

MCG NEWS



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NEWSLETTER OF THE MENDIP CAVING GROUP

Alan Dougherty wrote about the 1984 Whernside Manor camp in the Vercours, and his own caving adventures (including the Gouffre Berger), in MCG NEWS 172.

Mike Haselden also took part in the Whernside camp, and bottomed the 1150m-deep Gouffre Berger, solo. Mike writes here about his own trip, his lighting equipment, and his thoughts....

BERGER SOLO

The village of Autrans lies at the foot of the French Alps, twelve kilometres west of Grenoble as the crow flies, in the National Park of Vercours. It is 1000m above sea level and was the site of the 1976 Winter Olympics - and my July 1984 caving venue.

Fifteen kilometres to the north by road and over 600m higher is the Molière where at times a magnificent view of the Alps is visible. Here, too, is the end of the road for the Berger which is one hour's walk through a craggy forest.

The expedition I joined was organised by Paul Ramsden and Dave Elliot of Whernside Manor. The £75 fee excluded food and transport. About thirty other cavers participated not just at the Berger but at other superb Grottes and Gouffres which abound in the area. We enjoyed the facilities of an excellent campsite which included a swimming pool and communal games room.

Immediately after establishing ourselves at camp a meeting was held to discuss and agree a general plan of action. The following day, Tuesday 3rd July, rigging the Berger was commenced by Dave Elliot and a small team backed up by other sherpa groups. The final rigging was completed by Paul Ramsden (Whernside) and Rob Sermon (Crewe). They entered the cave on Thursday morning, 5th July. Altogether 820m of rope, 80 bolt hangers, 20 karabiners, a few slings, and 60m of line and 1 dinghy were used. One party of four set off late that morning to make their bid for the bottom.

At 3.30pm I entered the cave intent on reaching the bottom, solo. I was

carrying food, spares and camping kit. I descended Ruiz, Holiday and Cairn pitches, then the meanders followed by Garby's, Contard, Relay and Aldo's Shaft. Next came a short meander passage, through a boulder gap and into the grand master system. The Great Gallery, where boulders are as big as houses and in places heaped like blocks of flats, has to be seen to be believed.

Lake Cadoux was only a stream - the dinghy which proved to be unnecessary was nevertheless a comforting precaution. This part of the system often fills up to form a wall to wall deep lake. The Bourgin Hall followed which I remember as a stalagmite forest. I can't recall their names but a couple of small pitches and traverses led me to the Big Rubble Heap. Here the passage is immense and steep. It was like climbing down a mountain at night: you looked up expecting to see the stars. At Camp One I deposited my heavy pack. From now on I would be carrying just personal gear, spare lighting, food and emergency items.

Having been in the sherpa teams the route so far was familiar to me but now, despite my lighter pack, I had the extra weight in my mind of unknown territory beyond Camp One. I pressed on without delay, pacing myself for an endurance trip; I had another nineteen pitches and traverses and a lot of passage to go before my goal.

Just below Camp One, the Hall of the Thirteen with its deep gour pools and massive stalagmites was a spectacle to be seen; little wonder it is so photographed and speleologically famous.

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BERGER SOLO

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During my downward trip I came across the first bottoming team who had aborted for various good reasons.

At 1.30am after about ten hours of caving, I stood astride a deep stream passage, peering at the pseudo sump of the Berger. That brief moment was the climax to my trip. 1150m down; there was no-one there to share the occasion, or camera to record the event, just the Omnipotent and I. I wish I'd had more time to linger around and savour the moment, but making good my return to Camp One became a greater priority as already I could feel the strain of the Berger and it would be uphill all the way.

I had traversed a long way over deep water and had been up to my thighs in places, but my thermal suit soon drained off and I suffered no loss of temperature, other than when I was in the water. Eventually I was clear of deep water and, as I looked ahead to study the way on, I became aware of a point of light way above in the distance.

It was like a single star breaking through a cloud gap on a pitch black night. I had to stop and look before realising the meaning of this apparition. The light was from either Rob or Paul who I had met at the top of the Hurricane Pitch (Puits de L'Ouragan), as they made their way out from the final rigging. They had decided to come up just ahead of me on the return to Camp One. The immenseness of Berger passages manifested themselves in this and many other ways.

Soon I was below Hurricane where the waters plunge 170ft into a large pool where the wind and spray reminisce the name of the pitch. Now it was time for prusiking. I checked my equipment, attached myself to the rope and started to climb. For about the next four hours my upward journey, constantly on and off ropes, climbing, traversing, prusiking, scrambling and occasionally struggling, continued close on the heels of Rob and Paul. Finally at Camp One it was time to relax and chat over a hot meal. The others then started back out but I peeled off all my caving gear and crawled into my pit, blew out the candle and lay there in complete solitude, halfway down the Berger, the silence and the darkness absolute.

I became aware of a rumbling sound and in my semi-consciousness I did not know where I was. I opened my eyes and saw a cluster of lights approaching, then my senses returned from sleep; it was a party of cavers who had entered at dawn to make their bid for the bottom. At Camp One they stopped for a cooked breakfast and photographed me in my pit where I continued my interrupted sleep.

Later another bottoming party came by breaking my sleep once more, but then I felt it was time to start moving again. Still in my sleeping bag, I cooked breakfast consisting of hot muesli, cocoa and biscuits. My cold wet thermal suit was unpleasant at first but it soon warmed up. However the wetsuit socks were icy cold. I resolved this problem by pouring the remains of the hot brew water in them. Then with warm feet I soon felt ready for caving again.

Carrying my heavy pack again on my back (this is so unlike Mendip caving), I set off from camp to be immediately confronted by the massive boulder slope which seemed to go on for ever, sapping my strength with each step. However, as all cavers know, these unreal feelings dwell only in the mind. Leaving my sack at Petzl Junction I explored its gallery for some distance until it became smaller and less interesting. The absence of constant traffic has left this part of the cave in a more natural state, devoid of carbide and wires. I made my way out of the cave looking at other minor junctions and taking in the character of the system.

I stood on dirty snow just below the final climb and looked up into daylight for the first time in twenty-seven hours and two familiar faces greeted me: my wife Sue and son Oliver. A perfect moment to my finest trip.

Next day I had a rest.

By the end of that week storms were forecast so it was decided to de-rig before possible flooding (which did not, however, occur although the change in the weather indicated that storms had passed not too far off). Bottoming teams only had a two-day gap in which to make their attempt.

Every single day of the two weeks of
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BERGER SOLO

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our stay in the area saw teams going off on various trips. I had just the one day off following my Berger trip; the caving opportunities were too good to miss and Sue, bless her, encouraged me to do as much as I could. (Alan Dougherty's article in MCG NEWS 172 details some of these visits.)

The two weeks ended too quickly but we made new friends and had a super time. We can strongly recommend the Vercours, which also offers many surface attractions, for a summer caving holiday.

The amount of carbide and other waste to be found in the Gouffre Berger and other French caves is a sad reflection on foreign and British cavers. I did all my caving, including the twenty-seven hour trip, by electric lighting. My main light consists of four 7 amp/hour NiCad cells sealed in an old NiFe cell case, leaving a recess at the top of the cell to house a connection block and fuse and spares. I use an ordinary Oldham headlamp which accepts screw and pre-focus bulbs. Using an Ever Ready 4.75v 0.5 amp krypton bulb I get over seventeen hours good lighting of constant use. On long trips I can economise to get twenty hours. The whole unit

weighs 4.5 lbs, and is rechargeable overnight from a car battery and adaptor, or ordinary charger.

My spare light comprises three MN1300 alkaline cells in an adapted Ever Ready lighting pack wired to a headlamp using 0.5 amp bulbs from which I get twenty hours constant lighting, but these cells are not rechargeable. This unit weighs under 2 lbs. I have also a small emergency light attached to the rim of my helmet. I think this proves that it is quite feasible to undertake quite prolonged trips without carbide.

My solo trip may give rise to some criticism but I defend my action by claiming a right to cave alone as long as I take all necessary precautions. Those who occasionally cave solo will know just what a special experience it is and those who don't should respect that. In some ways soloing is safer because one has a greatly increased awareness.

Finally a note of praise for Paul and Dave of Whernside who did an excellent job of organising the Berger and many other trips. ■