

CAVING AND WALKING IN FRANCE

by Mike Haselden

With only twelve days to savour the riches of the Vercors, we came away with more planned activities for the future than we started off with! However, despite the low number of cavers we achieved a fair score of trips, including some spectacular surface walks, before travelling north-east to the Haute Savoie in search of the high entrance to the Gouffre Jean Bernard. Sue and I motored down with guest Peter Eckford who is a member of Speleo Rhâl CC, BEC, CDG and now MCB! Pete and I are long-standing friends and have enjoyed many caving trips together. We arrived at Villard-de-Lans on Friday evening, 4th September, just in time to pitch tents in the dark. We were supposed to meet up with Tony Knibbs, Denise Samuel, Peter Harvey and Wendy but by Monday had almost given them up when we saw the familiar shape of Peter in shorts parading the streets of Villard. Soon we were all together making plans over drinks at the bar.

Malaterre A 120m daylight shaft with a metal footbridge spanning the chasm. On our first attempt, Pete and I went over the balustrade but with the wrong choice of direction and a hatless French team below us, we decided to postpone the full descent for another day. Some days later, Pete and I returned. This time we had the pothole to ourselves and succeeded in reaching the bottom uneventfully. From below, the entrance appears as a small point of light with just a faint glimmering on the shaft walls, creating a unique atmosphere about the place. The footbridge has a removable floor panel which offers an ideal Y-hang but the balustrade has to be roped off securely at both sides for public safety. Lamentably some of the French types did not bother with this precaution, a practice consistent with potholing without hats!

Trisou Trisou comprises two entrances and a total of twenty pitches and a couple of nasty rift sections where tackle transit is "fun". It is a classic system offering an excellent sporting trip. Regrettably though, rock anchors leave a lot to be desired. I will not say too much about our difficulty in locating the entrance. Eventually Tony, Denise, Pete and I started the descent early in the afternoon, loaded with six tackle-bags containing enough rope for about 400m of pitches and traverses. About half way down the system we ran out of time but left the bags and ropes, except on the entrance pitch, ready for another day. Pete and I returned to continue the descent and managed to just bottom with no spare rope. Half way out we were beginning to struggle with bags of wet rope when Tony and Denise presented themselves to give a much needed hand. Even so we exited late evening to be greeted by the rest of the group.

Gournier Only by dint of the resourcefulness of Peter Harvey were we able to contemplate a trip in Gournier. He produced an inflatable boat from his car boot and all the necessary hardware for the trip which was attended by all except the strictly non-caving Wendy. We explored the entire fossil passage of the system comprising 4km of very large bouldery passage with much to engage the eye of the beholder. Access to the passage is across a large and deep entrance lake, and up a ladder. The leader of course has to negotiate a tricky rock climb. Judging by overheard exclamations, the unusual technique of starting and ending a ladder climb from an inflatable boat was much enjoyed by all!

Bournillion The two Peters and I did this easy walk-in trip, exiting via the narrow and more complicated oxbow passage which requires some trial and error to find the right way. The most notable feature of this cave is the huge entrance which I believe is the biggest in Europe. It is set in a 400m limestone cliff and the entrance arch spans some 200m. Vegetation and even trees grow well inside the cave within its far-reaching daylight penetration.

Molier and Sornin The Molier, situated some 2000m above sea level at the end of the Alps, can be reached by car and offers a magnificent panorama of the mountains. Walking eastward from Molier, the entrance the Gouffre Berger can be reached in about an hour if you can avoid getting a bit lost. During our walk we could not help thinking back on the recent tragedy of the young British caver who disappeared in this area without trace only about a month before. However, the many open holes, fissures and dolines that abound in this forested karst area invite such a disaster. One has to say that solo walking or caving in such an area is a serious undertaking.

Pic de San Michelle This is a high ridge running east to west, south of the Vercors, with some peaks, dotted here and there, of about 2000m above sea level. Tony, Denise, Pete Eckford, Sue and I spent one day climbing to a peak after my namesake. The company, the weather, the fabulous views and abundance of tasty wild berries made a memorable day.

Scialet du Pot 2 Situated some twelve miles south of base camp and only accessible on foot within about seven miles of the nearest road, this more-or-less single drop of 320m has the charm of concealing itself in a deeply-rifted wooded karst region which lives up to its name of "Le Purgatoire". It took a second attempt by Pete, Sue and myself to locate the entrance and I confess that luck had a part in our success. I have heard anecdotes of crack teams who have spent up to two weeks looking for the place! I might also add that despite extensive enquiries, the French National Grid system still remains a mystery to us so guide book references were of little help. Although Pete and I had toyed with the idea of attempting a descent of Pot 2, we soon realised that a serious attempt would require a team of at least four with better equipment and more time than we had. However, having located the entrance we are now keen to crack this one some time in the future.

Gouffre Jean Bernard Ranking as probably the deepest known system in the world, the Jean Bernard entrances are grouped 2000m up on the Montagne du Folly, north-east of Samoens in the Haute Savoie. This very deep cave is not much talked about for it lacks the glamour of other systems like the Gouffre Berger or PSM. It has very few pitches and none of any significant depth. A full descent of the system, which has to be done in winter when the water is icebound on the mountain, involves a mega-epic long trip so I think we ought to do it soon. To this end, Sue, Pete and I have reconnoitred the area. We camped near Samoens and spent a day on the mountain which, apart from the interest of finding entrances, provided us with a hard slog which was well rewarded by an unfolding panorama of an area which included a glacier and many spectacular rock towers.

As usual, our venture was too quickly over so many things to do were left undone, but at least fond memories were made and a longing for more prevails.

MALLORCA '87-'88

by Martin Rowe

The fourth MCB Christmas expedition to Mallorca took place from 23rd December '87 to 6th January '88. Six members of MCB (Neil Hutchinson, Andy Beare, Lesley Robbins, Yvonne Ward, Martin Rowe and Mike Haselden) were joined by five others (Sue and Dilly Haselden, Frank, Val and Phyllis Murphy). A total of 10 caves were visited. Most of these have been described in the reports of previous years (see newsletters 179, 185 and 191). Caves found or descended for the first time this year were:

Cova de Muntanya (Descended to 2nd pitch) Although beginning as a horizontal cave with an entrance at the foot of a rocky outcrop we soon realised this was really an avenc (ie. a shaft). We were able to place bolts for the first pitch only, so a return visit will be required.

Avenc Fonda (Descended) This has eluded MCB in previous years and almost did so again. As we were about to give up the search, NH uttered the now famous words "I think I might have found something". What he found was the entrance to the longest single drop on the island - some 168m. Unfortunately a very large boulder was poised above the entrance, which threatened those below and although it was possible to descend to the first rebelay, it was decided that it would be advisable to do some gardening. As a result the large boulder above the entrance is now a few metres below the entrance and resisting all encouragement to be 168m below the entrance.

Cova de Lienaire Close to sea level, and basically one very large chamber full of mud almost to the ceiling. The space between the top of the mud and the roof is accessible to cavers, and varies in height from flat out crawls to a few high avens. Some parts of the cave are very well decorated, but care is required as CO2 levels are high.

Five-to-Three Found during the search for Fonda, at 2.55pm according to MH's (broken) watch. A small joint in the rock was noticed, and it was possible to drop stones to a ledge below. A few minutes work soon enlarged the joint to allow access to a shaft, at least 15m deep by the "dropped-stone" test. Descent not completed due to the discovery of Fonda.

Avenc de na Blanca (Not descended) Another cave which has eluded MCB on earlier visits. Found by AB and NH, an 84m deep avenc, not descended due to lack of time.

Each time we visit Mallorca we expect to tie up the loose ends from previous visits and leave the island for the last time having done everything worth doing. Mallorca however is full of surprises and each year we leave behind more loose ends than we started with. Besides the known covas and avencs, there must be many more waiting to be found as Five-to-Three illustrated. The MCB will probably be in Mallorca again next Christmas.

Fonda footnote Dave Elliot organised a hauling party after we left and by attaching slings and a pulley system they managed to lift one end of the boulder, until it was able to slide past the narrow section and continue the 500 or so feet to the bottom of the pitch. With the boulder out of the way, they were then able to descend.

EXPEDITION NEWS -SIMA GESM UPDATE

Anyone still interested in prussiking a kilometre with a bag of wet rope, should contact Neil Hutchinson BEFORE FEB 28th as the transport and permit arrangements are now being finalised. It will not be possible to include more names after this deadline so it's make your mind up time. The overall cost per person is expected to be £250 max, which includes travel, accommodation, equipment purchase, permit and insurance but not food and drink. A deposit of £50 from each caving member will be required by Neil before March 1st so that rope may be purchased.

Travel to Ronda will be by ferry to Cherbourg followed by a long drive, aiming to arrive by the evening of Sat 13th Aug and returning home by Mon 29th Aug. Accommodation is still not finalised, but will probably be a campsite.

MCG CONQUER MT BLANC

Determined to teach his offspring a thing or two, Reg Clarke, proposals manager EW Division set about proving that he wasn't just a decrepit "old baldy" but in fact followed in the same vein as the likes of Sir Edmund Hilary.

However, Reg fully realised that many months of continued hard training would have to be suffered before he could attack his goal, the summit of Mt Blanc. A fitness programme building up to five mile jogs or a mile of swimming, every night, was started at the beginning of the year and rehearsals for the grand event included expeditions to the Lake District in February and Easter and the Isle of Skye at the beginning of May. Accompanying him were four members of the Mendips Caving Club (!!) led by Geoff Barton.

At the end of May the team set off for the first attempt on Mt Blanc but excessive amounts of snow prevented them from going higher than 11000ft.

Encouraged by this experience a second attempt was made in August by Reg and Cliff Hickman. The climbers set off on foot starting at the "Col de Voza" at 5528ft progressing to the "Aiguille Du Gouter" 12656ft before the final assault. Reg slogged his way to the top completing the trek along arrets with the world falling away on either side.

On 21st August Reg reached the summit providing in his 50th year conclusive proof that he isn't just a decrepit "old baldy"!

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