

# Mendip Caving Group

# NEWS

NUMBER 212

AUGUST 1990

MARGAUREIS REGION, ITALIAN ALPS, 1989

## "THE ITALIAN JOB"

by Dave Little

Participants: Pete Collings-Wells, Rich Hodgson and Dave Little - MCG  
Ed Pearson and Dave Jarman - WUCC

We had a quick, easy journey to within 16km of the Martel hut, then the road ended and became an unsurfaced mountain track where most of the boulders strewn along the track were much larger than the ground clearance of my car. With spectacular drops beside the track a landslide at one point required a very dodgy manoeuvre with 2 wheels on wooden planks wedged in above the precipice. The Martel hut, owned by the CAF (Club Alpin Francais), consisted of a tin shack balanced on top of a cemented boulder pile. Most people chose to camp outside the hut!

Next day, once Pete and Rick had arrived, Jean-Paul Sournier (author of the "Speleo Sportive" guide book to the area) whisked us off for a trip with some GSP cavers (an Italian caving club from Turin) to see their latest discovery, only a week old, already 300m deep and still going. Following numerous pitches in a rift the route entered a shattered fossil passage, muddy traverses, then more pitches. Having lost about half the party up side passages we reached the present extent of exploration, a 15m diameter shaft and at least 40m deep, where they'd run out of rope on their last exploratory trip!

The following day's cave was A11 (not old enough to have a name yet, and yesterdays cave hadn't been old enough to even be allotted a number). I kitted up and descended with Jean-Paul and Greg from Turin (he'd only been caving for a year and had already discovered 3 caves over 500m deep, such is the potential of the area). Pitches on ice and snow slopes led to the squeeze at the head of a 70m pitch, followed by a couple of small pitches and a broken 170m pitch leading to the impressive main chamber. All the rigging so far had been using the Italian minimalist approach which gave some very interesting hangs. Down a couple more pitches then we swung across to an unexplored window in the wall of a 30m pitch. Rigging with 7mm exploration string (very dodgy stuff) this new window disappointingly only gave 3 new pitches before joining in with the old stuff again. Met Pete and Rick brewing up with the other Italians in the main chamber, then plenty of combined tactics saw us all through the squeezes and out of the cave by 10pm.

Next day we set off on the first of many hikes up to and over the Col de Scarasson, our first objective being Gouffre Scarasson. After 3 days effort and a major bolting exercise we managed to rig down to the glacier in the cave, only realising that we'd taken a different route to the one we intended when it took 40m of rope to rig a 20m pitch. Riggged another pitch down the side of the glacier using ice screws then got extremely cold taking loads of photos before exiting. The beauty of the underground glacier is only spoilt by the remains of a camp, empty evian tins, plastic bags and wrappers left embedded in the ice since 1962 when a certain M.Siffre conducted a two month "out of time" experiment on the glacier - I can think of warmer places! I brought out a bin-liner full of tins, and just got it back to the camp before it disintegrated. Not surprisingly the local cavers don't have a good word to say for Monsieur Siffre. Dave J and Ed had a quick look for Gouffre Straldi (our next objective), but didn't find it.

(cont. on p6)

*"THE ITALIAN JOB" (cont. from p1)*

We returned the next day, spent a couple hours looking for Straldi, but still unsuccessful so as a consolation prize we went down the first few pitches in Gouffre 18C. The following day we returned with Serge from CAF who showed us where the entrance to Straldi was. Hardly surprising that we never found it, on top of an overgrown terrace and covered in undergrowth, it couldn't be seen from more than 10m away although it wasn't a small entrance - 15m x 3m. Lots of messing around and re-rigging on the entrance shaft of 90m, with the added interest of a perched crows nest 40m down the wide, damp shaft. Occasionally the four or five tiny occupants would wake, and almost as one, re-arrange themselves, shit powerfully over the edge, and settle down to sleep again. Consequently the lower part of the shaft, down to the snow-cone at the base, had a smell all of its own. Following this was a climb up, a muddy pitch and then the very tight Fissure du Vent, much thinner than the barrel containing my camera which I had to stand on to force through. A couple more pitches led to the very impressive 80m pitch dropping through the ceiling of an immense chamber. Of the multitude of dodgy looking bolts at the head, predictably the best one gave a drop right down the line of a persistent trickle - a Chinese torture on the long haul up! This enormous, chaotic chamber, about 200m down, did not respond well to our attempts to photograph it - it eats PFSb bulbs for breakfast! The next day saw a long trip to push down a further 60m in rather crumbly rock, before we ran out of time and had to de-rig, eventually surfacing near midnight to a magnificent moon-lit valley, with clouds pouring off the peaks. An impressive place, above and below ground.

A week had passed by by now and Pete and Rick left us. Despite the warnings from the CAF people that we were bound to get lost in Piaggia Bella we decided to visit this the largest system in the region, 25km long and 1108m deep. This amazing system has 11 entrances, 10 vertical with pitches up to 110m and the walk in (climb in) entrance which we used. Through about a dozen huge breakdown chambers we reached the streamway which is followed via various contorted oxbows to a fossil passage, then back to the stream. Eventually a climb up through boulders leads to the enormous Paris Cote d'Azur chamber, 200m x 100m x 40m. It took about 6 hours to get here, with passages all sloping steeply we were at about 600m depth having descended no pitches. CAF didn't quite believe that we'd got as far as we had - if they can get lost in Piaggia Bell they'd have no chance in OFD.

Descending the first four pitches of Gouffre Pentothal we reached the top of a 100m drop. This funnel shaped pitch was lined with precariously balanced loose boulders. Knock one stone down, then there's 10 going down, then 100, then 1000, etc. etc., the deafening echos go on for a couple of minutes. Not a pitch for the faint hearted - we turned around and went out!

Next day we lugged loads of gear over to Gouffre Navella and had a monumental failure so we lugged most of the gear back again. Returning to Navella to collect a sack that we'd left behind I met Remy (from CAF) who was off to have a look at a promising dig he'd found. This dig was a totally different proposition to English digs. We bolted some boulders and set up a pulley system to move them and within an hour we had a gale blowing out of a passage disappearing into the distance. We had no lights with us so we had to leave it.

On our last day we chose Gouffre Fera which turned out to be an excellent cave to finish on - pitches, boulder slopes, snow slopes, formations, everything, even rusty bolts. For a bit of added interest on the way out, after passing a re-belay and getting onto the top rope, it suddenly freed itself from a rock flake around which it had become looped. This introduced a couple of metres of slack rope into the system and I plummeted. Expecting to go all the way down the pitch, my life had only just begun flashing before my eyes when the rope went tight - it had held! I very cautiously carried on out of the cave. An exciting end to a wonderful trip. After dropping Ed off at the train station in Nice, Dave and I headed North to Chamonix for a bit of climbing - but that's another story.