

Friendship Caving Group

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VERCORS '90 (THE LOST CAVERS' EXPEDITION)

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In the early afternoon of 3rd July the two of us were leaving Portsmouth on the Cherbourg-bound ferry. At 8.30 the following morning, after non-stop driving, we arrived in Villard-de-Lans in the Vercors, our chosen base for the next 7 days.

Villard is a ski resort in the winter which unfortunately makes it a little expensive but we found it a good base as the adequate camp site is not far from the picturesque village centre which has a number of bars, restaurants and shops. It is also centrally placed in the Vercors, being at the head of the Bourne Gorge with its many caves, and a short drive from most of the well known caves. After making camp we bought provisions (mainly beer) and settled down for a well earned sleep in the sun.

THE BOURNE GORGE is a spectacular 15km gorge leading from Pont-en-Royans to Villard-de-Lans which makes Cheddar Gorge look like a scratch on the landscape. The cliffs tower well over 1000ft above you in places and the winding road is cut into the cliffs at regular intervals, with sheer drops of several hundred feet to the river below! Everywhere you look there are caves, some just on the side of the road and others high up in the cliffs. Be warned though, if a rock fall does not get you the mad French drivers are sure to!

GROTTE DE GOURNIER is found high up in the Bourne Gorge at the base of a cliff just 10 minutes walk along a footpath from the Choranche show cave. The cave is a major system of horizontal development, consisting of about 4km of very large fossil passage with the main streamway running directly below. At the end of the fossil passage the main stream continues into the mountain for several more kms. Access is across a long, deep entrance lake which the French cross in boats but which we, in true British style, swam across wearing wetsuits - it was bloody freezing! This is followed by an easy 25ft climb up and a traverse into the start of the fossil passage which averages 50 x 50ft with progress hampered in most parts by extremely large boulders which make K2 in St Cuthbert's look like a pebble. The formations are massive, dwarfing a human but unfortunately not many have escaped desecration by the French who seem to delight in touching, climbing on, breaking, and covering in spent carbide any formation within reach! We explored to the end of the fossil passage and then climbed down into the crystal clear waters of the streamway for an enjoyable trip downstream through pools and cascades before finally making our way back up into the fossil passage. An hour or so later we exited from the cave into torrential rain. This was a superb trip very much enjoyed by both of us.

SCIALET DE MALATERRE is a large daylight shaft situated in the forest about 20 mins drive up the mountain above Villard-de-Lans and is only 200m from the road. The shaft is 120m deep with a metal footbridge over it for tourists to stand on and drop rocks onto cavers below. We made our descent over the side of the bridge (not through the removable floor panel for tourists to drop through onto cavers below!) landing on a broad ledge after 60m or so overlooking the next 60m to the bottom. From this ledge there is a choice of two ways down: a direct descent on a single spit which protrudes nearly 1/2 in from the rock or a climb up behind the ledge to a parallel series of pitches which eventually bring you out at the bottom of the main shaft. We chose the latter route! As our luck would have it this way was extremely muddy, tight and had a severe lack of decent belays but we eventually made it to the bottom. From here the cave continues on down another couple of pitches and into some large chambers but we had run out of time and energy by then. The best part of the trip is the descent and ascent of the main pitch, especially the first one up, wondering whether someone above has sabotaged your belays on the bridge!

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"THE LOST CAVERS' EXPEDITION" (cont. from p1)

GOUFFRE BERGER was the next cave to be visited in the hope that we could beg a trip down from whoever was rigging it. The drive to La Moliere is beautiful and the views from there over to the French Alps. From La Moliere the Berger is easily reached on foot in 45 mins if you stay on the right path (passing Scialet Fromageire/Gouffre d'Engins which is another mega trip). Unfortunately, on arriving at the entrance, we found that it had not been rigged, which surprised us. The entrance itself is very disappointing and belies what is beyond. There is a vast amount of rubbish around, filling most of the cracks in the surrounding Karst! We would definitely recommend not straying from the path in this area as are holes everywhere and the forest is dense.

GOUFFRE DE BOURNILLION is a major tourist attraction and is visited by every Frenchman and his dog, wearing shorts (him, not his dog), yet no trip to the Vercors is complete without a visit to this cave in the Bourne Gorge. It has the largest known entrance in Europe with a span of 200m containing a sizeable lake (it was dry at the time of our visit). A huge boulder-strewn passage continues for several hundred metres to a sump and if you visit it on a Sunday, as we did, it is full of Frenchmen carrying torches! Apart from the main passage there is a smaller lateral passage which we declined to take, instead opting for a higher level return revealing an immense chamber above the main passage. Outside the entrance to Bournillion there is a sheer cliff over 1000ft high with a waterfall coming down its full height. About half way up, on a broad ledge and behind the waterfall, is a cave: La Grotte de la Cascade.

LA GROTTTE DE LA CASCADE is, according to the description we had, approached by a 500ft aided climb straight up the cliff next to the waterfall. We decided after a few beers one evening that an approach could be made up a steep slope through woods then along a ledge to the cave! The next day we put our theory to the test. The slope we had in mind was nearly vertical and thickly wooded with a good supply of loose boulders held back by the trees - but not for long! Inevitably, the higher we climbed the more boulders we sent crashing down the slope, and the more unstable it became. At the same time, we were being eaten alive by mosquitoes! We eventually reached the point where progress became too dangerous and we realised that there was no way to reach the ledge so a very careful descent was made behind the avalanche of boulders!

GROTTE DE FAVOT is a cave high up on one flank of the Bourne Gorge, and is the Goatchurch of the Vercors - but with a 70m pitch at the end of it, hence our visit. What is supposed to be a 20 min steep walk to the entrance took us and a French group following us a good 2 hrs - we could not find it anywhere. Eventually, we found the entrance a long way from where we had believed it to be. The large entrance arch led via a low crawl to an immense tunnel 25 x 25ft descending at a 45° angle to a junction. Right led to a series of large dead-end passages and low crawls, left was a very large passage leading to the 70m pitch. Due to our "getting lost" trying to find the cave, the time was now 6.30pm and we did not have time to descend the pitch, which was very annoying as we had been hauling two heavy tackle bags all over the place with us! Needless to say, this cave was virtually devoid of formations due to its popularity.

SCIALET DU TOROGGAN was chosen as our final cave because it was described as having a 30m+ entrance pitch along with several other shorter ones, some large passages and chambers, and a good streamway. Also it was next to the road so we mistakenly thought it would be easy to find. The book said that it was near the ski lift but it did not say that there are two ski lifts. We just happened to look near the wrong one! Eventually the entrance was located, only to discover that it was free-climbable as were all but one of the other "pitches" so we quickly dumped all the tackle bags and ploughed on. From the entrance to the climb down into the streamway, the devastation in the cave was unbelievable - virtually every formation was either broken or covered in mud. One particular passage would have been one of the most beautiful imaginable; about 600ft long and 10ft in diameter with a profusion of stal throughout its length, but every piece had been totally ruined. It was heartbreaking. Incredibly, the cave was only discovered in 1975.

From the streamway the cave changed character with refreshingly little damage. We carried on through two immense chambers where reflective tape and cairns showed the way. We eventually reached the bigger of the chambers where we were unable to find the way on. Lack of time and shortage of carbide forced us to begin our return just as we found the way onwards, but it was too late. We exited the cave just in time to set back for a last meal in our favourite Pizza restaurant.

All in all, we had a great time but it was a shame that nobody else came along with us (Ed. the trip was advertised in N/L 209 Jan'90 but not a single person expressed an interest). If we could have had another two or so people with us we would have been able to do some more complex systems and gone further into the ones that we did. But two of us were very limited in the amount of tackle we could carry. The other main problem we had was finding the caves! The Vercors is very extensive, mountainous and heavily forested which along with trying to interpret French directions created quite a few difficulties. We were extremely disappointed with the French attitude to cave formations, the desecration was unbelievable and unforgivable, unlike the Dordogne where damage was more or less at an "acceptable" level. Despite this, we have plans for the future and Vercors - we shall return...