

ITEMS FROM IRELAND

CAVING IN THE COUNTY FERMANAGH -- CAVAN REGION

by Carl Wright

About a year ago whilst spending my annual holidays in Ireland I found myself hitching from County Clare to County Fermanagh in search of a job at the Marble Arch show caves. I hadn't really much idea of the area, just a vague recollection of the odd article about a few of the caves, but I had been told there was a vast area of limestone here and that the show caves were worth a visit.

Hitch-hiking with a rucksack full of damp wetsuit bits, tins of beans and dirty caving kaks was certainly a memorable experience, especially crossing the border between Eire and the North - thank God I hadn't any carbide with me! Once in Northern Ireland I soon realised that apart from the British style road signs and red phone boxes the charm and character of Eire was all around me, and the scenery just mind-blowing. The Marble Arch show cave is just inside the border seemingly in the middle of nowhere but is well sign-posted and easy to find. The advert says "One of the finest show caves in Europe" - it certainly is. The tour starts with a walk through the forest passing massive shake holes and sinks until one reaches the entrance just above the resurgence. A short distance inside and you are placed in a dubious-looking boat and ferried along a splendid section of river passage. The river is quiet and the lighting minimal, providing a stunning effect. From the end of the boat journey the tour continues on foot for an hour or so passing superb formations and classic cave scenery. One particularly memorable point was the "Moses walk". OK, it sounds naff but it is tastefully done, and it is unusual - a sunken walkway brings the visitor right through the water at shoulder height. Clever lighting provides spectacular reflections of the formations in the water. Very nice!

All in all, Marble Arch is a stunning show cave which has been very thoughtfully planned and is carefully managed. It is one of the few I've visited which really provides the casual visitor with a sense of the real underworld. Back at the reception building one can spend a good while oggling at a brilliant display of caving photos or chatting to the staff who are very friendly, well informed and in the main cavers themselves.

I arrived here a total stranger, but within an hour had a complete weekend's caving, accommodation and drinking arranged for me! Within three hours I was underground.

I suppose the main caving area here would be described as the Cuilcagh, a massive flat-topped mountain (2188ft) dominating the surrounding landscape. Hundreds of streams pour off this mountain to disappear into numerous swallet holes, many of which have never been entered (intentionally)! As we drove from Marble Arch along the Marlbank scenic loop road my colleagues pointed out several sites that "could do with a look", some a few yards from the road itself! I was totally bewildered.

We arrived at a pothole miles from anywhere in the middle of a bog; a rubbishy looking hole full of dead dogs, spiders and gnats, but once down and away from daylight we left our eight-legged and dead four-legged friends, to explore a very different cave to what I was used to. My first impression was that it was black, and I wasn't using an FX2! The rock here is very dark and is heavily interlaced with bands of black chert. The effect is somewhat oppressive, your light is immediately lost especially in big chambers where one really feels isolated. The water, of which there is plenty, is rather on the cold side and is generally of a nasty dark brown colour heavily stained with turf. Flood debris is evident everywhere especially fifty feet up in the roof! We spent about four hours in this particular cave and I've never seen such a variety of scenery underground before. I was hooked.

Whatever your interest, there is something here for everyone. For the SRT enthusiast it's heaven. Noonan Hole for example, one of Ireland's deepest pots at 108m provides an impressive daylight descent comparable to anything in Yorkshire.

If it's diving you're into, the through trip from Noones to Arch is reputed to be one of the best trips possible. A collectors piece (for the smuggler) is the splendid Pollprulisk - Pollnatagha in which you can cross the border underground! There are numerous short sporty trips and formation-wise it's a photographers dream. The splendid "Cascades" cave is surely one of the finest in Ireland with every conceivable variation in calcium carbonate imaginable and as with most our caves there has been little or no damage. If you're into mines then there is plenty of interesting stuff in neighbouring County Leitrim and County Sligo, mainly coal and barytes. What ever you want, this an area well worth consideration, however there are a few problems. The weather is decidedly Irish and unfortunately many of the better trips depend on good weather. The Guinness is mighty and tends to become a priority if you're not careful. The scenery is knock-out, so you can easily slip into a sightseeing holiday if you're not too pissed to drive. There is stacks of potential for future discoveries and access is generally no problem. Responsible visiting English groups are more than welcome, although sadly some groups recently have left untidy dig sites which has led to a few access problems.

For my money this is the finest caving area in Ireland or Britain - and no, I don't work for the Irish Tourist Board, I work at Aillwee Caves in County Clare, which of course are also well worth a visit!

Accommodation from the very basic to the absolute luxury can be easily obtained right in the middle of the main caving areas. There are usually one or two cavers to be found in the Bush Bar, Blacklion, County Cavan who will help with information. For anyone interested in planning a trip to County Fermanagh the following addresses may be of use:

Richard Watson, Warden, Marble Arch Show Caves, Florencecourt, Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland.

The Warden, Lough Melvyn Holiday Centre, Garrison, County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland.

6 Burns, c/o Gortatole Outdoor Pursuit Centre, Florencecourt, Enniskillen, N Ireland.

Carl Wright, Kilmoon, Lisdoonvarna, County Clare, Eire.

