

GOUFFRE BERGER

by
Alan
Dougherty

It is not my intention in this article to provide a technical information sheet for would-be visitors to the Gouffre Berger. This has been variously attempted before, and as one group of pitch-riggers was reputed to be carrying both note-book and tape-measure, I presume may be presented in a quantitative form elsewhere. I do, however, hope to include some pieces of useful information gathered from experience.

I had been invited to join the Whernside Manor expedition, along with two other MCG members - Mike Haselden (also Speleo-Rhal) and Steve Lane (also BEC and Imperial College). The team consisted of some thirty cavers drawn from the regions of England and Wales, but with a predominance of northerners.

Travelling down in the Whernside minibus (which I met at Dover), I arrived in the Vercours on Sunday 1st July. Perhaps the most gruelling part of the trip was crossing London on the Underground, with two tackle bags and a large rucksack !

We had decided to camp in the village of Autrans. Although a twenty minute drive to the road-head at La Molière, the campsite in the village offered civilised facilities and can be highly recommended. Previous expeditions have camped at La Molière, but have found the water supply limited, and have experienced trouble with herds of tent-destroying bovines. One should remember that La Molière is two and a half miles from the Berger entrance. I can see little to be gained from camping at La Molière, and you would certainly need to be a sound sleeper to overcome the constant clanging of the cow-bells.

On the following day (Monday), a dozen British cavers were to be seen carrying tackle sacs to the entrance. The local 1:25000 maps were of little use as they showed only a few of the forest tracks found on the ground. The sketch map from the recent Crewe report was quite useful but hopelessly out of scale, as >

we found out when pacing the various sections. We did reconnoitre the route from La Molière back to Autrans, via the forest-covered ridge and the Pas de Bellecombe, but most seemed to consider that, if caught at the road-head without transport, it would be better to wait than walk back.

On Tuesday 3rd, a small group started to rig the cave. It was hoped to complete the rigging in one push, with one over-night stop at Camp 1. This could be made feasible by a second team carrying in bags of tackle for the lower section to the Hall of Thirteen, and by a third team carrying in the bivouac gear to Camp 1.

Together with Steve Lane, Mike Haselden, David Kay (Croydon), Robert Sermon (Moldywarps) and Bernard Taylor (Red Rose), I was in the sherpa party immediately following the riggers. We left a couple of hours behind the rigging party, with the idea of catching them up near Camp 1. However they found it necessary to place a number of bolts, and thus we caught them up very early on. The cave has numerous bolts in place, especially in the upper section, but many are in most peculiar places.

The whole of the rigging to the base of Aldo's Shaft was completed without a re-belay, but did include one rather awkward deviation.

Ice lined the entrance shafts, making them rather spectacular. The Meanders certainly required concentration, but are quite feasible without using the old wooden stemples that are present. Indeed, if carrying a tackle sac hung from your harness, the stemples are a complete nuisance because you are constantly lifting the sac over each one in turn. Although in places the passage is restricted in height, I found it far easier to carry the tackle sac on my back.

Once into the Grand Gallery the scale of passage becomes enormous. In many places the roof is not visible. We were lucky to find Lake Cadoux dry, but still had to leave a dinghy and line in case of a rise in water level. On reaching the Bourgin Hall we were treated to views of the first formations of the system, and they were on a huge scale.

The Tyrolienne, a traverse over a cascade, was good fun and led to the top of the Great Rubble Heap. Aptly named, this huge scree and boulder slope runs down to Camp 1. In clambering down it, one has the feeling of being on a mountainside, such is the scale of the place. Some of the boulders are enormous, and this section of the cave was hard going on the return.

The Hall of Thirteen is certainly a place any serious caver should try to visit. The approach is magical. From the base of the Great Rubble Heap you traverse the edges of huge gour pools with the thirteen majestic stalagmites in the distance. Moving forward, their scale gradually becomes more obvious and impressive.

It was here that we thankfully handed over our tackle sacs to the rigging party, who were resting and feeding. At least they would have been eating had the tin-opener not been forgotten. Fortunately I was carrying a knife with tin-opener - this was not to be the only time it came in handy.

We made a leisurely return to the surface, which gave the opportunity for photography, and attempting to take in the grandeur of the place. We emerged in the dark, after a nine hour trip, and were most grateful to find that Rob's wife, Cathy, had prepared us all a meal at the campsite.

Wednesday was mainly a rest day for me, but along with Mike Haselden and Dave Kay, I paid a visit to the Grotte Bournilion in the Bourne Gorge. This cave has the most grand entrance - reputedly the highest in Europe - and provided an interesting one hour boulder hop. There are good formations in places. The terminal sump pool is very reminiscent of the Third Chamber in Wookey Hole.

We also paid a visit to Marbach's shop near Pont-en-Royans. The man himself, looking just like he does in 'Techniques de la Spéléologie Alpine', spoke good English, but only after I had failed to describe a rexotherm bivouac in French. I am assured the quality of his English improves in line with the amount spent.

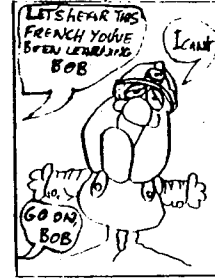
Late on Wednesday we learnt that the rigging party had decided to return from the head of Puits Gache. So on Thursday Paul Ramsden and Rob Sermon were to descend to finish the rigging below Gache.

Along with Dave Kay, Steve Lane and Bernard Taylor, I followed them a couple of hours later in an attempt at the bottom. Dave and myself made good progress to Camp 1. Indeed we actually over-shot the Camp and had to return from the Hall of Thirteen. The other pair arrived at the Camp some twenty minutes after, by which time we had brewed tea.

On our first trip into the cave we had not carried water and suffered consequently. Both Steve and I had felt very dehydrated and my lips had cracked. This time, lesson learnt, water bottle and purifying tablets were carried.

Following a short break, Dave and myself continued on down the system. After the Hall of Thirteen the passages close down and the formations became more easily visible. Of particular note was the 'Elephant's Trunk' stalactite. This hollow stalactite discharges a small stream into a pool a couple of metres below. From afar the sound of the falling water is so amplified as to make you think it is the main streamway you are hearing. Good helictites were present in this area.

Bob Speleo &



This section was most sporting, especially the canals of the Couffinades. As these were rigged with traverse lines, I found it possible even to keep feet dry by climbing along the sides of the passage, but this probably used up more energy than would have been lost by wading. If available, pontonnières are the obvious solution to this section.

Going really well I clipped into a diagonally-rigged rope on a short cascade after the canals, only to find that two-thirds of the way down I had no slack in the system. The pitches had been rigged tightly and, as usual, I was using an additional friction krab with my descendeur.

Efforts to change to ascenders failed because there was no slack to get my chest ascender locked onto the rope. Eventually, after some twenty minutes hanging around trying to sort out the problem, I decided the best course of action was to cut the rope below me and ascend the then vertically hanging rope. Fortunately I was carrying the aforementioned knife, and had noticed spare rope coiled at the base of the pitch. On severing the rope I pendulumed with some force against the wall of the pot and under the cascade. Luckily I was able to bridge to keep out of the worst of the water, whilst I sorted out my ascent.

By this stage Bernard, Steve and a solo-travelling Mike Haselden had arrived at the pitch-head. Shortening the traverse line enabled us to provide Steve with enough rope to re-rig the pitch. This involved a spectacular pendulum across deep water, which Steve accomplished with fine precision, keeping his back-side just above the water level.

I was cold from my wetting, not to mention a little shaken, and decided to call it a day here. Very kindly Steve offered to accompany me out of the cave. I donned gloves, balaclava and spare polar jacket, and by the time we reached Camp 1 was nearly over-heating.

Following a late supper at the Camp we continued to make steady progress, emerging after some fourteen hours to struggle along the forest tracks to La Molière in the dark.

We arrived just as Friday's dawn was breaking, and witnessed the most spectacular silhouette of the Alps, viewed over the cloud-filled valley of the River Drac.

I am sure that had we descended earlier in the day (we had a 2pm start) that we would have felt much less tired. Timing of descent is important especially if
continued on page 8 ...



trying for the bottom and out, without a bivi. Consider your biological time-clock and the possibility of having to walk back in the dark. Perhaps of greater importance is to try and avoid the flood-prone lower section between 6pm and midnight when thunderstorms are most likely. Mike Haselden used a planned overnight stop at Camp 1, and as a result surfaced looking fitter than most.

On Saturday a visit was made to Grotte Gournier with Steve Lane, on a short trip to photograph formations in the dry fossil passage section. The boat trip across the entrance lake was great fun.

On Friday storms had been forecast, and the decision was taken to de-rig the Berger. Although this made good sense, in view of our limited time in the Vercours and the large amount of abandoned tackle already left in the Berger, it was disappointing in that I would have liked to try for the bottom again.

So Sunday involved the ferrying of gear from the entrance to the road-head, whilst on Monday I descended the Scialet de Malaterre along with Rob and Cathy Sermon, Dave Kay and Roo Walters (York University).

This spectacular 400-foot shaft is spanned by a metal foot-bridge which has a removable floor section allowing for a fine 'Y'-hang belay.

Tuesday saw me back at the Gournier with Mike, Dave and Roo. This time we descended to the active resurgence streamway, and followed it upstream. The lower section obviously filled to the roof, and contained a squeeze, the

only one I experienced in the Vercours.

Soon, however, the streamway assumed spectacular proportions. We followed it for many metres, sometimes making use of the fixed traverse wires above the deeper sections of water. Eventually we were stopped by an eighty-foot high double cascade where the traverse line was broken by flood-water abrasion. Both Dave and I climbed up to the broken section and decided climbing rope and slings would be necessary to overcome the climb safely, so we reluctantly made our return.

Back at the lake we made use of a French speleo's 'canot pneumatique', which resembled a blow-up version of the QE2 - French cavers don't seem to do things in half-measures. On entry we had swum the lake, a pleasure which was repeated for Mike as we had to leave the boat on the inward side.

Knowing that we were to depart on Thursday, the next morning I accompanied the Haselden family to La Molière, to view and photograph the sunrise. Instead of the magnificent temperature inversion of the previous Friday the mist was down and good photography was out of the question.

All in all the Vercours is a superb caving area and the Berger itself a magnificent system. It was a little disappointing not to reach the bottom, particularly as I had hoped to investigate some of the avens which could be potential terminal sump by-passes. There is still a tantalising amount of limestone between the siphon at the base of the Berger and the resurgence at the Caves de Sassenage.