bless his soul) led a short and exciting via ferrata. For those not familiar with the sport, via ferrata (or the German equivalent, klettersteig) are protected climbing routes, normally characterised by iron rungs, ladders and wire ropes and requiring via ferrata harness and cows tails.

Also on the trip were Sue Mabbett, Josh Vaughan, James Meredith and Beth Lewingdon. The weather was perfect and the rock nice and dry.

The Via Ferrata du Pont du Diable is situated just upstream from the historic stone bridge at Thueyts

in the Ardèche Gorge. After a short walk in through the woods by the river, our route started with an amazing rope bridge. Not a particular challenge but airy and great fun.

The next part of the route is the first steep ascent on iron rungs, typical of many other via ferrata in France. As you can see from the photos, there was an excellent view from the pillar back down to the river and the rope bridge. After a brief rest stop, Steve led the way up the most challenging section of the basalt pillar. Due to my very weak arm muscles and a few overhanging rungs, this climb was definitely quite tough for me! But so worth it.

And finally, the must-have shot from the top of the climb. A lovely excursion to be recommended if you're ever down that way!

Canoeing Down the Ardèche

James Meredith

Follow the success of the canoe trips in the Lot, it was a matter of 'when' we would go in the Ardèche. Again, with the majority of the motley crew, we bundled into cars and then minibuses to arrive at our start point upstream of the famous Pont d'Arc.

I recall this canoe trip being the sunniest of those I have been on and the route having something for everyone. There were sections that were calm and serene, beaches to moor up on and have a spot of lunch, and a few sections of faster flowing water for those who enjoyed the sportiness of faster flowing water. Another distinctive feature of this route down to the Pont d'Arc were several weirs which had concrete slides to allow canoes to safely traverse down the river. Some managed to gracefully come down and glide off the end, whilst others came down with a mighty 'whoosh!' and

flew off the end with a splash to match. It's safe to say these were exhilarating and a lot of fun (I enjoyed them anyway). We also had the pleasure of French children and teenagers splashing us as we approached the slides to cool us down, and whether you liked it or not, you were going to get splashed!

These adventures are now a mainstay of Club activities for Unexpeditions and definitely one of the best non-caving activities to do on the rivers of France. I have had many laughs in the canoes, and it can be funny to see two people try and go in a straight line. Trust me, it's harder than you think. For those going this year, get your arms in training and mentally prepare yourself for the thrills, spills and sights you will see (by that I mean members wearing budgie smugglers).

Note: The image of gentlemen in budgie smugglers has been censored for the sanity of the reader.

▼ *Andrea Lewingdon and Sue Mabbett coming down on of several weirs with a whoosh!*



The intrepid covers ready for a canoeing adventure ▼

▼ "Ah, unsuspecting British victims to splash"



Aven de Noël

Andy Dobson

Group - Michel Souverville (leader), Jules Carter, Ali Garman, Pete Hobson, Brian Clipstone, Dave and Andy Dobson

The first welcome feature of Noël was that we parked almost next to the entrance – no long hot sweaty walk in, just kit up and ready to descend. The manhole cover lid immediately opened onto the entrance pitch, although this is in a constricted rift the tightest parts were enlarged by the original explorers to give the larger members of their group access. Part way down the 30m pitch, an intermediate level goes off which features bear

claw marks on some of the rocks, the passage eventually chokes but presumably once connected to the surface as I doubt the bears did SRT...

The bottom of the entrance rift pitch opens out to an aerial traverse and the 90m main pitch in a very spacious chamber, giving a marked contrast to the 30m pitch. We had a short delay here. Jules and Ali were rigging but found the 100m rope was still hanked, resulting in a, very careful, and awkward unravelling without dropping the rope. Duly rigged, this was an excellent SRT pitch with a real sense of space and a panoramic view.

Safely landed, we set off to explore a caving wonderland. Paths had been sensitively taped with

▼ *Balcony / Pitch, Galerie Supérieure*



▼ *Calcified Bat Skeleton, Galerie Supérieure*



▼ *Gour Pools, Galerie Supérieure*



fishing line preserving the beauty of the cave while still giving access. The galleries contained a superb variety of formations – white and coloured flow and curtains, gypsum flowers and needles, masses of helictites, knobbly mushroom coral types and plentiful stals and columns. Colours ranged from pure white through pastel shades to reddish brown. A side gallery contained a series of large, impressive gours. Off another branch, a crawl led to a fantastically decorated grotto, with each of us taking our turn as only one person could access it at a time. This section was so stunning that Pete even stopped talking about New Zealand for 10 minutes.

At the far end of the main route, we reached a climb to a balcony giving views of more wonderful

curtains and flow. A climb and crawl led to a calcited bat skeleton.

Returning towards the pitch we all admired, again, the forests of stal as we passed. On our way-out, Brian, Dave and I diverted to the intermediate level, a very different caving experience but fascinating all the same (and it breaks up the prusik).

A sunny evening greeted us on the surface with, again, only a few moments stroll to reach the car.

This is an awesome cave and I strongly recommend a visit to anyone competent at SRT and lucky enough to gain access.

▼ *Formations, Galerie Blanche*



And finally...

Denise Knibbs

Many more caves were visited including the very impressive Grotte de St Marcel. Other activities included cycling, visiting the numerous show caves and historical sites in the area, a lavender farm, snail farm and of course there were the restaurants

and wine tasting. Most evenings finished outside Lel and Iain's tent with the usual bonhomie, accompanied by beer and wine.

This Unexpedition was thought by those who took part to be probably the most enjoyable, whereas the next Unexpedition, in 2014, was to prove the most eventful.

Lozère 2014



Introduction by Denise Knibbs

The end of July 2014 saw the usual group of keen SWCC members and a couple of our French caving friends, arrive at the campsite Le Pont du Tarn in Florac. Another good turnout for an Unexpedition with almost forty in the group. Most of the first eager cavers to arrive immediately set about preparing a visit to Aven de Hures for some SRT practise the next morning.

Little did we know what was to happen next... we were quietly getting on with our morning, getting to know our way around the campsite and the town. Then late morning, we receive a mobile phone message of an accident in Aven de Hures. The communications were not very good and so we kept losing the signal. The first reports indicated that Jules (Carter) had fallen 40ft. French cave rescue had already been alerted by a member of the caving group.

Our friend, Jean-Marc Apers, a member of our local cave rescue, immediately got in touch with the local cavers that he knew. We also contacted another member of our club, Bernard Tourte, who is the head of the FFS (Fédération Française de Spéléologie) cave rescue. Bernard was caving in Spain at the time. I explained to him that we had several qualified medical personnel amongst our group and he immediately had them on standby. We stayed at the campsite to handle any calls and pass messages on when we could. Jean-Marc went to join the French rescue team at the cave.

Gradually, bit by bit, more information was getting through to us and 40ft had become 40m! Everyone went quiet. Lisa Williams went to help the rescue team and I am sure that her excellent French and professionalism, helped make the next phase of the rescue run smoothly. Back at the campsite everyone waited nervously for more news.

There was a huge sigh of relief when the message came through that Jules had survived but was badly injured. Several hours passed before we finally got the message that the helicopter had taken him to Montpellier hospital.

On the Wednesday evening, we had a BBQ to thank the French firemen and cavers and everyone was starting to feel a little better.

Jules' accident has been documented in detail elsewhere, so this publication does not include his personal detailed story. Included next however, is Pete Hobson's recollection of Jules' fall as a fellow member of the group caving that day and a close friend of Jules. The story is that of his perspective on the incident and rescue. Pete doesn't stop there of course... but more to come on that!

The final part of this article is devoted to Jules' follow-up, a poignant story of recovery, 'Returning to the Darkness'.

Before that and back to the Unexpedition itself. Of course, it wasn't all bad. Even though the trip was also blighted by a lot of rain, the group rallied and took some lovely excursions around the local area. You will see from the photos spread throughout the article, that the typical Unexpedition activities were enjoyed, including hiking, visiting showcaves, clambering around a highly entertaining rope course, plus an exciting day out on the river, canoeing with a rather invigorating finish in a heavy rainstorm. Well, everyone was wet anyway so it didn't really matter!

So, an Unexpedition to remember....

Enjoying good times on Le Tarn ►





Dom and Benedict Hyland at Parc National des Cévennes

A Visit to the Cave of the Malevolent Valley (if that's what its name means)

Pete Hobson

This was our family's third Unexpedition. What is an Unexpedition I hear you ask. An Unexpedition is the name given to a two week-long Club trip run by South Wales Caving Club, that has no formal objectives and is suitable for families to attend. They are usually run through the last week of July and the first week of August, they take place somewhere where hot sunshine should be guaranteed, based at a camp site with good facilities (restaurant, swimming pool, camping sites and cabins), with fun outdoor activities to suit everyone (fishing, white water canoeing, via ferrata etc), good caving, cheap beer and preferably within 1000 miles of the club's headquarters. These trips run on alternate years to more formal expeditions that allow members to visit deep caves, such as, Pierre Saint-Martin or the Gouffre Berger.

2014 saw the Club heading to the Lozère, a department in the region of Occitanie in Southern France, located near the Massif Central. I always think it's good to jump in as soon as you arrive,

rather than procrastinating, so soon we had a plan. A small group of us would rig Aven de Hures, a 345mm deep cave with multiple pitches, with others to follow later.

The result of that trip was rather unexpected, with one of the team peeling off the top of the second pitch and falling 40m. Having rigged a traverse line across to the main anchors, he was attaching his Stop to the rope when he slipped, and as he did so, his cow's-tail flipped into the death position and detached from a resin anchor. I was standing shoulder to shoulder with him at the time and watched in horror as he plummeted into the depths below. After the sickening sounds of the fall were replaced by a deathly groaning and then silence, I was left with the unenviable decision about what to do next. Shortly afterwards, the third member of the party arrived in the chamber at the top of the pitch and it was quickly decided that I would be the one to descend and give assistance but in the knowledge that I was most probably going to find a dead friend. At this point, I also borrowed a couple of crabs because all of our rigging gear had been lost in the fall. Annoyingly, when I tried to get on the rope, I found it loaded because the patient must

have been laying on it. This required me to completely re-rig the pitch head to obtain some slack and soon I was descending. At the bottom I was amazed. Jules was alive! He had luckily bounced clear of where one would naturally unclip from the rope, thereby avoiding a series of large gour pools. If had he landed in one, he would definitely have died. Having been knocked unconscious, he had regained consciousness with his legs hanging down the third pitch and then had somehow dragged himself to safety before passing out again. He had fractured his left femur, smashed up his left midfoot, broken the right kneecap into three pieces and had substantial rope burns to both hands, yet somehow, he was alive, if a bit confused.



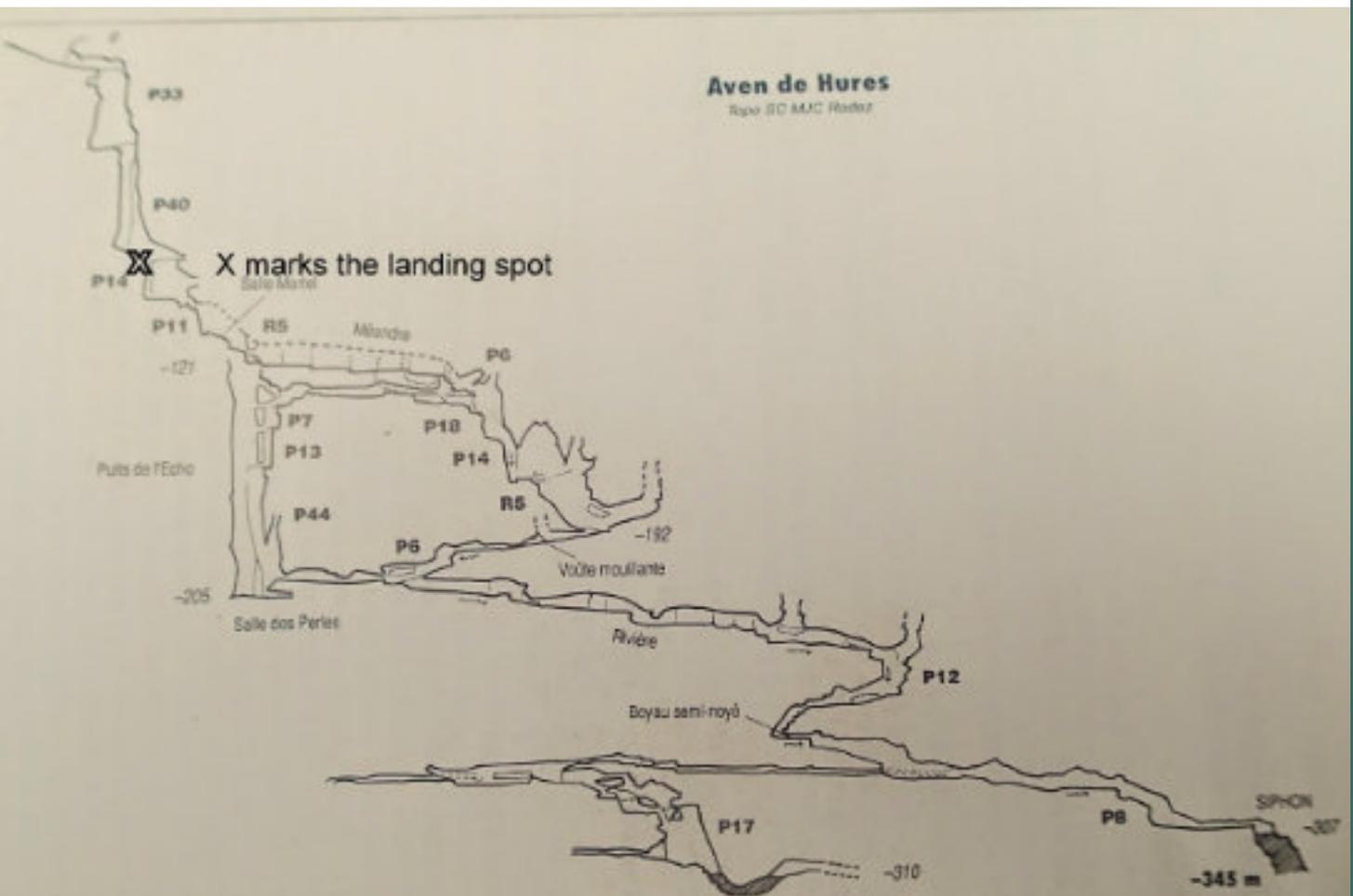
Jules hanging on the pitch in Aven de Hures

Soon I was joined by the third member of our party and we briefed him about our diagnosis. He then headed to the surface to raise the alarm. Luckily, the entrance was only five minutes' walk from the car which was parked in the village of Hures. Jules and I now settled down for what we expected to be

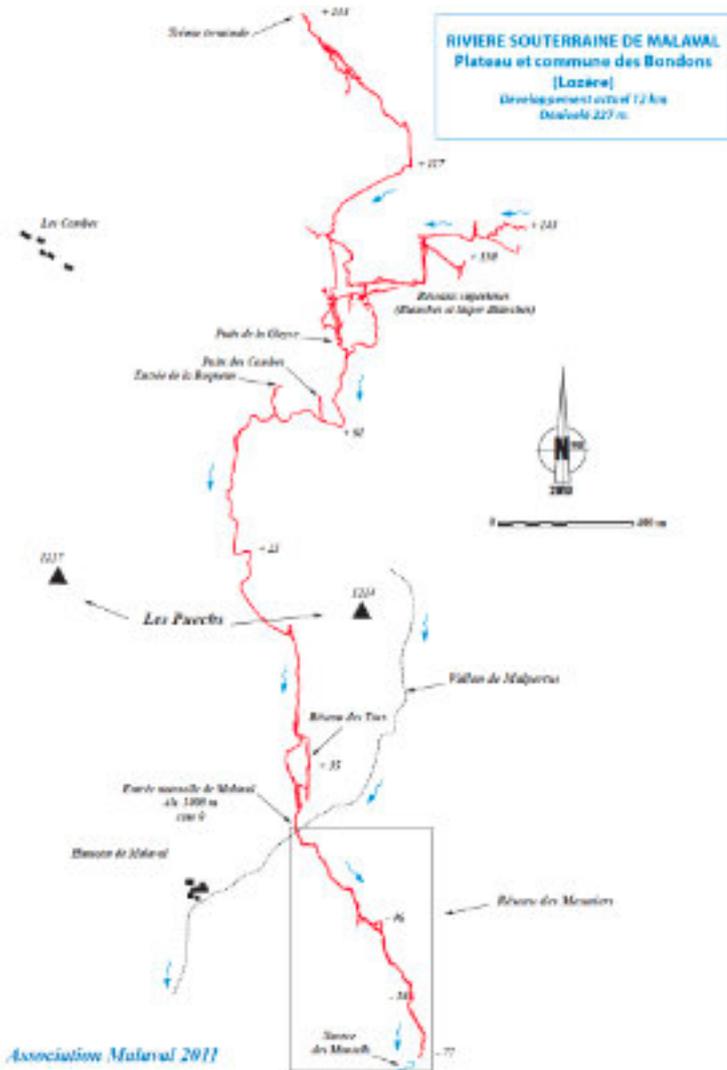
a long wait. Yet just forty minutes later, we heard a French caver descending towards our position. The new arrival was a local caver and was carrying Entonox and spoke English. He took over my job of keeping the fractured femur in traction and I moved to Jules' side to keep him warm, then began the wait for the rest of the rescue team. Eventually, we were surrounded by rescuers (including my wife, Lisa, a consultant in orthopaedics and trauma and a fluent speaker of French). A cord was strung across the rift so that a tent-like structure could be built, and then formal assessment of injuries were made, and Jules prepped for hauling.

From here on everything was very simple. The rescuers rigged a single haul line from the surface, with a few deviations, and soon our patient was at the surface, in a helicopter and waiting for the French rescue doctor to be hauled up the same way. It is worth noting that this is the cave that the local rescuers use for training. It's also worth noting that when training and when on rescues, they're all officially paid as firemen. It was also odd having the whole operation overseen by Gendarmes in a very official militaristic manner. Once the doctor was in the chopper, they were off to Montpellier, three hours' drive away! This was the first rescue in this French Department for ten years. We felt like a complete group of muppets.

The few days after Jules' fall were naturally a bit subdued, with the exception of the barbeque we hosted for Jules' rescue team. People were subsequently more cautious on their trips following the incident and the weather was pretty wet. However, people still went caving and canoeing and generally found ways of having fun. Several trips



RIVIERE SOUTERRAINE DE MALAVAL
Plateau et commune des Baudons
[Lozère]
Développement actuel de 7,2 km
Dénivelé 227 m.



Location map for Grotte de Malaval

were made to visit Jules in hospital before he was flown back to the UK. Of course, that wasn't the end of the story for this particular 'jinxed' Unexpedition. Read on...

With the end of the first week approaching, it was time to put my Club Chairman's cap on and try to get people interested in another caving trip. It was an ever-optimistic French caver, Jean-Marc, who joins us on these trips, who had the idea of visiting Grotte de Malaval. This is a cave with interesting formations that he had visited and would make a good, fun little through-trip. He got the group really motivated with his enthusiasm, so it was decided to do the cave on the Friday. If you see pictures of green helictites there's a good chance that they're in this cave but sadly we would not have access to that part of the cave.

There were 16 of us and Jean-Marc was the only one who had been there before and said it had been rigged the last time he had been there. Jean-Marc is the eternal optimist and he kept saying that it would take about 4 or 5 hours.

We drove off in convoy, up narrow lanes and parked the vehicles, got changed and set off along the valley. Of course, the cave was not rigged, but luckily, we had planned for this predicted eventuality!

Arriving at the entrance we all kitted up in our SRT gear because we knew there would be some abseiling and traverses. At this point I decided, rather stupidly (I think, due to the nature of the passage), to rig a traverse line right from the entrance. I think it was unnecessary and probably put most of the team in the wrong frame of mind for a fun speedy trip and as a result, we moved very slowly from the start. There was also the problem that our local French caver was the only one who had been in the cave before and it had been rigged when he did it. Consequently, his idea of the time the trip would take was an underestimate by some margin, especially with such a large party. Because we were moving so slowly for what I considered an easy cave, I'd soon had a 'gut full'. At this point, I decided to hang back and take some photos on a ledge 20m above the streamway, knowing that it should only take me about five minutes to catch up if I hung around where I was for half an hour or so.



The entrance to Grotte de Malaval

I pulled out a drum full of photographic kit, set up my camera on a tripod, stuffed some strobes into my oversuit and headed across the ledge to place my first flash. As I started climbing beyond the ledge, I heard a pop and for some unknown reason found myself falling. Luckily as I fell past the ledge, I managed to wrap an arm around a big stalagmite and stopped with my left foot touching my back and my right leg hanging with nothing between it and the floor twenty metres below. Relieved that I wasn't doing a Jules imitation in the stream, I now had to haul myself back onto safe ground. My left knee hurt but this was understandable with all of my weight on it, but I found it a bit odd that I couldn't use it to help me retreat. After a bit of thrutching with my other foot, I managed to reverse, and once safe, managed to straighten my left leg slightly. It wasn't pleasant. For some reason that I didn't understand at the time, I couldn't straighten my leg. I concluded that I had dislocated my knee in the fall and that the best thing I could do was try and get it back into its correct position. With a bit of nauseating manoeuvring, I managed to stand upon my good leg and thought '(expletive) it, there's going to be lots of pain involved, I might as well straighten it now'. With that, I swung my leg and with an almighty crunch it went back to where it should be. 'Great' I thought, 'I'll be able to get myself out', and with that sorted, I decided to head

back to my daren drum. As soon as I loaded the leg, it buckled underneath me and left me crumpled in a heap of nausea and pain.

Moving through the cave 'in force'



About this time, a doctor friend hearing all sorts of foul language and probably some extreme whimpering, asked if I needed assistance. When I replied yes, she knew I had a major issue and I'm pretty sure that an expletive was heard emanating from her direction. Soon I was surrounded by a selection of concerned/pissed-off cavers, including one GP, one colo-rectal surgeon and my trusty spouse-come-orthopaedic consultant. Having collapsed on the leg a third time, a diagnosis was made: ruptured patella tendon or to use the official orthopaedic terminology: 'my knee was F***ed.'

After a bit of discussion, we decided that we'd give self-rescue a go. My leg was splinted with a closed-cell-foam mat and I attempted to continue. The first few steps went well but as soon as I tried to traverse beyond the ledge, the splint and my knee hyperflexed for a fourth time. Luckily, I was clipped into a traverse line this time.

I wasn't going anywhere! Because we had already abseiled to get to where we were, it was assumed that there was no way to retreat 500m back to the entrance and so I was left in the care of a doctor and the previous Club chairman with the rest of the party continuing with some going faster to raise the alarm. We were left sitting on our ledge, Paul and Mandy in PVC and furry suits and me in a single thin layer of Marino wool and a cotton boilersuit. I think some sort of tarp was set up above us to reduce air movement and trap heat as was done by the French rescue team on Jules' rescue and soon we were left to the sound of the stream below.

How long were we going to wait? I estimated we had only traversed 500m of the 1500m trip. It had taken two or three hours to get that far and with the speed the party had been travelling, I guessed we were in for a long wait, especially considering the party then would have to find their way back to the cars. Then there would also be a delay while the rescue team were organized and able to make their way to our location.

At first, we were all warm and cheerful. We chatted and sang songs, but as the hours progressed, there was little more to say and eventually, Mandy and Paul started to feel the cold. At this point, I was very pleased with my clothing choice that day. I had managed to avoid all water and any perspiration I had evaporated rather than soaking my insulation layer. It was laughable that the patient ended up keeping the support crew warm.

Eventually, after about eight hours or just after midnight from memory, French voices could be



Pete in foam splint

heard and soon I was being poked, prodded and asked questions in a language I don't understand. "Douleur un à dix?" "Pardon?" "Douleur un à dix?" "Excusez-moi, je ne comprends pas. Je ne parle Français" "Douleur un à dix?" "Aaaaaah! Je comprends, toi." "Non!" "Oui! Toi!" And with that I was given some analgesia and *Soupe de Tchernobyl* was scolding our mouths.

Although the French rescue team came prepared for anything, they had been advised by Lisa that I'd be able to exit under my own steam if I was given a suitable leg splint. I think it was with some relief when they saw me that this was the case. Soon the cave was being rigged and Paul and Mandy headed out. I followed not far behind. The vacuum splint was amazing. We fitted it to my leg and pumped out the air and with that, I could walk. I grabbed the pump and stuffed it inside my boiler suit and off we went. Many hours earlier I had noticed a line of P-hangers high up one wall above the stream and now I discovered why they were there: just downstream of where we had been waiting, a traverse line was rigged so that one could safely negotiate a series of flowstone nodules, 20m above the stream, while making one's way to a Tyrolean Traverse. From here we followed an easier route to the entrance than that which we had followed earlier. Periodically I pumped the splint, and my knee became nauseatingly unstable. Annoyingly, my rescue team refused to let me abseil the few short drops that hindered progress but sometime around 3:00am I was back at the entrance. Here, I was met by an eager looking surface team waiting to carry me down the hill, but I wasn't going to be carried anywhere. Soon, I was off with the French lads trying to slow me down and stop me slipping or falling on the track. At about 4:00am I was back at the road and soon I was tucking into pizza and coke before being ambulated to Mende for an unnecessary examination.

Here, I was peeled out of my kit and given a sponge bath by a couple of ladies who were horrified at the grotty apparition that greeted them. Imagine if

they'd had Jules as a patient. Luckily for me, the orthopaedic registrar on site that night spoke reasonable *Frenghish* and better still, Lisa soon arrived with our friendly colo-rectal surgeon mate. This must have been quite an experience for the regulars, having two foreign consultant surgeons in there explaining the diagnosis, prognosis and dragging me out. With that, I was left to sit on my arse for a week watching my leg swell to gargantuan size and to design an Unexpedition T-shirt.

Lessons? This incident wasn't caused by carelessness, or the cave or by equipment failure but simply by failure of the body. I'll never know why my patella tendon ruptured. My surgeon said that a full mid substance tear was unheard of in the literature, it was a unique injury and couldn't have been predicted or prevented. However, what it taught me, was that we should be prepared for the body to fail. If this had occurred further into the cave, I would have sustained a major fall and probably not survived. This sort of thing could happen to anyone at any time, and so unless we put safety lines on every little traverse or climb, eventually someone will fall, through no fault of their own or anyone else. So, unless everything is rigged (and why would we want that?), we must be prepared to deal with the consequences.

Post-note by Denise Knibbs: The rest of the team split up into smaller groups eventually surfacing as it was beginning to get dark. We headed off down the hill and as we got nearer the village, we came across the Pompier's van (firemen) – said hello to the friends we had met earlier in the week and made our way to the village hall. Here we were met by the mayor and the Gendarmes who took our names and other details and gave us something to drink and some nibbles. At first, they wouldn't let us go back to our cars in case they needed to bring more vehicles up the narrow road. Most of us had left our mobile phones in the cars so we couldn't get messages to those at the campsite either.

▼ Photos from a visit to Aven Armand, a local showcave ►





Returning to the Darkness

Jules Carter

Prologue: At the start of the 2014 SWCC Unexpedition to the Lozère in the South West of the Massif Centrale region in France I suffered a serious accident whilst exploring a system called the Aven de Hures. The details of the accident, and my rescue, have been written up in a blog and published elsewhere so I do not intend to repeat the detailed story here.¹ Instead, this article explores the recovery from the accident, and the drive to return to caving, and eventually back to the Aven de Hures.

I was only around 10 years old when I first went caving. The impression my trip into Bridge Cave made on that day is still with me some 40 years later. A mixture of fear and uncertainty, yet amongst it, a deep sense of wonder.

The years since have seen many a caving trip both in the UK and abroad. Some of these trips have been truly miserable experiences of tight, muddy, cold caves. Others have been simply stunning experiences of geological architecture at its best. Always though, is that allure of the darkness, of what lies beyond, and where does it all go?

Anyone who enjoys the outdoors knows there are risks. You ponder them, and you know they are there. The risks can be reduced by gaining skills and experience, but they are still there. Even with the best intentions in the world they can hit you. In

2014 this happened to me whilst exploring a cave well within my abilities. A couple of minor, but poor decisions, a minor slip and suddenly I'm falling down a 40m deep pitch in a cave in France. I shouldn't have survived, but I did, somehow...

The experience left me broken but initially fixable with some screws, metal plates, and bits of wire, put to good use via some skilled surgeons. Apparently, a broken leg takes '6 weeks' to repair. What I, as a very hopeful patient, failed to understand is that it is just for some initial healing to take hold, not to actually fix! I still remember the French surgeon that did the initial bolting of me back together saying 6 weeks and me thinking that's not too bad, I can be back in a kayak in a few months. How wrong I was. Healing is a much longer process, both physically and mentally.

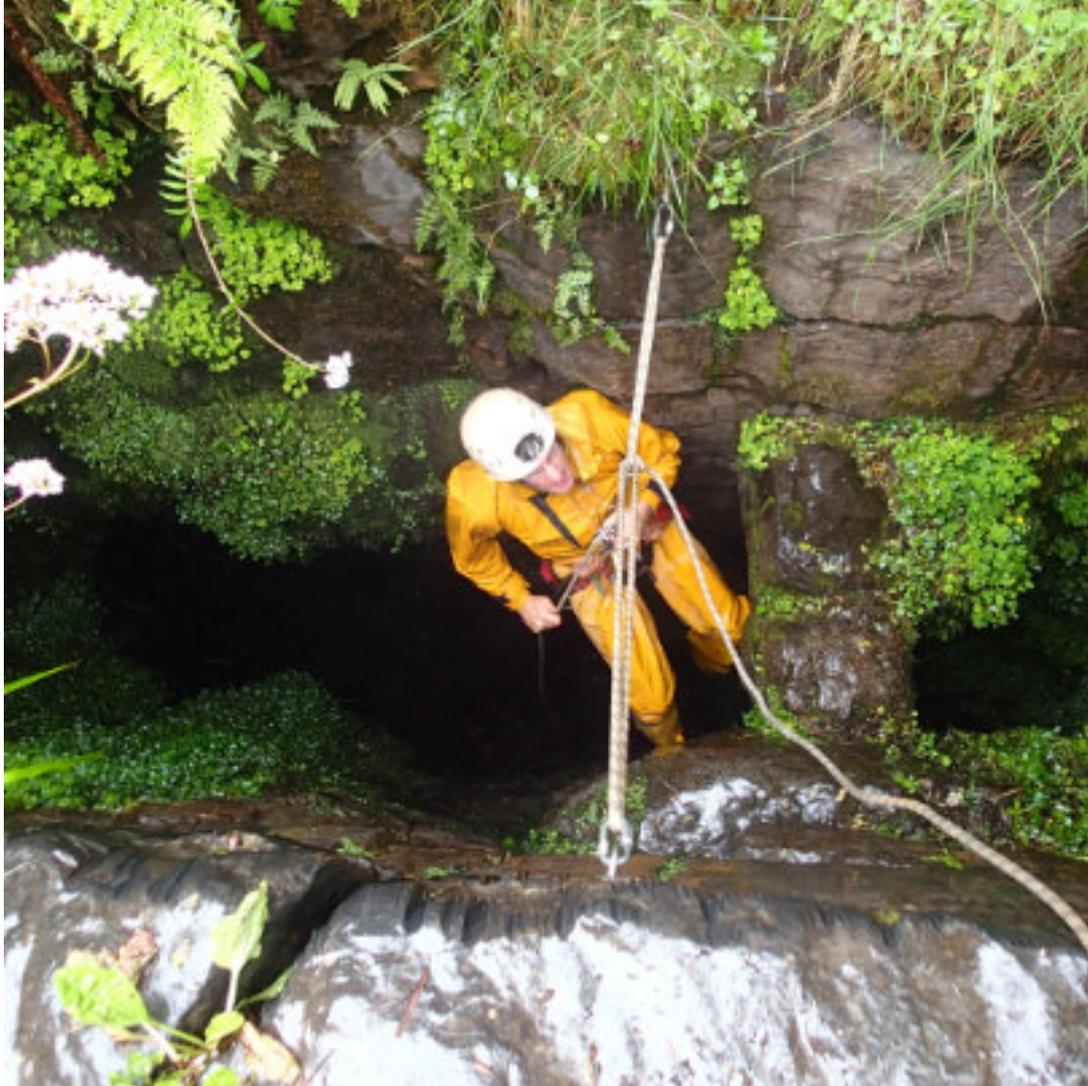
For the first couple of months of recovery, I ended up being confined to a wheelchair, living downstairs with the dog, and being effectively stuck in the house due to steps fore and aft. Fortunately, mates would regularly launch rescue missions and wheel me down to the pub! The worst thing though was not knowing how well the body would ultimately fix. How well will I walk again, would I enjoy the outdoors again? With this came the guilt. Others deal with far worse...

So, for a while, I watched the chickens from the back window, chatted to the dog, read books on the kindle, attempted to do some physio from a bed and kept a pee bottle in easy reach! Oh, and there



Rescued by the Garmans! A trip in the outdoors around the supposedly wheelchair friendly trail on Caerphilly Mountain (©Claire Garman)

Ali on Pant Mawr Pitch – looking into the Darkness of the pitch as I prepare to follow Ali on my return to SRT 2015



was pain. Lots of it. Sleep had to be a planned staging of painkillers and tests with pillows and duvets to give support, since rolling in bed was not possible with a metalwork frame poking out of the foot, along with the other broken bits. In truth, nights were hell.

Regular visits to the UHW (University Hospital of Wales) trauma unit marked progress with regular x-rays and the odd CT scan. Fortunately, injured cavers are a rare entity at the hospital. Plus, several of the consultants knew various caving friends from the medical world and other friends from the outdoor world, who also worked at the hospital, which meant I became quite well known. New nurses or doctors would come to see you and remark “ah you're the caver!”

Gradually, time passed, and the wheelchair was swapped for crutches. Being back upright the journey to recovery could now properly begin. Surely, running again in 6 weeks-time? Well, walking without crutches at least maybe? I was ever optimistic! The truth was recovery was slow but steady. The first challenge was getting confident to get out of the house... step by step the range increased. First to the end of the street, then to the main road, then a walk as far as the local woods.

And then the next challenge started taunting me. Could I ride a bike? This took a while... experimenting with a bike on a borrowed turbo

trainer, the first challenge was to get a leg over the crossbar. The first time I managed this, I thought I was going to be stuck there until Sue got home! Gentle physio gradually enabled the damaged legs to turn a crank again, and eventually I was managing 30 minute stints on the turbo trainer.

The day came to try riding outside again, and so I gingerly started riding up and down my road. It wasn't comfortable, and was probably a bad idea, but before too long I was getting to my trauma clinic appointments on the bike. I thought the consultants would tell me off, but they were actually pretty impressed with the effort. However, venturing into a cave again was going to take a little longer, but I was at least getting active again.

The first post-accident trip was a short trip into Porth yr Ogof with my daughter and the Williams family. Attempting to follow small children proved challenging, but darkness was touched! This was soon followed by a more ambitious trip into OFD1 with my good lady Sue, only to Boulder chamber and back, but via the streamway. Experiencing the sounds and shapes of the streamway was exciting but challenging, especially trying to negotiate the short climbs and stream pots with clumsy legs. However, the body and mind passed the test, so to the next challenge - experiencing SRT again.

Literally one year after the accident, I managed the walk out to Pant Mawr Pot with Ali Garman and

Malcolm Stewart. *Ali rigs, and I quietly follow. Standing on the lip of the main 15m pitch into the cave, looking into the darkness below, proves daunting. What am I doing here? The stop is loaded onto the rope, locked off, and checked, AND checked again. And everything is checked again, before slipping into the darkness again...*

A few months later, this was followed by a weekend in Yorkshire with the Morgannwg CC. A trip to Ireby Fell gets aborted due to water levels, so we move to Marble Steps and somehow, I get 'put onto the task of rigging', the first since the accident. Nervously at first, but gradually confidence returns. The next day Ali manages to get me rigging the main hang in Flood Pot which proved super exciting, and another step into the darkness.

Gradually I managed to get back into the caving again, and the body kept improving, but I was still struggling with my gait and core stability. Two years after the accident, things started to deteriorate. On a walking trip in Scotland, I struggled to get off the hill. A trip to Fort William A&E revealed the problem. My left femur hadn't fully joined due to the complexity of the fracture, and the metal work holding together had started to fail due to a number of screws breaking. This was allowing the metal plate to start moving, causing flex on the fracture site, and this hurt... a lot.

Fortunately, the UHW trauma unit back in Cardiff quickly had me back in for a check-up, confirmed the carnage in my leg, and amazingly 6 weeks later I was back in the same ward as before to have the plate replaced! "Ah you're back" said one of the

nurses who remembered me. 48 hours later I'm back home with a straightened leg and a new plate fitted. And it was back to recovery, though fortunately this was much quicker than the previous time. Whilst initially a step backwards, the fix did significantly correct issues with my leg, improving posture and enabling me to consider the next challenge. Going back to the site of my accident, the Aven de Hures.

The plan had always been to return to the cave. The question was, *would I be able to? Would the body be fixed enough, and would the mind be up to it?* This was also not a journey to do 'alone'. The effects go deeper and affect not only you but also those you are with at the time of the accident. Ali, Rhys and Pete, the team on the fateful trip, are friends I have known for many years and shared many adventures with. The horror felt when they realised it wasn't a dropped tackle bag but me that was descending that 40m pitch would have been deep and have effects of its own.

So, after a journey of over three years, I once again find myself clad in caving kit and standing at the entrance to the Aven de Hures cave. The experience brings many strange feelings to the fore. Some of it, excitement at the journey ahead, but a lot of it nerves, an edginess, thinking *what the f**k am I doing here again...* Ali Garman is with me. We said we'd be back to do this cave together, and once again I'm joined by a good friend and neighbour, Malcolm Stewart. A good team for this return trip.

Ali kindly offers to rig, and sets off, himself feeling the edginess and nerves of the occasion. The caving

Ali Rigging the P40 pitch in the Aven de Hures at the point where my accident occurred



Jules, Ali and Malcolm at the entrance to the Aven de Hures on the return trip



doesn't feel natural and we move with more caution and care than we would normally. The first pitch is descended and the pair of us stand looking at the line of bolts leading to the point of my disaster. On the floor in front of us a huge toad sits oblivious to it all! A big hug, and Ali pushes on with the rigging...

Crossing that pitch head traverse again proves a challenge to the mind. It is fairly straightforward caving, but it presents a huge barrier to me. I quietly push on and reach the resin anchor where it all went wrong. The thoughts come back. *I was rushing, and my mental health state was in a bad*

Looking up the P40 pitch



place due to workplace stress. I shouldn't have been rigging. Maybe I shouldn't have been caving. In hindsight I should have just chilled for a few days, drank some beers and talked some rubbish but adventure time is precious, and the urge to grab it maybe too great.

I take time at the pitch head observing the drop down the shaft. In my mind the walls of the pitch are completely vertical, but in reality, the first 20ish meters are slightly off vertical on this side of the shaft, but only slightly! However enough to absorb a little fall energy ... maybe?

We spend some time looking at the potential 'splat' point and developing the possible survival hypothesis. It's probable that I pinged out of the upper section of the shaft, rebounded off the far

At the bottom of the P40 (©Ali Garman)



wall, then hit the slope off a stall boss, while somehow missing the two gour pools. This then propelled me in the direction of the third pitch, but thankfully, I came to rest just before the descent into that... however, the conclusion was still the same. *How did I survive a 40m fall like that?* Fortunately though, I did, and was able to return to ponder the question, even if I couldn't answer it. But at least the demons had been tamed a little.

It was now time to explore onwards, and suddenly it became a caving trip again. Ali continued with the rigging, traversing along a wall and then descending a beautiful 11m pitch. A few more short pitches saw the start of a narrow meander, and it's here I took over the rigging. A few short easy drops brought us to a constricted pitch head gained via a short crawl. Popping through this put me above a series of 20m pitches, but the way on was via a sporting bolt traverse line along the left wall. So, putting the memories of past rigging cock ups in this cave aside, I got stuck in whilst doing a lot of double and triple checking on the way!

An excellent trip was had, and after 9 hours underground we emerged into the fading light of a beautiful September day. Priority now was to find food and beer to celebrate. A definite challenge in this area on a Sunday night out of the tourist season. Despite a couple of holdups with sheep flocks on the road off the Tarn plateau, we made it back to Florac to find a lone pizza takeaway place still open, complete with a fridge of cold beer, enabling us to celebrate the 'return' in an appropriate style!

This journey back to the darkness may have needed my personal fortitude, but without the support of family, friends and the medical services it is a journey that would have been considerably harder. My thanks and love go to so many.

References

1. *"The Fall"* (September 2014) via welshrandomadventures.blogspot.com). Also published in *Mountain Rescue* 50 (2014), pp24-27

Rescuers with Lisa, Ali, Emily and Pete (@Jean-Marc Apers)



Rhys Lewingdon on the high ropes course ▶



Susie Conway enjoying the rope course ▼





Barbara Hyland on the ropes ▲



▲ Beth Lewingdon (and Andrea Lewingdon's foot) on the rope course

▼ Canoeing on Le Tarn



And Finally - The Funeral...

Denise Knibbs

The following week we said goodbye to an old friend who often joined us on these foreign trips. Steve Tomalin had died a few weeks before and many of those present would normally have attended his funeral. It had been arranged that we would hold our own ceremony for him at the same time as the funeral would be taking place in the UK. Unfortunately, it was pouring with rain, so gazebos were erected. A eulogy was read, and we all sang 'Caving Matilda'. Steve had often been a great participant of the trips – always ready to help others

on caving, cycling, canoeing and via ferratas and playing an active part in the usual festivities. We all miss him.

So, you see, this was no 'standard' Unexpedition. Far from it. 'Two rescues and a funeral' aptly sums it up. The Club was very fortunate not to lose Jules or Pete but as you can see, Jules' recovery has been a long-term consideration and his experience something he, or indeed any of us, will never forget. Losing Steve before his time was incredibly sad – his memory will live on.



Steve Tomalin (photo from the Ardèche) ▲



▲ *Steve Tomalin's funeral ceremony*

▼ *Canoeing on Le Tarn*



Hèrault 2016 & Franconia 2018

Introduction by Denise Knibbs

After the very eventful trip of 2014 it was a much quieter affair in 2016. Only seven members made the journey to the Hèrault and only a few remained for the full two weeks. A very good account of the caving done, written by Andy Dobson, has already been published in Newsletter 133 so Iain Miller has provided a few words about the location itself: The campsite used in 2016 was Camping des Sources at Soubés. Though not within our chosen area, it did have the advantage of easy connection to the motorway system, which turned out to be

fortuitous. The original plan was to use the D25 through the Vis gorge, but unknown prior to our arrival, this route was closed due to a landslip as a result of major floods a few weeks before.

So far, all the Unexpeditions had been to an area of France. 2018 was to be the first one in another country, Germany. Kevin Diffey writes about the location in Franconia and gives a summary of some of the activities enjoyed and caves visited.

A scenic railway journey, Franconia





View of Pottenstein, Franconia, from the castle

All About the Franconia Unexpedition

Kevin Diffey

In the summer of 2018, a group of SWCC members met up in the Franconia region of Southern Germany for an Unexpedition with some caving and a good sprinkling of 'normal' tourist activities. The trip itself was instigated and organised by our member in the North who is very good at these things. The rest of us just had to get ourselves there!

Franconia is a region not unlike Wales, that is, hilly with caves, mines, Schloss (castles), museums and so on. Tourism is a major industry. It has its own distinct culture and German language dialect, which caused problems for the German speaker in our party.

This Unexpedition was slightly unusual in that while most of us stayed at the quieter Jurahöhe campsite (carefully chosen for us by the German caving group Karstgruppe Mühlbach) for up to two weeks. This was spread over three weeks so there were *comings and goings* of people throughout but with useful information being passed on.

The campsite itself was located in the Naturpark Fränkische Schweiz to the north of Nuremberg which was where most of our activities took place. Luckily, we were able to all camp together and had distinctive Welsh Dragon flags on cars and our camping area, *Cymru am Bydd!*

Several of us hired canoes for a 14km day trip down river to Muggendorf. The summer was very hot and dry with the result that river water levels were low. This actually caused much mirth and *schadenfreude* when fellow canoeists struck rocks in the riverbed and either were capsized or forced to jump out to free the canoe.

Another day saw a group of us take a heritage steam train (well it would have been steam but it was changed to diesel because of the risk of sparks setting fire to the dry vegetation either side of the track) to Ebermannstadt where there was a local

German street market, food and beer stalls and oompah band. Many of the locals were wearing the distinctive costumes, i.e., low cut dirndl for the ladies and lederhosen for the men. You'll be pleased to know that we managed to stagger back to the station to catch the train to the campsite.

The local and tourist Germans are very keen on *Wanderung* i.e., hiking and there are many trails in the area which several of us visited. Exploring a lot of these hiking routes also meant an opportunity to escape the summer heat. There were also several show caves lit up with guides giving a commentary through the cave. The Sophienhöhle was a particularly good one.

A few of us were taken by one of our German engineer friends on a whirlwind but informative trip to see several small hydroelectric schemes which he had installed in the locality. We were very impressed and particularly with the disguise. From a distance they just looked like a log cabin complete with false windows. No brutalist concrete structures for the Bavarians. Interestingly, he explained that some of the schemes were not running at maximum efficiency because landowners at the bottom of the hill had been too greedy and demanded too much payment to warrant siting them on their land.

We were incredibly grateful to our German hosts who showed us round local mines and caves when they had the time. Consequently, one evening, we had a party at the campsite to thank them and also celebrate two birthdays. It was a great success. Hopefully they will be able to visit SWCC in the near future.

Participants: Denise Knibbs, Harvey Lomas, Lel Davies & Iain Miller, Kevin Diffey, Brian Clipstone, a brace of Dobsons, Allan & Margaret Richardson, Caitrin & baby Arthur and Stuart Bennett.

Our hosts: Christa Locke, Sabrina Huber, Norbert Hedler and other members of Karstgruppe Mühlbach.



▲ *Kevin Diffey at the mine entrance in Franconia*

And Finally...

Denise Knibbs

Franconia was a really interesting area with lots to see, great walking and cycling too. Our German friends were wonderful hosts and they made sure that we saw the best of their region, both above and below ground.

There is a fuller description of the mines and caves visited in an article by Allan Richardson in Newsletter 135.

And the future?

A trip for 2020 in the Aude was planned. The campsite was booked and French cavers ready to take us into some gated caves in the region. However, we all know what happened to that!! Perhaps it will happen in 2022?

At the time of writing, plans are in full swing to revisit the Ardèche in 2021 for more fun, caves, sunshine and good times with our friends.

The Franconia group with our German friends ▶



Cave walk in Franconia ▼





Cave Diving

Introduction by George Linnane

A lot can happen in 25 years and cave diving is no different. Since the SWCC 50th anniversary publication, the use of technical gasses such as Nitrox and Trimix has become mainstream, traditional open-circuit diving equipment has become significantly more reliable and mixed-gas rebreathers have been developed into a variety of form factors and are within the grasp of the many, as opposed to the few. A sub-culture of 'overhead' scuba divers has formed, bridging the gap between the formerly quite separate worlds of open-water technical divers and dry cavers who learn to dive to explore beyond sumps. Areas such as Lot in France, North Florida and Riviera Maya in Mexico have developed from borderline wilderness, to actively accommodating cave diving tourism.

Diving in flooded mines has become more commonplace, with several slate mines in North Wales having been re-explored with more being quietly pushed in the background. The same goes for the iron mines of the Forest of Dean and, perhaps to a lesser extent, others in the North and South-West of England. In mainland Europe, some flooded mines have even been opened as diving tourist attractions, with hefty entrance fees, guides and training courses available on-site.

Meanwhile, in South Wales, the task of finding new cave passage, dry and submerged, becomes ever more challenging as passages are pushed to a conclusion, forcing re-examination of 'previously-unattractive' leads. It is very rare for significant

lengths of new passage to be found these days, but the sense of achievement when it does happen is all the sweeter for it. The CDG (Cave Diving Group) is still plugging away, with kit configurations kept as light, svelte and robust as possible.

Another area which has seen significant development since 1996 is camera technology. Digital photography is now the standard, with super-wide-angle lenses being used in high quality applications alongside remotely operated flash guns. The beauty of modern digital cameras is the ability for the photographer to instantly preview the photo that has been captured and adjust accordingly for the next shot, something which was impossible with film techniques. In some respects, the film photographers of old can be regarded as even more skilful than their modern counterparts but the best digital photographers use these advances to push the boundaries of cave photography. One thing that 'remains' the same though is the challenge in transporting such heavy, sensitive equipment through dry cave passages and sumps.

In 2018, cave diving was thrust into the limelight with the Tham Luang cave rescue in Thailand, which, from a Welsh perspective, was supported by cave rescue and cave diving personnel from SWCC, SMWCRT and CDG. With that, arguably the greatest cave diving achievement of the last quarter-century, we salute the accomplishments of the last 25 years and raise a glass to the next 25!

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A Diver, Not a Climber

George Linnane

I've been scuba diving, to some degree, my entire adult life. My parents bought me a PADI try dive for my 18th birthday, and once the effects of and subsequent sorrow caused by a bottle of Southern Comfort had worn off, I experienced breathing underwater for the first time and loved it. I was 'straight on' with PADI Open Water at the old torpedo testing range at Horsea Island, Portsmouth. This is no longer open to civilian dive schools but was analogous to a shallow quarry-type dive site, complete with sunken Land Rovers, boats and Wessex helicopters, which contained loads of little jellyfish that would mildly sting your lips and any other exposed areas. I progressed to Advanced Open Water, which included a very entertaining and slightly scary day in Portland Harbour. I did a few South Coast shore dives, then did the PADI Rescue Diver course at Horsea Island, and again, was an excellent week, bringing my total career dives to 20 and number of times being hit by a torpedo, amazingly, zero.

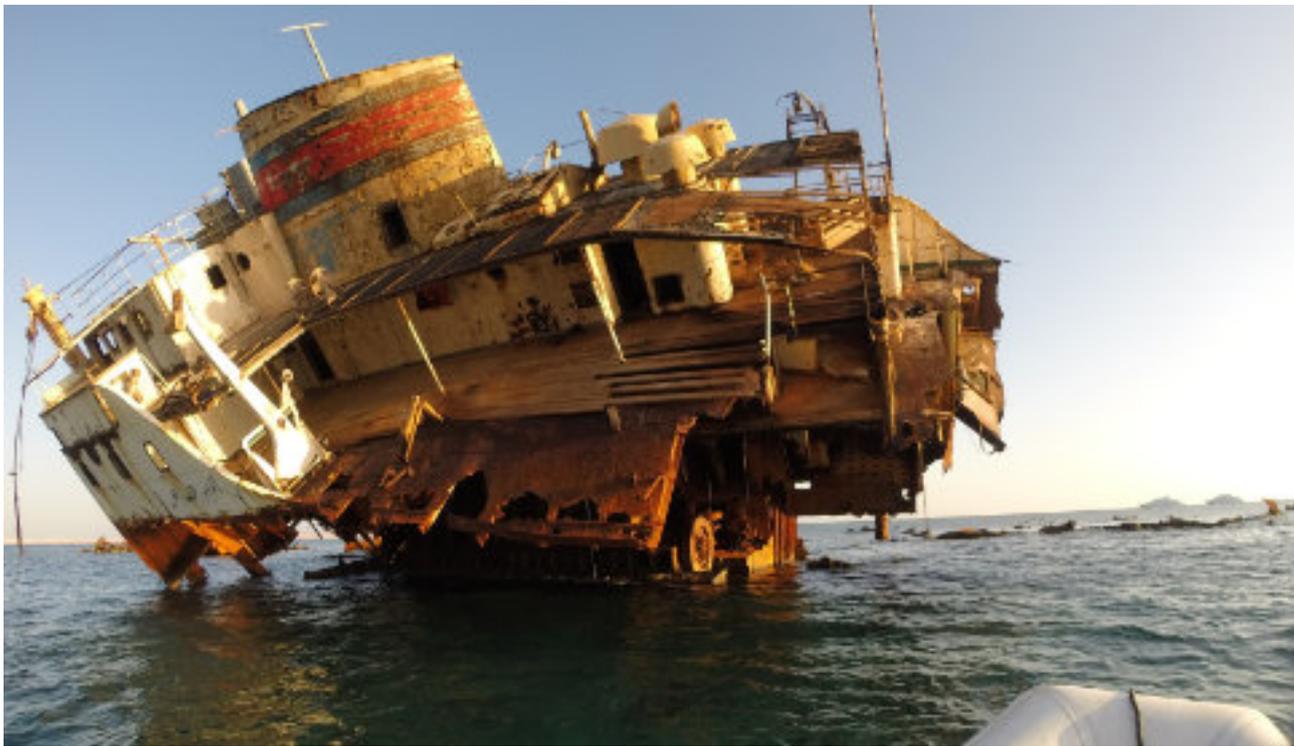
In 2002, I did my first foreign dives during a family holiday in Malta with my Dad, my original dive buddy. This experience thoroughly ruined UK diving for me, as I could see more than a metre and could still feel my extremities when I got back on the boat. I was young, wild and spoilt and became a fair-weather holiday diver, with Malta still a firm favourite to this day.

Fast forward to October 2014, six years ago now, and I found myself sitting by a swimming pool in the Riviera Maya region of Mexico with my partner, Julie. I was bored, as I always am after sitting still for a couple of minutes, so I did what I always do when on foreign turf and scuttled off to sample the local dive scene. There was no shortage of dive shops and no shortage of beautiful diving to be had and having eased myself back into it with a couple of

days' worth of stunning boat dives in the Caribbean Sea, I signed up for a day of 'cenote' cavern diving.

A cenote is a natural sinkhole, resulting from the collapse of limestone bedrock that exposes groundwater. They have been used for millennia as sources of water and swimming holes, though some are more accessible than others, many being hidden away in remote jungle. Cenotes along the Caribbean coast often provide access to a very extensive network of stunningly beautiful, flooded, cave passages, whereas those closer to the Gulf of Mexico are more likely to be isolated deep pits associated with fracturing of the earth caused by a rather famous meteorite; the one that caused the extinction of the dinosaurs, which is believed to have landed just off the present-day coast of Mexico. They are in short, fascinating.

I could never have known how pivotal 2nd November 2014 would prove to be. It started much like the previous day – wake up hours before Julie, head down to Scuba Playa and go diving. I felt a mix of fear and excitement, a feeling with which I am still very familiar, as I assembled my single-cylinder back-mounted rig in the jungle, received a dive briefing and followed the guide, and a couple of other intrepid adventurers, to a sink hole full of crystal-clear water with an overhanging roof. In we went. Career dive number 37. Down through the freshwater layer, through the blurry halocline where it meets the denser saltwater below, making for an experience similar to wearing someone else's glasses. As I regained my vision below the halocline, I marvelled at the columns of expanding diver's bubbles rising from the depth against a backdrop of blue-tinged sunrays. Down we went, into what my dive log describes as a moon-rock tunnel, and then I got narced. Very, very, narced. Nitrogen narcosis is an anaesthetic effect, which becomes stronger with depth, caused by breathing a Nitrogen-rich gas at



elevated ambient pressure. Not only was this dive relatively deep (I logged a maximum depth of 44m) but it was also a veritable checklist of exacerbating circumstances – a fast, head-down descent into a dark, unfamiliar environment. I remember following the guide down this tunnel whilst feeling increasingly fuzzy. The twin O's of the bottoms of his back-mounted cylinders shone out of the gloom at me under my torchlight like the eyes of some ancient Mayan Cheshire Cat, gazing right through me, penetrating my being and searching the very depths of my soul. The next thing I remember is being at 40m in the midst of a smoky Hydrogen Sulphide layer with jagged petrified tree branches and the bones of mammals and reptiles long-since forgotten. It was within this land-before-time that I both lost and found myself. Time at this depth is very limited on a single cylinder of air and we were soon slowly circling our way back up the walls of this immense vertical shaft. As the depth reduced, so did the effects of the narcosis and I came out of El Pit knowing two things – I wanted to be a trimix diver and I really, really, wanted to be a cave diver.

After another, much shallower, cavern dive into the Bat Cave of Dos Ojos, I returned to the hotel, where I tried desperately to relay this life-changing experience to a long-suffering Julie using one of my signature techniques – jabbering at her like a mental patient. I described the experience as being 'like doing acid on the moon' and essentially told her that I was going to become a cave diver or break my neck trying, with emphasis on the 'or'.

So began the more obsessive phase of my love affair with scuba diving. I arranged a PADI Drysuit course, which I completed in January at Wraysbury in 5°C water. Not quite the Yucatan peninsula. I got involved with Big Squid diving centre and club in South London where we lived at the time and made

more trips to Wraysbury to get used to diving in a drysuit (which adds warmth but also complication compared to wetsuit) before returning to the sea for away fixtures with the Squids – Portland, Cornwall, Vobster Quay. I completed a Nitrox course, which would enable me to spend extra time at depth without requiring decompression, before heading to the Red Sea, Egypt onto a boat full of strangers for a one week 'liveaboard' trip where I completed a magical 20 dives in 6 days, picking up a PADI Deep Diver qualification, a new personal depth record of 46m and completing my first night dives in the process.

In Egypt, I found a single cylinder of air was becoming a limiting factor, so I began to explore the world of twinsets (twin back-mounted cylinders). I spent a terrifying first dive at the National Diving and Activities Centre (NDAC), near Chepstow, with two budding 'technical' divers who strapped me into a rented twinset and took me down to 44m, where I hovered, feeling very narced, paranoid and alone, whilst they descended to over 50m to a small boat, before we all ascended to shallower waters for a swim. I got a little more confident over the course of the weekend. My dive computer was having a fit by the end of day 2, telling me I needed to do 20 minutes of decompression whilst my buddies' computers required no such thing. I did 3 minutes and resolved to get a 'better' computer. I also resolved to learn how to use a twinset properly, which I was taught in early 2016 by Michael Thomas of Wessex Caving Club fame in his capacity as a TDI instructor. Wraysbury in January, again, 5°C again. The other student on that course, Leo Fielding, became a good friend of mine.

I spent the majority of that year working hard on my technical diving skills, completing two more courses relating to decompression and the use of fancy

Learning to use a twinset with Leo Fielding; (©Michael Thomas)



shot away from all the stooping and dragging of dive kit. Little did I know I was starting on a path that would lead to plenty more stooping and dragging of heavy dive kit.

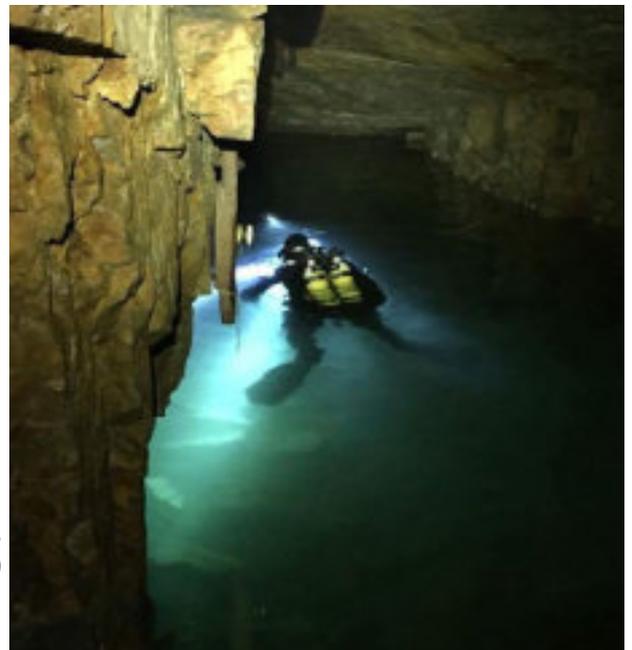


Diving with seals, Lundy Island, Devon

gasses. Having no vehicle and no license to drive one was becoming a nightmare. I had purchased my own twinset by this time and a small sack trolley with which to transport it. The remainder of my dive kit consisted of large back-mounted bag containing a drysuit and thermals, a bag containing multiple sets of regulators over my shoulder and a roller bag the size of a suitcase containing other equipment. I would move all of this at once, through South London and out into the sticks. My flat to Wraysbury involved a short walk, a bus to Clapham Junction, then up and over 17 platforms on the footbridge, then down to platform level. I then had a choice of the Underground, more stairs and a walk, if I was meeting Leo and getting a lift, or a train followed by a fairly long walk. I then had to do it all in reverse. My back has never been the same again, partly because neither the trolley nor the roller bag was tall enough to allow me to stand up straight whilst walking with all that kit. I was dedicated.

I don't think I'd ever been to Wales before September 2016. My first Welsh experience was carrying a borrowed 7 Litre twinset up that dreadful hill from Dinas Rock car park towards the silica mine. This was far more strenuous than anything I'd experienced shore diving, though that had had its moments. No way would I ever want to bring my twin 12s (12 litre tanks) up here! I remember feeling that mix of fear and excitement again, just like in Mexico two years previously. Something about diving underground causes that heady mix and still does to this day; I believe the excitement keeps me coming back and the fear keeps me alive. Career dive number 151. Two 50m penetrations into Dinas silica mine. Three weeks later, I returned to Dinas with Michael (in my own car and equipment this time, having passed my driving test and purchased an 8.5L twinset from Leo a few days before) and completed the next level of my underground dive training, a Level 1 Mine diving course. On the first dive, I laid a temporary guide line to 8m in the main adit, connected to the main line and we dived to the end of the deepest level of Dinas and back. I was hooked.

Once I'd completed the decompression courses and really got to grips with twinset diving, I fuffed about in Scotland, Dorset, Devon and some Southern quarries, switched back to single cylinder diving briefly to spend a week on a liveaboard trip on Lake Baikal in Siberia, then took the next step towards my goal of becoming a cave diver. That step was a TDI (Technical Diving International) Cavern Diver course with Michael Thomas with surface support from his son, Robert, now a Somerset section QD (Qualified Diver). I also started some fairly intensive driving lessons as my back was starting to feel a bit



TDI Cavern Diver course, Dinas Silica Mine, Powys, Wales (©Robert Thomas)

Carrying a twinset to Dinas Silica Mine, Powys, Wales
(©Michael Thomas)



That night was my first ever experience of a caving club and I took an instant liking to the South Wales Caving Club headquarters on a mercifully quiet, but not too-quiet, Saturday night. Michael and I stayed at Penwyllt as we were back in Dinas the following day with Connor Roe. Connor was on an educational journey of his own with Michael and was taken aback by how beautifully smoothly my Apeks Black Sapphire regulator breathed, compared to his battered Poseidon Cyklon. I was taken aback by how quickly he disappeared up the hill ahead of me with his kit on his back. There's an outcrop of rock on the verge near the crest of that hill, at the top of the steep steps in the woods by the main entrance to the silica mine. The outcrop forms a decent seat and I usually rest a minute here as I don't like negotiating those steep steps with jelly legs; the rock is introduced as 'George's Hump' or similar during Michael's diving courses these days. As I sat on that hump for the first time, puffing and blowing like a whale with dust in its blowhole, Connor cheerfully declared "every day's a leg day!" before disappearing into the distance once again.

The original underground activity plan was to become proficient at mine diving so that I would have access to some relatively (compared to the average UK cave dive) easy-access sites with sensibly sized passages so I could hone my skills in preparation for a triumphant return to the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico (at the time of writing, 6 years on, I still haven't made it back). However, apart from Michael and Robert, I didn't know a single soul

who went mine diving. So, I did what any sensible person who passed their driving test 4 weeks ago would do and drove 12 hours from South London to Thurso to get on a ferry to Orkney for a week of world-class wreck diving in Scapa flow.



IANTD Normoxic trimix course, Malta (©Ian France)

Winter 2016-17 was spent floating around in quarries at increasing depths, gaining experience of decompression diving, culminating in March 2017 in finally reaching one of the two goals I had set for myself in Mexico 2.5 years previously – career dive 197. I gained a Trimix qualification, enabling me to obtain fancier gasses than ever before, including helium, which solves the issue of nitrogen narcosis at depth but, as with most things, introduces complications of its own.



IANTD Normoxic trimix course, Malta (©Dave Gratton)

I had, over the Winter, joined UK Mine Cave (UKMC), a nationwide group of mine and cave divers who, like me, came primarily from a diving background. I was aware of the CDG but had no intention of attempting to join, believing it would never be for me and wasn't my type of diving. Plus, I had never set foot in a cave. Through UKMC, I finally made my first underground dives outside of an educational setting. This was in a North Wales slate mine, with the same pair of reprobates who had temporarily abandoned me at 44m depth during my first twinset dive nearly 18 months previously, plus my good mate 'Sidemount Jim' (so called because he was the first person I had come across who dived exclusively sidemount). This kicked off a love affair with North Welsh slate mines

that continues to this day, my favourite being the mighty and remote Croesor in Gwynedd. Many people know this due to the popular through-trip to neighbouring Rhosydd mine, but far fewer people are familiar with the truly epic diving.



Croesor Slate Mine, Gwynedd, Wales

Somewhen around this time, I accompanied Michael Thomas up to Dinas silica mine to help with, or at least act as a spare body on, an 'Intro to Cave' diving course. It was an excuse for a mine dive. Out of curiosity, I followed him and his student to Porth Yr Ogof, which was to be the student's qualifying dive. As I stared down the Tradesman's Entrance, all my intentions of sticking to UK mines and spacious, pretty foreign caves fell apart.

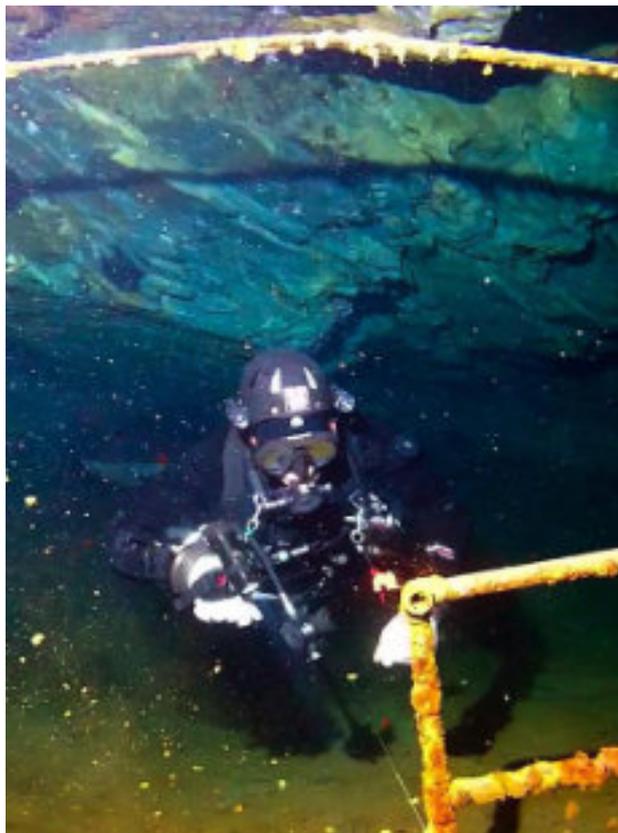
Michael later said I looked like I might wet myself when I saw the underground river rushing past at the bottom of that ridiculous-looking hole. This place looked mental and I had to dive it.

That Summer, after a trip back to the Red Sea, Egypt, to do some bucket-list diving (idyllic, 2-3 hour, 60m Trimix dives, during which I blew £900 on gas in 6 days – helium is not cheap), I learned to dive Sidemount and completed an 'Intro to cave diving' course of my own. Career dive number 238; I was finally a cave diver. During the course, I laid temporary line in White Lady Cave and dived to Four Ways Airbell in upstream Porth Yr Ogof. The visibility in the former was dreadful and is not worth the walk with cylinders but the latter was everything I had dreamed it would be. As a bonus, Michael and Robert took me into Ogof Ffynnon Ddu for my first 'proper' caving trip, down to Gothic Sump, then up OFD1 streamway and through the boulder choke to Dip Sump. Once again, I almost wet myself. The sight of those hanging roof pendants, the ceiling meeting the surface of the water, the rocks in the bottom of the sump pool and the guide line disappearing into nothingness is a serene sight that I can close my eyes and summon at will when I need a moment of peace. Bob Hall once laughed at me for disappearing into that boulder pile by myself to 'commune with the sumps' during a dry caving trip. I love that place. Incredibly, I have still not dived it.

Trimix diving in Red Sea, Egypt (©Leo Fielding)



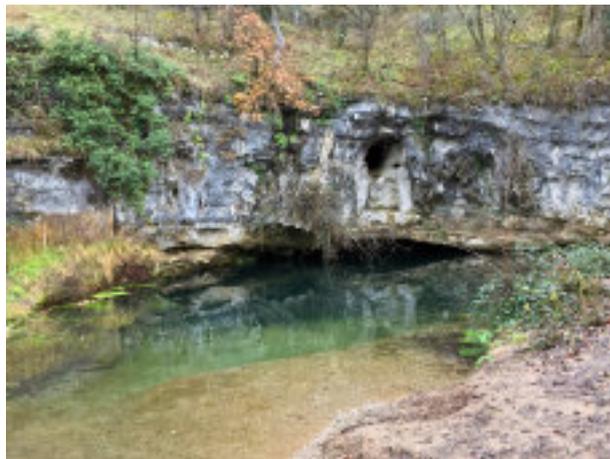
Negotiating a line junction in Croesor Slate Mine, Gwynedd, Wales (©Jim Suddaby)



I spent the remainder of the summer doing as much mine diving as possible and ticked off all of the usual UKMC haunts - Dinas, Aber Las, Cambrian, Croesor. All in Wales, plus Holme Bank (Derbyshire), Hodge Close (Lake District) and Roscobie (Scotland). Sidemount Jim nearly destroyed the transmission of his Land Rover Discovery trying to assist John Duxbury's Transit van up the hill to Croesor mine without using the low ratio gearing. John eventually got the van up the hill under its own steam, with me sitting over the nearside wheel in the passenger seat to 'keep some weight over it' but ready to bail out via the passenger door (or window if necessary) should the alarming lack of traction cause the van to topple off the track and down the mountainside. It seemed preferable to carrying dive gear up the hill. We camped on top of the mountain that night, which was a pretty magical experience in itself, though I learned the following morning just how Jekyll and Hyde the weather can be in the Snowdonian mountains. I also completed my first solo dives in Cambrian and Croesor slate mines. It was terrifying and exhilarating by equal measures. I've always loved the oppressive vibe of slate mines, caused by the material's propensity for absorbing light; they are very spooky places to visit alone. I spent several weekends camping alone in the farmer's field at Aber Las and Cambrian slate mine, with only sheep for company, solo diving in both mines, building experience. I was still boat diving in the sea some weekends too, wrecks in the 35 - 50m depth range, and really noticed how the underground solo diving was giving me more

general confidence underwater. I also joined SWCC as a provisional member around this time.

In December 2017, I completed two TDI courses in a week - 'Full Cave' and 'Stage Cave'. The former introduced the techniques required to plan and execute complex cave dives, building on the fundamentals learnt at Intro level. The latter introduced an additional cylinder of gas to extend range, which was not carried for the whole dive but dropped off once a predetermined amount of gas had been used from it and picked up again on the way out of the cave. Michael Thomas taught the course and his son, Robert, was a student alongside me, as well as another chap, Adamos. I was introduced to some of my favourite underwater caves at this time - the large, seemingly endless Gouffre De Cabouy and Resurgence De St Georges and the smaller, multi-sump Marchepied and Font Del Truffe. The water in the caves here is 13°C and, during the week I was there, the air temperature dropped as low as -4°C. It's the only time I've ever got into the water to warm up, it's usually the reverse!



Resurgence De St Georges, Lot, France

Feeling suitably like a big-boy diver now, wallet literally bursting with plastic qualification cards (as opposed to money, which had all been spent on qualifications and equipment), I turned my attention to something more grassroots in the UK. Enter Trelech lead mine in Carmarthenshire. This had been mentioned to me by Phil Knight at Penwyllt as he'd explored the dry passages and found a deep shaft filled with beautifully clear water which was begging to be dived, potentially to a depth of 50m, intercepting various flooded levels of the mine. I'd agreed to have a look and, having never genuinely 'explored' anything in my life, enlisted the help of Ashley Hiscock who, at the time, was a member of both UKMC and CDG.

It was February and there was ice on the ground as the three of us slithered into the mine, past some wicked looking spiders, crawled then stooped through half-flooded passage for 100m (there is a bodyboard there if preferred. I tried - it doesn't work well), climbed up a 4m winze, hauled the dive

gear up using an in-situ rope tied off to a suspiciously rusty nail in the wall, then stooped through to the dive hole. A scaffolding bar was wedged across the passage, an electron ladder and kit line deployed from it and a guide line belayed to something in the mine plus the scaff bar. I kitted up and climbed nervously down the ladder, intending to descend to circa 15m where I expected to intercept a horizontal tunnel, probably no larger than the one we had stooped through.



Flooded winze, pre diving activity, Trelech Lead Mine, Carmarthenshire, Wales (©Phil Knight)

By the time I was in the water, the visibility had deteriorated significantly due to our activity and by the time I had tested my regulators and donned cylinders and fins, it was absolute zero. Excellent. I grabbed the line reel and descended into the abyss. It was horrendous. I worked my way, feet first, down the vertical shaft, trying and failing to belay the line to whatever was sticking out of the slimy wall. Everything was done by touch and my comfort zone was nowhere to be seen. At 12m depth, my feet reached a floor of sorts, which was unexpected as the shaft was believed to be much deeper than this. I felt around below me with one hand and ascertained that it was just a kink and that the shaft continued. I started to reluctantly feed my feet through this feature before deciding to check my gauges as I had no idea how much gas I had breathed. I was completely unable to read them and decided at this point to bail out. I reeled in the guide line as I ascended and surfaced after 12 terrifying minutes underwater. Ash took the dive kit, went in for a look and I fully expected him to succeed where I had failed. In fact, he returned 8 minutes later. He'd left the reel at 17m depth, having negotiated the kink, apparently tangled but secured to itself to stop it unravelling down the shaft. He described it as 'horrible' and 'bordering on digging vis', which made me feel like less of a pansy for bailing out and running away. Total amount of time spent underwater - 20 mins between the two of us. Not a great return on a 7 hour round trip in the car. I did say I would go back for another look one day but, nearly 3 years on, I still don't feel equipped for that site; I've actually had nightmares about it.

Flooded winze, during diving activity, Trelech Lead Mine, Carmarthenshire, Wales (©Phil Knight)



Six weeks later, I was in Gothic Sump in OFD. I dived solo and bit off more than I could chew by trying to squeeze through the slightly larger looking route to the left of the bedding plane towards the end of the sump in a drysuit and large wing (buoyancy control device). It was a fair bit longer and twistier than I anticipated, when it started to close down, I decided I'd had enough. Unable to turn round or to let go of the line and in near-zero visibility, I attempted to reverse out, but it seemed that, no matter what I did, I hit rock. I had been taught about the 'A-Frame Effect', where it is possible for a sidemount diver to enter places that it was not possible to reverse out of and, thinking I was genuinely stuck, a sickening fear rose inside me, very strongly and very suddenly, my breathing rate shot up and I nearly panicked. I somehow seized some mental control and gave myself five seconds to calm down and, when the count to 5 was over, I started to work calmly through the problem and extracted myself from the bedding plane. I was out of that sump like a shot, glad that I had been using 7 Litre cylinders, not 3s.

Around this time, I had a superb trip to Top Waterfall in OFD with Michael and Robert Thomas, Claire Cohen (who I had first met in France in December), Kevin Hilton and one other. Unbeknown to me, the trip was actually a recce for Michael and Robert to assess the possibility of diving Top Waterfall. This was a feat Robert accomplished later that Summer, with Michael's support, during a serious drought by bolt-climbing up the wall and laying a small amount of line in atrocious visibility due to the lack of water flow. The other on the recce trip was Simon Perkins, a WCC member who was also interested in the CDG, and it was with Simon and Claire that I found myself in Swildons Hole for the first time, attempting to dive the Landing Sump that everyone usually ignores, with good reason, on their way down the streamway to sump 2. Neither of us got very far into that god-forsaken tube. I did pass several restrictions but reached a point where it would have been necessary to dig the silt out to continue. I went in feet first so this would have been

impossible anyway, though there is a colander stashed close to the sump for this purpose.

The following weekend I had an excellent time learning to survey underwater in Porth Yr Ogof resurgence and completing a through trip of the main cave from the entrance next to Tradesman's, once again with Michael. Then it was off to North Wales to get myself in more trouble. I dived three slate mines in two days with a pair of UKMC buddies. On the first dive, I did not spot and therefore did not mark the 'home' direction at one of the various junctions. On the second dive, I started with more gas in one cylinder than the other and swam about half a kilometre before realising what I'd done and becoming very paranoid about whether I would have enough gas to exit if the fuller of the two cylinders failed – cue a swift solo exit. On the third dive, at Croesor, the two buddies had a different plan to me, wanting to check out the shallowest level, whereas I wanted to explore a deeper level, so I gave them 5 minutes head start then headed underwater solo. Little did I know that a spool of line had detached itself from me and was lying on the silt-covered underwater steps leading down into the mine. The visibility down the stairwell was zero but improved as I neared the bottom and popped out into B Level. As with most mines, there is no significant flow so, as I rounded the corner at the bottom of the stairwell, I was surprised to find myself encountering resistance. It was only when I felt a line snag the back of my fin that I looked back and saw the string, still connected to me, disappearing back into the gloom from which I had emerged. I didn't want to cut the string as it would have resulted in loose line floating around in the zero-vis stairwell, which could have entangled me or, perhaps worse, the other team as they returned (they would have had no idea it was there). I turned and started wrapping the string around the fingers of my right hand, which was not smart since, once in the stairwell, I had trouble holding the dive line and gathering the string at the same time. In addition to my fear of losing the actual guide line, my string had crossed over and under the guide line several times and I became concerned that not only had I voluntarily incapacitated my own hand but had also tied it to the mine and would be prevented from reaching the surface. Eventually, I reached the surface with the spool and all of the string without resorting to cutting anything. Idiot. After calming myself down, I did go for a rather paranoid solo dive, significantly shorter than the dive I had originally planned.

I seemed to be having a run of 'learning experiences', aka scary dives where stuff goes wrong. I spent an amazing long weekend at Molnar Janos cave in Budapest, Hungary with some UKMC friends, which is a truly world class, beautiful cave but unfortunately is under very strict controls and is something of a restrictive nanny-state as well as being very expensive to dive in. There is, however,

something to be said for having a fully equipped dive centre right next to the sump pool and a fully lit decompression trapeze large enough for a dozen divers in 28°C water. I returned home, invigorated and curious to know what lay in store during the next episode of 'Why Do All UK Dive Sites Want To Kill Me?'. I was not disappointed.

Career dive 331 and I was to show a UKMC buddy, Tim Cutter, to the end of the line in Cambrian Slate Mine. It was the start of hay fever season; I was on my usual medication for it and my ears were fine on the way into the mine. The vis wasn't great, but I noted two or three unlined passages off the main drag towards the end of the mine that I would check out another day. The return journey involves dropping from 14m depth to 26m, there is no avoiding the deep section of the mine, a situation known as being on the far side of an 'elbow'. One of my nightmare scenarios unfolded, I was at 14m and my right ear would not clear. I had a couple of metres of passage height to play with and rising to 12m depth may have helped but didn't. I tried 3 times to head partially to depth down the slope toward the deep section, then come back up and clear the ears at 12-14m. Not happening. I tried chewing motions, I tried forcing it, I tried making all sorts of stupid faces. Not happening. Tim knew what was going on but was powerless to help. I made the decision not to use more reserve gas fighting a losing battle because if my eardrum imploded on the way out of the mine, I was going to have major vertigo, which would slow me down, and my breathing rate was probably going to be elevated. I went for it. My ear was absolutely singing at 26m depth and I swam at full speed, expecting any second for an explosion of pain followed by debilitating dizziness. My plan, when that happened, was to lie down on the line so that I didn't lose it, try not to pass out, which would be very bad news indeed and gather myself enough to be able to continue. I was glad I had Tim with me to help guide me out of the mine and perhaps even stop me from drowning if I did pass out. Then it cleared! A loud squeaking sound, a small amount of pain and the pressure eased off my eardrum. I knew it had cleared, not burst. I slowed down, signalled to Tim that things had improved and counted myself lucky.

That Summer, I did some amazing trimix diving, including wrecks up to 71m depth in the Mediterranean off the coast of Malta. That came to an abrupt end when I returned to the UK and got bent (decompression sickness, in this case believed to be due to dehydration) on a 50m deep dive on the Avalanche in the English Channel. I was in a bad way within 20 minutes of surfacing and was airlifted to a decompression chamber in Poole, Dorset for a 5.5 hour treatment followed by 4 weeks off diving. It wasn't even a good dive. We had spent 20 minutes exploring HMS Seabed. The shotline deployed by the dive boat had completely missed

the wreck so I deployed a reel and carried out a circular search, eventually finding the wreck, which we spent 5 minutes on, decided we didn't like and returned to the shotline for half an hour of decompression.



Porth Yr Ogof, Summer 2018 with Pi Maj (©Ewun Cameron)

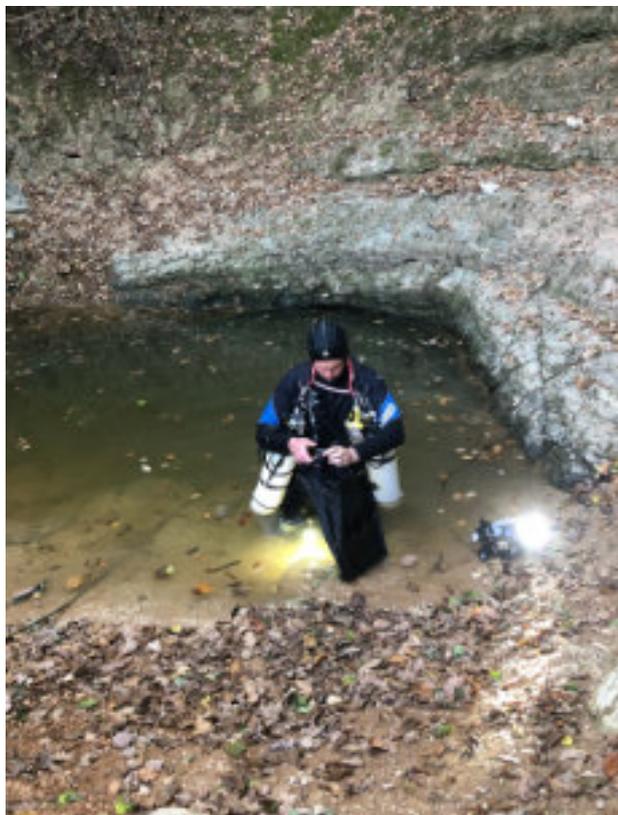
Summer 2018 was a hot one. So hot that, in addition to dehydrating trimix divers, it caused drought conditions that enabled people to see to the bottoms of the 4 large pots in OFD1 streamway and enabled a diver to enter Top Waterfall without being ejected like a cork from a shaken bottle. It was in these conditions that I entered the upstream passages of Porth Yr Ogof with the intention of checking out the route from Four Ways Airbell to Upper Cave. I had a UKMC buddy with me who I had never dived with before but seemed a good diver. The flow was very low, and we had a great dive in, though past Four Ways the passages become smaller and it seemed impossible to negotiate parts of it without trashing the visibility. We arrived at the tiny airbell just before the restriction leading into Upper Cave and I felt that was far enough, especially with a buddy in a drysuit and large cylinders who could get stuck behind me, blocking me into the cave! Typically, things got a little hairy on the way out. I led into the cave which meant I was behind the other diver exiting. Not being savvy enough to leave a gap between divers, and with there being so little flow that the visibility probably wouldn't have cleared even if I had done so, I was in absolute zero visibility in a part of the cave I was not familiar with. By the time I got to Four Ways

Junction (so called, seemingly, because it goes three ways), I'd been feeling my way past line belays for a while, and the junction just felt like another belay. The first line I identified was actually the one to Top Entrance, a dreadfully tight place that I was certainly not equipped to negotiate. It was not the way home. I nearly followed it, but it just didn't feel right, there was another belay literally a foot beyond it and a little voice in my head said, "this doesn't feel right, why two belays so close together?". I had another feel around and, sure enough, I found a second line that had my peg on it. The way home. Sumps that are expected to have zero visibility are usually lined appropriately and without junctions. A blind exit-by-touch from a cave containing junctions, whilst something we are all trained for, is something else. I was glad that day of all the time I've spent swimming around blindfolded in open water.

Finally, my luck turned, and I had a great first day out with the Black Sheep Diggers of Nidderdale, Yorkshire, diving 3 sumps to Bridge Hall in Goyden Pot with UKMC pal, Cristian Cristea. The following day, I dived Hurtle Pot in Yorkshire for the first time and, apart from a sticky drysuit inflator button trying to fire me back up the Hindenburg Wall on the way out, I didn't nearly die there either. I was very nervous though, it being my first 'elbow' dive since the ear incident in Cambrian slate mine. The weekend after that I dived 4 sumps of Llygad Lluchwr with Michal Poreba followed by my first ever solo cave dive (as opposed to mine dive) in Porth Yr Ogof.

I had been invited by Ashley Hiscock to support him, and Ian France, pushing a deep cave in Northern Spain called Fuente Azul that Summer. The push dives would be 130m deep 'elbow' dives, so not exactly my cup of tea but I saw an opportunity to act as a support diver (which would not involve going anywhere near 130m or past any elbows) whilst learning the ropes of expedition diving and hopefully seeing at least the first sump of the nearby and very famous Pozo Azul on my day off. Unfortunately, Ash's rebreather had a meltdown in Pozo Azul the week before, meaning he was unable to push Fuente and the expedition fell apart. I had already booked a slot on the Eurotunnel train and decided not to waste it. I loaded every piece of diving equipment I owned (which, whilst not as much as I own now, was a lot!) and drove to the Lot region of France where I camped for 9 nights by myself with the intention of solo diving everything I could lay my hands on. At the camp site, I pitched my tent next to the van of a middle-aged man who had multiple home-made rebreathers and a literal trimix factory in the back of his van. I asked what he had been up to and he said he had been diving in St Sauveur, a rather deep cave. He was friendly, we chatted, he seemed very knowledgeable, then a couple of days later he left. It was a number of weeks later when I discovered that the man was

Krzysztof Starnawski, a famous deep cave diver, who had been pushing the end of St Sauveur at nearly 200m depth and had discovered a chimney up to shallower depths but had turned rather than negotiating it. No doubt, he will make a plan to return and, when he does, it will be the elbow dive to end all elbow dives. Godspeed to him.



Preparing for a solo trip into Fontaine Del Truffe, Lot, France

After a couple of dives repeating, by myself, dives I had done on my 'full cave' course, I broke new ground by diving to '440 corner' in Ressel, a classic large French resurgence dive that left me hungry for more. The following day, I found myself at Font Del Truffe, a dreadful-looking puddle by the side of a woodland track which leads, through a short body-sized restriction, into one of the most beautiful underwater caves in the region. By the time I got in the water, there were no less than four walkers chatting to me in French and watching me get ready. They even took photos as I kitted up and dived (a particularly friendly one told me he would text me a few of the photos and, about four weeks later, did exactly that). This must be what it feels like to be Rick Stanton. I cleared sumps 1 and 2, made the climb (which would be a lot easier in higher water, e.g., Spring), caved to sump 3, dived that, climbed out again and went caving to look for sump 4. I suspect I got there and probably turned just before the line hove into view, but it was dry due to low water levels and I was on hands and knees on sharp limestone with no pads and a 10kg cylinder on each shoulder. I've wanted to return ever since to push towards sump 7. I love sump 3, an epic little

thing, so twisty, reminding me of a silly straw with all those loops and twirls before the beverage finally reaches the lips of the drinker. I also enjoyed the knowledge that I got further in that cave than most visitors ever do. That afternoon, I went to Cabouy for a 1 mile round trip swim to Pou Mayssen.

The following morning, I went for a trip into another stunning, multi-sump cave – Marchepied. I cleared sump 1, ditched a cylinder and pushed on through the cave, diving the small sump 2 and negotiating more rifty river passage to dive the first couple of hundred metres of the terminal sump 3, to 20m depth. This cave has a serious CO₂ problem, and the air quality is horrendous. I was puffing and panting when caving between sumps (which thankfully isn't far) and had to take a few breaths from a scuba regulator every now and again to calm the breathing down. On the way back from sump 3 to 2, it is best to walk down into the wet rift, not along the top of it. I realised too late, found myself on increasingly sketchy-feeling ledges and tried to lower myself into the rift rather than backtracking as I should have done. I fell into the rift and got jammed, suspended by one of my cylinders, panting like an asthmatic and trying to think of what to unclip first to get myself out of this mess. In the end, I managed to get down without unclipping anything. It was not pretty or gracious in any way. CO₂ causes feelings of panic and is not conducive to good decision-making. The reason I was in that mess is because I was rushing to get back to the water and out of that poor air. It's important to maintain composure in these situations, a point hammered home that day!



Entrance to Marchepied, Lot, France

That afternoon, I met Pete Mulholland, an old-school CDG head who, many years previously, had made the decision that he was spending so much time pushing French caves that he may as well move there. He introduced me to Oeil De La Doue, a powerful river cave in high water conditions, and Meyraguet, which involved packing our cave diving kit into two canoes and setting off down the Dordogne River to find the entrance in the cliff-like riverbank. This cave has dangerously hypoxic air between sumps, so regulators cannot be removed from the mouth, and is reminiscent of large UK sumps, with less visibility than is usual for France and dirty, discoloured guide lines that blend into the background a little too easily.



Preparing for a dive into Resurgence De St Georges, Lot, France (©Isha Mandot-Mulholland)

The jewels in the crown of that trip were the dives that I undertook solo in Emergence Du Ressel and Resurgence De St Georges. The former was a 720m swim into this incredible system, reaching a depth of 53m. The cave becomes so atmospheric past the 500m point and I have every intention of going further, the next target being the third junction, which marks the start of the 'deep loop'; only another 150m or so distance but at that depth (and still dropping) on open circuit scuba with no scooter, it's not a small job. The latter still represents the longest cave dive I have done in terms of time (also, at the time, distance) and, as a solo dive, it certainly felt a long way from home. I swam 900m upstream and poked down the slope into the deep section to 30m depth; originally planned to turn at 41m as Léger & Andres had done when originally exploring it in 1976, but something in my head told me to turn at 30m, so I did). I returned home from France that year feeling that I had pushed myself and that the trip had been a

worthy alternative to the expedition that it had replaced.



Equipment used for solo dive to 920m distance in Resurgence De St Georges, Lot, France

A month later I moved from London to Bristol. The following Summer I joined the Welsh section of the CDG, thanks to Max Fisher and Malcolm Stewart, and have been on a fairly slippery slope ever since. I'm still a member of UKMC and they will always have my support. Depicted as 'those bloody mine divers' by some stuffy old-school types, it's actually a nationwide network of friendly people with various diving skillsets (from basic mine diving on a pair of 7s to trimix rebreather epics to gnarly sump diving). Without them, I would have struggled to get anywhere with my underground diving in the early days. I try to return the favour occasionally by taking a newly qualified mine diver on their first few dives in the real world and introducing them to others so that they can get that difficult initial momentum going.



Keld Head, Yorkshire (©Simon Perkins)

My ongoing slippery slope has involved the squalor of Ogof Cas in the bank of Neath River, arduous multi-sump trips into the likes of Swildons Hole, P8 and Little Neath River Cave, exploratory dives in large mine complexes in the Pennines and Forest of Dean, an amazing first experience of Keld Head and plenty more besides. I've learned a lot from the

likes of Max Fisher, who has tried tirelessly to knock the edges off me and turn me into a well-rounded sump diver. The day I joined the CDG, the Training Officer, Gareth Davies, took me into Llygad Llchwyr to the fairly terminal point known as The Slot. I repaid him by destroying the visibility with the flick of a fin, leaving him off-line and blind as a bat. A few days later, we went to Upper Cave in Porth Yr Ogof and he had an equally entertaining time following me. The more sump diving I do, the less I like using fins! I seem to be a bad luck charm for poor Gareth, as I also left him stranded with Tarquin Wilton-Jones at the bottom of a pitch in Pwll Dwfn when I snagged an SRT rope and pulled it way out of reach during a surveying trip. I felt obligated to fork out for a round of beers after that one.

I fell in love with 'dry' caving the second I stepped into OFD1 streamway and I've done as much of it as humanly possible over the past three years. In some respects, though, it's always been about the diving. I've never been good with heights and I remember, during one of my very first SRT trips, staring down The Nave in OFD for the first time and thinking "how on earth did sun, sea and bikini-babes turn into... whatever this is?". I've never been the type to do things by halves and this was no different, there was no denying my scuba hobby had got out of hand. I was simply looking for ever more challenging diving and I'd heard there might be some at the bottom of a hole in Wales somewhere. Most CDG trainees learned to dive to find new cave, I learned to cave to find new dives. Now that I'm in it up to my neck though, I can think of nothing more exciting than finding virgin cave or joining two existing ones together by diving.

I continue to be involved in a wide range of subterranean aquabatics and have recently pieced together a diving harness using an SRT sit and chest harness as a basis. This is by no means a new idea, in fact, something of a rite of passage. Despite

having no head for heights, I have a soft spot for Yorkshire potholes and love the idea of dropping down into one and diving through to reappear from another. The highlight of my Summer was supporting Chris Jewell and Andy Torbet on their trip to the 'diver's end' of Daren Cilau. I've also supported Chris' pushing efforts in Wookey Hole and he in turn has supported me in laying some line into the unknown at Noxon Park iron mine. I also seem to have struck up a fruitful partnership with Mark Burkey – a fellow SWCC member, Derbyshire CDG trainee and underground photographer extraordinaire who seems to know his way around every cave in the world. His goal is to obtain modern, high quality images from seldom or never photographed locations beyond sumps. For me, it's probably just an excuse to go diving.

I've had plenty of cavers accuse me of being some kind of madman over the past few years. So many seem to view cave diving as a high-risk activity, whereas the truth is, that done properly, it's low-risk but high-consequence. I then watch those same people free-climb a muddy, exposed pitch with no sense of irony whatsoever. Maybe we all have to pick our poison. I may not be able to breathe indefinitely underwater but at least I float in it, so I'll go round the wet way thanks. Career dive number 484 and I'm still alive. I guess I'm a diver, not a climber.

Preparing for a trip to Gloom Room in Daren Cilau by diving Pwll Y Cwm (©Chris Jewell)



Cave Diving in the Lot – with not a clue how to get there!

Andrew Ward

The early 1990s saw my first cave diving trip to the Département du Lot (referred to here as ‘the Lot’) in the region of Midi-Pyrénées. We only had a few basic cave diving location details with us. Many people discuss diving in the Dordogne; however, this causes some confusion as the caves in the Lot are in a different Département and region from the Dordogne (some still talk about going to the Dordogne when they actually mean the Lot). It was necessary to take all the equipment we would need, compressors and so on as the nearest dive shops were a three hour drive away from our base.

Our journey started in Portsmouth. The three divers and Sue, plus our two sons, met there for the ferry crossing to France. Our plan was to stay in a hotel at the halfway point to our destination. This seemed like a good plan. One of our group had visited the Lot region a few years previously, as a tourist so knew the way. What could possibly go wrong? We headed off in convoy with me following the ‘pathfinder’ car. After about four hours of driving along very slow A roads (not the nice big N road) and many junctions to negotiate, we decided we would stop at the next town that had a hotel. Fortunately, we found a hotel with available rooms, we think largely due to it being a trucker’s hotel!

Once unpacked, we hit the bar for a few drinks with locals and passing truckers. Bilingual conversation does in fact improve after a few drinks. One of our party decided on an early night, which was fine as we put the drinks for everyone onto his tab! We had a leisurely breakfast in the morning and a walk around the town, assuming that it was only a five-hour drive to the Lot. That was of course until we looked at a map (this was in the days before smart phone and sat nav). The map made it clear that rather than being halfway to the Lot, we were in fact about two hours from the ferry port via an N road!



Diving in Ressel cave in the Lot

Our ‘pathfinder’ friend said he would provide improved route finding for the next stage of the journey so off we went again. After an hour, and for some unexplained reason, we drove in ‘magic roundabout-style’ on an interchange. Round and round we went while our pathfinder decided on the best route to take. After passing (rather than taking) several signs pointing us towards Brive la Gaillarde (just north of the Lot), we decided to abandon our pathfinder and take one of these as a good way to navigate (we had no mobile phone to let them know of course). From that point onwards, we made good progress, finally reaching Gramat, the centre of the Lot caving universe. For information, I would note these days it is so much easier to reach the Lot with better cars, fast N roads and péage tags making payment easy.

We called in at the house of the chap we were to rent a gîte from had a chat and a coffee with him

Our base in the Lot



and his wife. He led us to the gîte at Gruffile, 12Km from Gramat (did I mention this is the centre of the Lot caving universe...). We had a look around the gîte, had yet another coffee with the owner when his wife rang to say the other two had finally turned up, two hours after us! I headed back to Gramat to show them the way, and on reaching the gîte owners house again, I found one of our friends was looking a little shocked. It seems that while waiting for us, the house owner's wife (she spoke no English they no French) had given them a glass of water each and put a jug of water on the table. One being thirsty and the temperature being above 35 degrees, knocked his back quickly. Unfortunately, it was not water but Pastis!

We stayed for six days in the area, heading back early Saturday morning for the late afternoon ferry home. The arrival was during a hot dry spell and as mentioned previously, above 35 degrees. There had also been no rain for five weeks and so a very parched landscape. The gîte was great, and the owner even made space in his barn for us to store the diving gear and compressors.

Our first full day, Sunday, arrived hot and dry. The day was spent gear fettling. We had a 'hotchpotch'



At our gîte, loading for the days diving

of big back mount cylinders from many sources. As a UK and CDG trained cave diver (I have never dived in open water), this was all new to me. So, we spent an enjoyable afternoon cylinder pumping, working out how all the cylinders, STAB jackets and lights integrated as well drinking beer of course. The big dive lights we had were all homemade as at that time, there was nothing much available to buy.



Pumping and tea

Monday morning started with a visit to Gramat for fuel and food shopping. We were also joined by another UK diver and his wife camping nearby. Then off we went to the Ressel for the first dive of the trip. This involved a cross county trip on mostly B-road equivalents with parched brown fields either side and picturesque villages with inviting-looking cafes. We found the Ressel and parked above it. The route down to the kitting-up area was a steep overgrown gravel slope to an access point to the water. We had to beat the undergrowth down to make space for kitting up. We put drysuits on getting in the water quickly, to prevent overheating, the air temperature being around 36 degrees. We proceeded to put on our heavy kit whilst in the cooler temperature of the river.

The river was brown, sluggish and shallow due to the ongoing drought. We waded for a bit before it became deep enough to swim. Visibility in the river was a few centimetres and the water warm. Progressing on, we hit an upwelling of cold water (relative to the river water). This represented the edge of a crater and this was where we were able to dive down. The visibility became clearer and clearer, like driving out of fog.

At the cave entrance the visibility was beautifully crystal clear. On entering the cave, you could see the roof, floor, and walls, even in the large passage. In my usual dives I was used to seeing just one small aspect of a cave passage (and even then, not much of that due to poor visibility). This though, was incredible.

Our first dive in Ressel took us to the shaft via the deep route and out via the shallow route. The dive was great fun. A pleasant float back along the river and final wade took us back to base and de-kitting with beer and medals to follow. Then back to the house for more beer and food. We pumped

cylinders and rearranged the gear to sort out issues found on the first dive. We continued this routine, post-dive for the whole stay (and is still my normal practice). The trip was very social and unregimented. This is something lost to those who go for the all-inclusive type of cave diving trip available in the Lot these days ('hi-de-hi' style if you remember this veiled reference to a holiday camp ethos!).

Our second dive the following day was back to the Ressel and more fun again. The following days saw visits to a few more caves and more great diving. We also managed to take time out to visit a few tourist sites. I would recommend Rocamadour (although very crowded in the summer months). In the evenings we continued to explore the local area to find dry caves. This would take us to caves like the Gouffre de Réveillon, with the second largest cave entrance in western Europe and sometimes to a glorified 'rabbit hole'. We even took time out to go canoeing, although with low water conditions, a certain amount of dragging took place, as well as scampering upriver banks to look at inviting holes.



The road above the Ressel – me far left

In the time we were in the Lot we only saw two other cave divers. They were helpful in directing us to other dive sites. This trip was just the start of my long interest in cave diving in the Lot that still persists to this day. We regularly returned for the next ten years to the Gruffile gîte, only stopping when the owner sold it. We now stay near Miers.

Our final diving day of the trip (Friday) also coincided with the long drought breaking and the most incredible thunder and lightning storm with biblical amounts of rain turning the roads into rivers. At least we had packed the gear before the storm arrived. Then a final beer and meal at the house it was time for bed. Saturday morning was an early 05:30 start to give us time to reach the late afternoon crossing home. This time, there was no 'convoy system'; just everyone for themselves. These days I take a more leisurely approach and split the journey with a hotel stop in both directions or include a visit to family.

I have dived in the Lot nearly every year since this first trip, normally accompanied by Sue. The divers

on the trips have changed over the years although the fun hasn't. Has the Lot changed? The Ressel cave itself hasn't changed, but the area around it has. There is now a large car park situated nearby, just for cave divers, and a café close by. Some who come to the Lot will base their entire trip on diving the Ressel. This, however, misses so much. With more divers comes more pressure on dive sites. In the future will it be harder to just do your own thing? Some now make their livelihood from the caves and several dive shops have sprung up. This may persuade some to take a more controlling interest as income depends on the caves. Or maybe not?



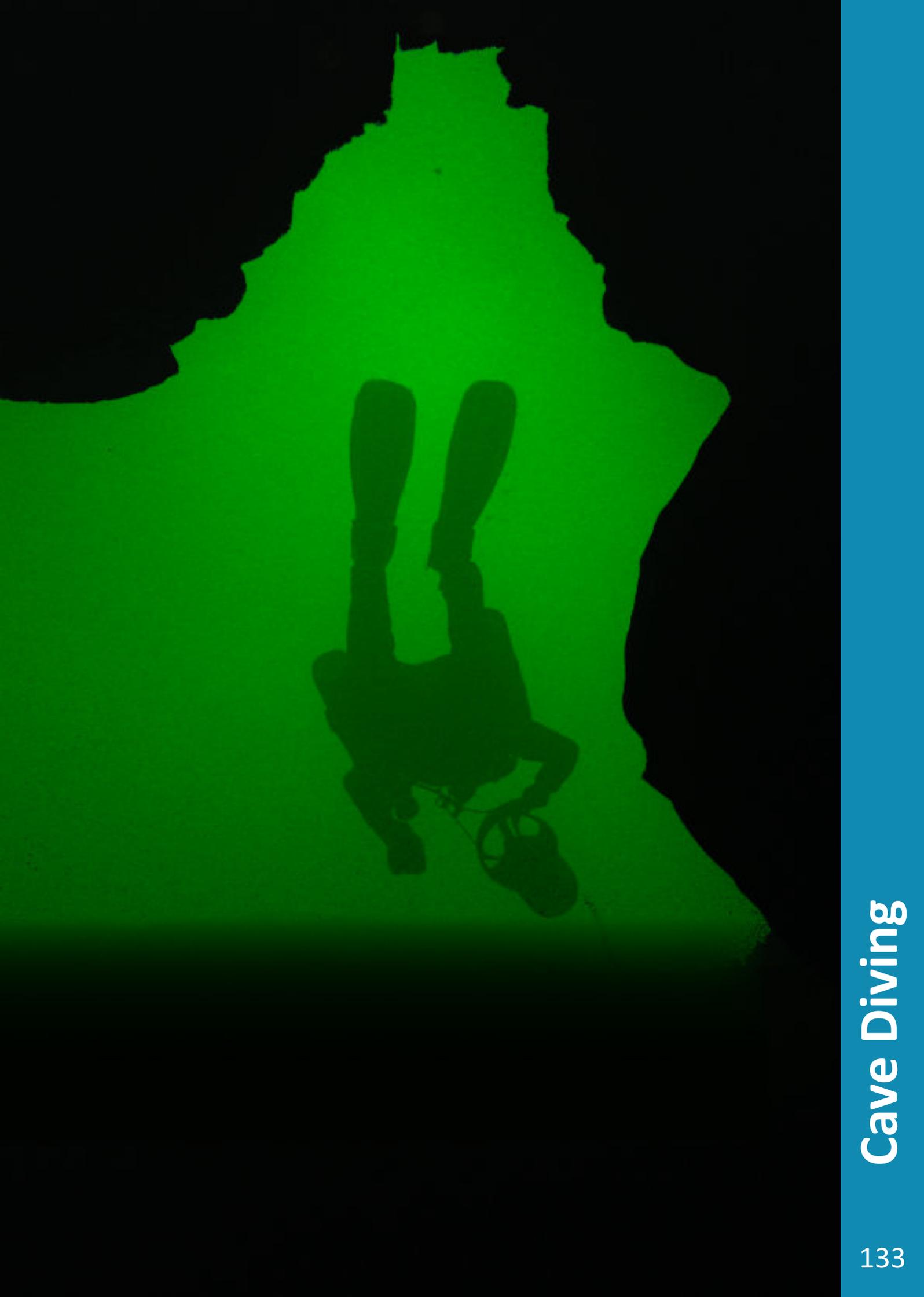
Sue, without whom none of this would have happened

From the notes I made and further research I have carried out, I produced the CDG Lot and Dordogne cave diving guide (<https://www.librairiespeleo.com> Référence : S2003-08). This is still available much photocopied! I should say the Lot is not the only good cave diving area of France there are many others, and I am lucky enough to have visited most. Why the popularity of the Lot over these? Well, where else can you more or less reverse the car into the water?

I would note this account is remembering events of a while ago memory can be imprecise at times.

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10 Years a Caver

Mark Burkey

In 2009 at 40 years of age, and pushing 18 stone, my idea of an adventure was to jump on my motorbike and tear about country lanes on a weekend, with the highlight being stopping off for a bacon roll at one of the many lay-by pitstops.

It was in this same year that Jess (the lady who I would go on to marry) and I met. My new girlfriend was, let's face it, a bit weird. She was into climbing, mountaineering and this bizarre sport called caving. At 42 she was a full-time student and I really wasn't sure this new fling would last long, we just had nothing in common.

After a couple of months of dating Jess, we were walking in the Malvern hills. She was fresh as a daisy with me bright red faced, puffing and generally looking like a candidate for a coronary. Jess was

telling me she had just been offered a placement in China followed by a month in Africa with her University over the summer.

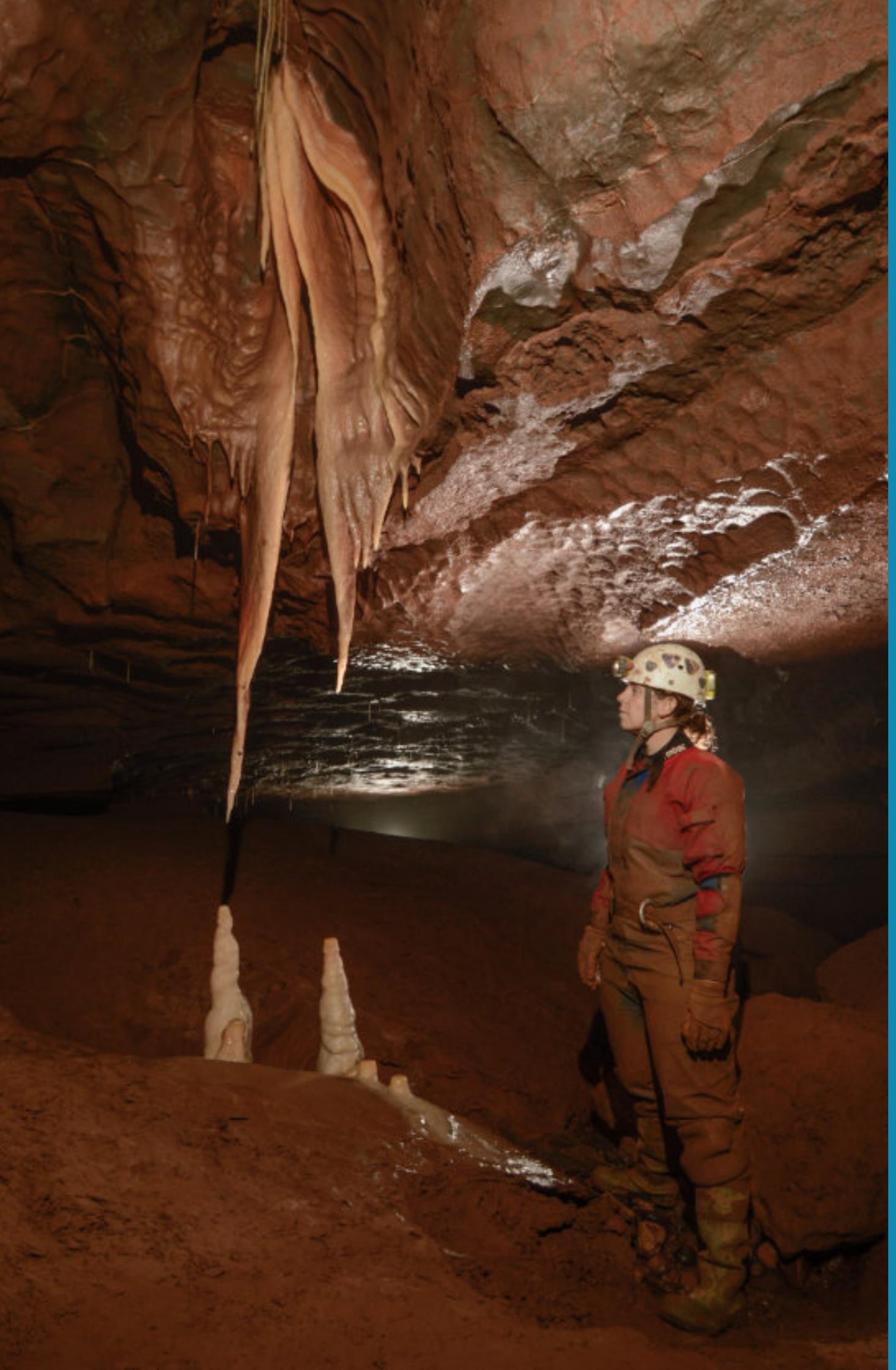
It was then I decided that if I stood any chance of keeping this lady, I would need to make some changes. I gave up smoking and began walking 6 miles a day with a load of weight in a back pack. On the weekends I headed off to the mountains to walk, and by the time Jess got back from her adventures I had lost 3 stone and could finally exercise for more than 10 minutes without risk of a heart attack.

On our first weekend away in the mountains of North Wales, I was finally keeping up with her stride for stride. I finished the last 30m to the summit at a trot and turned back to Jess beaming. It was at this

▼ *Martin Wright and Geoff Ward in Peak Cavern Resurgence (©Mark Burkey)*

Chloe Burgess in the Old World Series LNRC (©Mark Burkey) ►





Ashley Hiscock and Rick Van Dijk
in Sump 1 Izvor Licanke (©Mark
Burkey)



point, on the summit of a mountain, after months apart, Jess turned to me and snapped, “*typical, you just can’t let me be better at anything!*”

I had been nagging her for ages to let me come caving, but she said they were her friends and she didn’t want me muscling in on another of her hobbies. In 2010 my constant nagging paid off. I promised I would quietly tag along at the back, I assured her it wasn’t really my kind of thing. I’d probably only go the once, just to try it.

It has been said of me that I have something of an obsessive, ‘all or nothing’ personality, and I guess looking at my last decade of caving that is a pretty accurate description. I have rarely missed the chance to cave on a weekend since discovering the best sport in the world, and it has indeed taken over my life in many ways.

To help document my new adventures I began to write blogs of our trips, and soon wanted photos to illustrate them. I started with an Olympus tough camera, taking point and click photos. At that time most of my caving was done with a chap called Brendan Marris who is an amazing photographer, specialising in documenting the caves of South Wales. He was my inspiration to begin ‘proper’ underground photography and his shots were, and still are, something I aspired to. For my 43rd birthday, Jess, with advice from Brendan, bought

me two strobes and infrared triggers for my camera so I could begin flash photography underground. Jess has often said it was one of the biggest mistakes she ever made!

I have been truly lucky thus far in my cave photography to have been afforded some amazing opportunities. To see sights, I would never had even thought to dream of, and travel to places I would not otherwise have visited with some truly great and inspirational friends. At the beginning of 2017 one such opportunity arose when I was asked by Christine Grosart to help document a cave exploration project in Croatia. There would only be one snag... the cave in question was beyond a short 20m sump and I would need to learn to cave dive. I would be required to join the Cave Diving Group (CDG) and train to a point that both I and Christine were happy that I wouldn’t kill myself. My entry in to the CDG was explained to the section, as being ‘temporary’, only so that I could be used for this one project. One of the members asked what would happen if I wished to continue after the project and Christine, after assuring them this would not happen, promised to be my mentor if that became the case.....A promise that she laughingly says she’d have never have made had she known!

The CDG mentoring program is tailored for each trainee. Mine was a little unusual in that I started off

Chris Jewel and George Linnane in Lake Chamber beyond the 5th sump LNRC (©Mark Burkey)





Chris Jewel in New World Passage beyond the sumps LNRC (©Mark Burkey)

by diving a back mounted configuration called a twinset and then moved to the more traditional UK side-mount style. Christine has since invested vast amounts of her time and money on my training, and often says that she is passing forward the time and experience that was afforded to her by her mentor, Clive Westlake. So, it is perhaps fitting that Clive's amazing photography beyond sumps would be the motivation for me to combine my new found love of diving with my cave photography.

In 1967 members of the University of Bristol Speleological Society (UBSS) passed a small sump in Bridge cave to enter a significant discovery that would be named Little Neath River Cave (LNRC). The same year they opened up a 'dry' cavers route to assist in pushing this stunning stream cave and several further sumps would later be passed.

My first experience of the cave would be in 2013 when I would enter via the aqueous crawls to marvel at the huge stream passage and finally be stopped at sump 2. I can clearly remember lying flat out looking at the line disappearing in to the cold sump water and thinking that cave divers need their heads examining. In 2014 Brendan and I located the 'Old World Series' in LNRC and it was whilst on this photographic trip that I first heard of the 'New World Series' of passages that lay beyond the sumps.

Years later, now that I was developing the skill set that would allow me to visit this section of the cave, it felt only right and proper that this should be the target for my first photography project 'beyond the sumps'.

Over the past year I had been doing quite a lot of caving and diving with another South Wales member, George Linnane, and suggested to him that it would be a good project for us. He was equally enthusiastic and so, as the lockdowns of 2020 ended, we recruited a team of sherpas and headed in to recce the line condition in the further sumps and scout possible photographic locations. Between the 5 of us, we transported 2 x 7ltr and 2 x 3ltr cylinders as well as line reels and the rest of the diving kit through Bridge Cave. I, George and Simon Perkins dived the kit through sump 1, whilst Melissa Bell and Laura Appleby ran around the dry entrance to meet back up the other side. Re-grouped, Simon dumped his kit and took on a sherpa role to move mine and George's dive kit forward to Sump 2. Water levels were quite high and the canal was a joy to float along with all the kit. The rest of the passage proved a bit of slog, but more than manageable with our helpers. At sump 2, we kitted up and George dove into the sump to repair any line breaks. After giving him a head start, I followed, tidying the belays as we had practiced. The sumps

David Jahn in canal bypass LNRC
(©Mark Burkey)





Chris Jewel in Lake Chamber beyond the sumps LNRC (©Mark Burkey)

are short and shallow, the longest only being 60m and we had remarkably good visibility. We had soon dived sumps 3 and 4 to emerge in large stream way passage. We scouted around over the next hour but had neglected to take a survey and so weren't entirely sure where the climb to New World Passage and the start of sump 5 were. Simon had set an early call out for himself and already headed out. We had arranged to meet our other two sherpas for the return carry. Time was running short, so we dove back through the sumps to meet up with them but emerged to find we were early... or they were late. We stripped down and bagged up the dive kit, neither of us looking forward to carrying it without help. Resigned to our task, we began carrying/dragging the heavy kit through the cave, rounded the corner and found Laura and Mel hiding in the dark, giggling. Relieved to have help, we took the smiles off their faces by loading them up with dive cylinders. Once more at Sump 1, George and I dove the kit through whilst the girls headed out the dry way before regrouping at the boulder choke in Bridge cave to help once more.

The following week George was busy with another dive project. Now, knowing the line was in reasonable condition and that I would only need 3 litre cylinders, I decided to do a solo trip back in with the survey to locate the way on past sump 4.

With my kit weighing in at a mere 20kg, my wife Jess helped me through Bridge cave before waving me off through sump 1. I planned to leave a cylinder at sump 2 and so had brought a third cylinder which I left the other side of sump 1. Again, high water levels assisted me through the canal and the carry didn't seem too bad through to Sump 2. I was soon through sumps 3 and 4 and looking at a very slippery looking rope climb up in to New World Passage. I decided it would be unwise to try and climb this without anyone around and so continued on to sump 5. Once through, navigation was straightforward, and I was soon looking forward to being able to bring the camera through to photograph the stunning chambers before me. I had only breathed down one cylinder, with the other as a bailout and hadn't needed the line reel I had taken, so I left one cylinder and line reel in preparation for the final project dive. Upon exit, George appeared at the rescue dump. His dive had been called off and so had come to help carry kit back out; shame he hadn't arrived earlier!

Finally, the day arrived and on a chilly October morning myself, George, Chris Jewell and Martin Wright met up at the car park. I had managed to squeeze my standard camera kit (consisting of a Nikon D800, Sigma Art lens, and 3 x AD200 strobe units) into a suitable case. It required an additional

4kg to make it neutral in the sump and so weighed in at an unwieldy 12kg to carry. Unfortunately, at sump 1, Martin had a failure with his breathing sets and so only the three of us continued on. Again, one of my tanks was left on the other side of the sump. My remaining tank and lead were distributed between Chris and George to carry. With the excitement and adrenaline, it felt like no time at all before we were kitting up ready to dive through the next sump. Chris would lead, George to follow, and I would bring up the rear with the camera. All went smoothly and I was soon happily clicking away past sump 5 in LNRC 6. After an hour or so it was obvious that George, who had a good size rip in his suit, was getting pretty cold and so we agreed that he would head out whilst Chris and I got a final quick shot in New World Passage. On exit, crawling between sumps, I was feeling pretty exhausted. The 12kg of camera box was feeling more like 20kg, but I was delighted with how things had gone, and this energised me to push through to meet back up with the others. Emerging from Sump 2, we began stripping down the gear and bagging it up for the carry out when I noticed the bleed valve on the camera box was open. It had come undone whilst crawling between sumps and I hadn't thought to check it before diving. With my heart in my mouth, I opened the case to find everything swimming in

water, no wonder it had felt so heavy. I ejected the batteries and memory card and dried everything the best I could before packing it away again. Hoping that at least the photos may have survived. George and Chris took both my cylinders and lead, but even so, I found it tough as I exited. George is strong, but Chris is a machine and kept doubling back to help us keep up. Exiting through Bridge Cave, we found Martin had waited all this time to help with the final carry back to the cars.

Fortunately, the SD card did survive. Unfortunately, the camera and lens were not so well. But I learnt a lot on my first project to take my photography beyond the sumps, not least of which is that caving is brilliant, but it's the people you share it with that make it awesome.

Ashley Hiscock entering Sump 2 Izor Licanke (©Mark Burkey)







Chris Jewel and George Linnane in Lake Chamber beyond the sumps LNRC (©Mark Burkey)

◀ *Jess Burkey in the entrance duck LNRC (©Mark Burkey)*

George Linnane entering Bridge sump. Bridge Cave (Mobile phone photo) (©Mark Burkey)



FRONT COVER

Hywel Davies in the Grotte de la Diau, Haute-Savoie (2009) - Photographer Tony Baker

INSIDE FRONT COVER

Pont d'Arc, Ardeche (2012) - Photographer Pete Hobson

Cueva Mur, Cantabria (2019) - Photographer Tim Lewingdon

INSIDE BACK COVER

Rocamadour, The Lot (2010) - Photographer Tim Lewingdon

Aboriginal cave art, Australia - Photographer Pete Francis

BACK COVER

Christine Grosart, Ivor Licanke, Croatia (2019) - Photographer Mark Burkey



