

Mendip Caving Group

NEWS

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PYRENEES 1991

by Yvonne Rowe

Sat 20th July to Sat 3rd August was to be a caving, walking and tourist holiday and it was all we hoped it would be:-

DAY 1: Joan and Simon Goddard arrived at our house mid morning and we just managed to get all the caving, camping, walking and personal gear into our Ford Orion. It's a roomy car but this was pushing it a bit! We set off for the 3pm Portsmouth to Caen ferry and after a smooth crossing arrived in France at 10.30pm (French time). After a short drive we found a lovely campsite for an overnight stop.

DAY 2: We set off again at 8am and after an 11hr drive we arrived at Tony and Denise Knibbs' delightful bungalow at THIL, near Toulouse. There we also met Bryan, Ann, Michael and Sian Pittman who had arrived the previous day in their camper-van. We had a long, relaxing meal on the terrace, then - surprise! With the long drive I had forgotten that it was my and Michael's birthday, when Ann brought out a beautiful cake with a fondant helmet and FX2 battery in the centre and three cavers sitting around the edge (one with a beard!). This iced fruit cake proved to be a yummy and excellent source of energy on our walking and caving trips.

DAY 3: After a leisurely breakfast we all set off for our campsite at MANE, 1 hr. drive from Thil. A superb, uncrowded site with a swimming pool which was well used by the three younger members. We put up tents, shopped, and had the first of many communal meals on the "Pittman Pitch". During the night there was a tremendous thunder storm and while Martin and I were watching from our tent we were zapped by a thunderbolt which came too close for comfort!

DAY 4: We decided on a walk to the entrance of GOUFFRE HENNE-MORTE (1380m). We parked in the carpark above Arbas and set off. The weather was overcast but it was very hot and humid so it wasn't long before we were all dripping wet with the effort of climbing up the overgrown and human-unfriendly footpath. Footpaths marked on the maps don't appear to exist any more, probably through lack of use, so a compass is vital (and long legwear!). Everything around was still but ahead of us was a small area where we could see plants and grasses blowing about. It was TROU SOUFFLEUR, a "blow hole" that is a small cave entrance with ice-cold air blowing out. We all took turns to get a quick cool-off, then on our way again. We eventually found our way to the bouldery doline that contained the entrance to Henne-Morte which had a very suspect (permanent?) rope leading in. Next to this doline was another doline-cum-shaft that saw no daylight. It could just be seen through a slit from our side and in the bottom was a snow plug. Really weird when the temperature on our side was in the 80s! The other thing of note was a clearing in the shrubbery filled with beautiful, head-high, pale blue Alpine Sow Thistle (looks like tall Chickory).

DAY 5: We parked the cars above Arbas again and set off on the short walk to GOUFFRE TROU MILE (1322m). Some used ladders and some SRT but a good trip was had by those who went down. There were a few other cavers down of varying nationalities, some of whom had already rigged the cave for SRT. After 4 or 5 pitches we came to a long fixed handline traverse. The rope looked pretty rotten and when we had got a little way round we found it had snapped and simply been knotted! We weren't happy with this so we made it our point to turn back. Martin and I were first out and while we waited for the others we poked about in the stream that flows into Trou Mile. We found small black Salamanders, the biggest tadpoles I have ever seen and bits of dead shrubbery with legs! These turned out to be Caddis Fly lava which wrap themselves in dead leaves or similar, presumably for camouflage.

DAY 6: We chose a walk to COL DE L'ARRECH. We parked the cars at ARET and walking through this village was like taking a trip back into history. We found the path we needed which was well defined to start with but as we started the steeper ascent up the mountain we had to resort to the compass.

The sight we saw next will be with me for ever (and Joan I suspect); the most lush, colourful and densely flowered alpine meadows. We walked up 3 or 4 of these meadows and each had its own dominant colour - purple, yellow, white and pink. We saw many (but larger) flowers that were familiar and some that were new to us (thank goodness for Joan's Alpine flower book). We reached a refuge so stopped for lunch and decided that as route finding problems had slowed us down, we should cut the walk short and find a quick route back. It was quick alright - I think I slid most of the way! We went straight down through woods with deep gulleys filled with leaves. It was like slithering down on soft snow. We also crossed 2 streams, fought through head-high ferns and nettles and tobogganed down steep, grassy slopes. On the way we saw an area of raked-up earth and rocks - apparently the work of wild boar looking for food. We eventually made our way down to the road, 3 miles from the cars. A wonderful adventure and if anyone tries it could they please keep an eye out for Bryans camera! We later had a huge 4-course meal in Mane - and all for £5 each.

DAY 7: Tony returned to England for the weekend to attend his daughter's wedding so we had a tourist day at ST GOURDENS. We did the pavement cafe bit, wrote postcards and bought some bits in a caving/sports shop. The most interesting part of the day was a visit to the local museum. It was opened just for us and our guide could speak no English. Non-the-less we managed to understand most of what she was telling us (eventually) and said she enjoyed the experience as much as us and refused a tip.

DAY 8: Up to the snow! We headed for LUCHON which seemed high, but still within the tree-line. Then up and up, round many hair-pin bends until we reached the grass-line then up further still until we reached bare rock and snow. We were at a small ski resort at SUPER-BAGNERES (1700m) which gave clear, breathtaking views all round. There is also, a large hotel and ski-lifts. While we pic-nicked we saw many birds of prey stacked (like planes) waiting for a turn to swoop on prey. We even saw a huge eagle saunter past - it turned out to be a vulture! On the way back we took a different route which took us briefly into Spain, crossing at a loop in the border at COL-DE-PORTILLON - just so we could say we'd been.

DAY 9: Time for another caving trip, this time to GROTTTE FRANCAZAL (450m). We thought this was an easy cave so we took Sian along but it turned out to be more technical than the bit of Trou Mile that we did. The cave itself was more interesting, having been scooped out at different levels by fast flowing water. Judging by the amount of debris throughout the cave at all levels we suspect it still floods up to ceiling-high in storm conditions!! A good trip and Sian did well under the circumstances - French ladder rungs are spaced further apart than English ones which is very noticeable when your only 11yrs old.

DAY 10: For me, the best cave of all - GROTTTE D'ALIOU, a half mile or so of river cave. Tony and Bryan provided boats for the non-wetsuited cavers, and inflated inner tubes and flippers for the rest of us. It was best on your back (hmm!) because you could then appreciate the wealth of big and beautiful decorations overhead, plus a colony of large bats, not too pleased with our presence. A few constrictions in the river called for some acrobatics to get the boats through on their sides without the occupants getting wet! At the end you reached dry (!?) land where you climb up a rift, over a cascade, to a terminal sump. The return was quicker and easier as we swam with the current. Back at the cars we were met by Anne with welcome cups of hot coffee.

DAY 11: Sadly, Bryan and family left us for sun and water-sports at a lake near Bordeaux. The rest of us had a tourist trip down a show cave called GROTTTES DE MEDOUS at BAGNERES-DE-BIGORRE. A beautifully decorated cave and not too spoiled. Quite a long trip, the return route being by boat. Every type of decoration can be seen - well worth a visit.

DAY 12: Our last day in the mountains so we went for a final mid-level walk to say goodbye to the beautiful Pyrenees. Parking in the usual place we walked past Trou Mile and Trou de Vont and up onto a ridge. We saw more wild boar rakings on the way. We walked along the ridge admiring the view and found a few more unusual alpine flowers. We had lunch then headed down to some woods where Tony asked us to look for closed

depression in the limestone. It turned out to be a huge yawning arch (no cave as yet!) which could be appreciated from rocks opposite or above, but especially through a natural rock bridge at the side - an impressive sight. We walked back via a lower level track. Having packed up and loaded the cars before the walk we set off for Tony and Denise's at Thil, arriving mid evening.

DAY 13: Tony had to go to work so Denise took us on a whistle-stop tour of Toulouse with its historic red-brick buildings. We saw some lovely works of French art in LE CAPITOLE (the town hall), built 1759. We visited HOTEL DE BERNUY (originally a palace), built 1504. It has the highest private tower in Toulouse and other unusual architectural features. We also visited LE COUVEN DES JACOBINS, built from 13th to 17th century. It has an architecturally intricate 100ft belltower, beautiful stained glass windows and many other interesting features. So much more to see - must return.

DAY 14: Car packed again (never goes in the same does it?) and off for another 11hrs drive to the ferry. We got to Caen 8.30pm and camped overnight, rose again at 5.30am (English time) then off to catch the early morning ferry. Home by 3pm having had a super holiday, packed with much more than there's room to mention here, and most of all - very agreeable company. Our thanks go to Tony and Denise who did all of the groundwork and planning for us before we went and for putting us up (or putting up with us!).