



Mendip Caving Group Newsletter

CZECHOSLOVAKIA

I have had this article for nearly a year now and thought it was time to use it, especially as the Group Expedition is to visit Czechoslovakia this year. Owing to its length I have decided to split it up over two Editions, hoping this will not detract from its quality. I must apologise for the lack of accents on the place names.

An account of a visit made in 1973, a week or two before the International Congress. Last August Bill Jones, Peter Mathews and Don Vosper set off for the middle of Czechoslovakia: a much depleted party from the original one of eleven.

Crossing the Channel at midnight with a brimming tank of petrol, we hurried through Belgium hoping to gain sufficient momentum to carry us through Germany, where we hoped not to discover the cost of petrol. Curiosity about the derivation of names of campsites led us off in search of Camp Monte Kaolino - the last camping place before the Czech border. As we neared the camp-site we rounded a bend in the road to be confronted by an incredible mountain of gleaming, white kaolin clay, at the foot of which lay the camp. It was mid afternoon, very hot and the place was packed

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solid; a few skiers slid down the hot white slopes of the mountain; and we slid on our way.

And, so we motored on to find a very small, pleasant site listed in none of the books, and which really was the last before the border.

The Land of Knedlicky and Brambory.

Crossing the frontier and completing visa formalities took some two hours; a bit longer than the five minutes flat in the old days before the Russian Invasion, but, by now it was time for lunch and we rolled to a halt outside a sun-drenched restaurace. We found a careful deliberation over the average menu was rather pointless. The only real choice boiled down to whether you have knedlicky (dumplings) or brambory (potatoes) the rest always turned out to be one sort or other of stew.

The first cave we visited was the show cave of Konepruska, near Beroun, a small town on the road to Praha. The cave is the longest in Bohemia, and was discovered halfway up the face during quarrying operations.

And, then on to Praha, or Prague, where we planned to camp and meet up with Graham Gregory; but he never turned up. The evening was spent in the dearest restaurace in town. And, it must be explained here that minimum currency restrictions in Czechoslovakia require one to spend a minimum amount each day. We found it quite difficult to keep up the average just camping and caving. It didn't help much spending our money on beer; it was about two pence a pint!

Moravsky Kras.

From Praha we motored South to Brno before heading to Blansko and the village of Sloup. We stayed in the chalet camp here for one night, and visited the spectacular Macocha Chasm, which is 138m deep.

The following day was Monday, and time for calling in at offices of the Moravsky Kras, who we wrote to before leaving London. After lots of phone calls and trips to various offices round town we eventually met up with Miroslav Cechak, who was better known as Mike and Jindrich Kvasnicka, known as Henry. Henry spoke very good German and quickly organised things; we followed him back to their field centre at Skalni-mlyn, where we camped for the rest of our stay. But, it was Mike, with his painstaking English, who looked after us for most of the time. It took quite a few days for us to appreciate that he was the head warden of the Moravsky Kras National Park - we could not understand how anyone who did so little and consumed so much beer could be in charge of anything, but there it was. As he put it when asked what his job entailed, "I look after conservation... the best way to conserve the country side is do nuffink; and all day long I do nuffink, so they make me head....."

Skalni-mlyn.

The field centre at Skalni-Mlyn was an odd looking construction. Essentially, it was a timber building made up almost entirely of a high steeply pitched roof. Here Mike lived in the upper steeply pointed room. Two other wardens lived here with him - "Wanker", who spent his entire time working on his motor bike and "Willie Stanton" who didn't do much at all and knocked off to go home on Wednesday morning. Henry lived a little way away on his farm. I suppose I should apologise by the confusing names given to these guys. We simply called them after whoever they reminded us of.

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CZECHOSLOVAKIA - Cont/.....

what else do you call a fat little chap with a crew cut and glasses whose name is Wankel? In addition to these there were also two divers staying there in preparation for the International Congress.

Somehow, our original party of eleven had swollen to thirty, but, there were only three of us! So heavily outnumbered by our guides we set about planning our stay.

The Abseiling Record

Mike took on an air of authority and spoke about drawing up lists and time-tables and programmes and guides. We looked on silently, but amongst ourselves we began to grow a little worried by all this paper work.

Time at Skalni mlyn often stood still. Sudden unexplained pauses seemed a frequent event in Czech speleological circles and proved something of a mystery to us. Although they were an excuse for a beer or two everyone poured beers down their throats all day anyway. During these lulls everyone waited around and looked out of the window or up at the trees and then at their watches, (if they had them) as if something important was about to happen, but it never did. Then just as sudden everyone would leap up and rush around, tackle and odd items of clothing would be thrown about. We would be late, we must meet our friends and off people would rush in all directions.

It was during the first of these lulls that Mike told us about his skill at abseiling.... "My friends, I am champion abseiler of whole Czechoslovak.... fantastic.... in winter for two years.. with my wife I make abseil... ONE THOUSAND METRES... fantastic!.. experience!... fantastic!... I have big story in Czech newspaper!.. abseil took twenty seconds... really fantastic". At this stage Bill was beginning to look decidedly worried as admiration for Mike's exploits became clouded by the uneasy thought that we were going caving with him the next day. Mike continued, "fantastic, experience, fantastic.... I was unconscious forty days and have seventy five stitches.... fantastic, we only had thirty metre rope.. and land in snow drift... big party... much beer... fantastic". We quickly found that Mike's super efficient image was just a front. The paper work on his desk was thrown away and Mike revealed himself as the very model of disorganisation and one of the biggest drunkards we had met for a long time.

A Tour of the Caves.

A sudden flurry of activity found us setting out for a tour of the local show caves. There were the three of us and Mike, and Henry, Wanker, Willie and hordes of odd pods. We were completely outnumbered by guides. But, on reaching the first show cave we found we were suddenly alone, with Mike. The rest of our 'guides' went no further than the refreshment stall where they stopped for beer. After a leisurely tour of the cave enlivened by an unfamiliarity with the lights we emerged to pick up our 'guides' and set off for the next cave. Here we left our 'guides' once again at the beer stall and went on our way.

Sloupsko -Sosuvske System

This cave was visited twice, one through the show cave section and again when we descended Steps Chasm (90m) to visit the lower streamway. This was very dry and we were able to penetrate

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some way into the sumps.

The next caves we visited were Balcarka Jeskyne and Katerinska Jeskyne.

Punkevni Jeskyne

This was the finest show cave we were to see. The tour followed some 800m. of passage, then surprise, surprise we came out into daylight just above the lake at the bottom of the Macocha Chasm. From here we went back to see the rest of the show cave, travelling mainly in battery driven boats.

Our visits to the various show caves have not received the full description they deserve. But, it should not be thought that these tours were uneventful. We found our own way around and had one awkward moment in Sloup Cave when we were caught without lights after the power supply failed during a thunder storm.

13C

There are so many caves in Moravia that it was obviously difficult to think up names for them all, many such as this one just have a number.

The cave of 13C is near the hamlet of Holstejn. The entrance is at the bottom of a small cliff face just inside the edge of a thick wood. A dark gloomy hut used by the early explorers and digging parties stands close to the entrance.

Entry was gained down a wide tube closed by a vast iron lid getting on for five feet across. Essentially, the cave consists of a dry shaft 100m. deep at the bottom of which one meets the Bila Voda River which sinks close by. The shaft is broken up into a number of pitches the deepest and last of which opens out to the streamway. This is a fixed ladder of 45m mounted at 70°. Now this is not quite so simple as it sounds because it seems the thing to do is to have everyone on the ladder at once. And, if the blokes above you hasn't got his boot in your face it's probably because he's standing on your fingers. Added to this the natural resonance of the ladder takes some getting used to. A swing of two to three feet about once a second after a few beers can have far retching effects.

Once in the streamway, we inflated our rubber dingies and set off at a brisk paddle downstream. This cave was once the scene of intensive digging - friend Henry was a member of the professional group that used to work here. In those days the cave was fitted out with fixed electric lighting and a pneumatic air line. The lighting cable had long since suffered the effects of water. But, we found the airline useful for propelling ourselves along the stream. We floated through high lofty passages, and passed stalagnite grottoes separated by smaller sections, once sumps, blasted by early digging parties.

The streamway is about 1½ km. long and disappears in a sump. The stream of the Bila Voda reappears in the vast Amaterska Jaskyne.

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