

Mendip Caving Group NEWS

ISSUE 224

NOVEMBER 1992

The Berger

THE WET WAY, by Tim Francis

The Gouffre Berger, often considered to be the classic caving trip, is perhaps the most famous of the worlds caves. With the recent connection to the Gouffre da la Fromagere the system has a depth of 1271m and a length of 25.957km. Despite being explored way back in the 1950's, the Berger still ranks as the tenth deepest cave in the world. Such facts, combined with the attractions of the Hall of the Thirteen, the Canals, and the exaggerated accounts of the meanders, meant that I jumped at the chance of a place on the Hades Expedition 1992. The opportunity of becoming a fully-fledged 'Berger Bore' was too good to miss.

Leaving aside details of training trips to Yorkshire and how I managed to scrape together enough cash, camp was finally pitched at la Moliere, near Autrans, in the Vercors on Saturday 27th June. As it turned out the drizzle that greeted us turned out to be some of the best weather we were to have in the whole two weeks. Although our booking did not begin until the Monday, we decided to get a head start. We decided to haul all the tackle down to the cave entrance: no mean feat considering half the expedition personnel were still to arrive. The walk-in to the cave takes forty minutes, and is downhill. On the way back it's an hour and a half slog uphill to the campsite. The only water supply at the site is from a natural spring which also doubles up as a cattle trough. The accompanying herd of cows were very inquisitive and for some reason particularly liked Belgian tents.

My first trip was on the Monday* morning. Our group was to act as porters following the riggers who had entered the cave several hours earlier. With previous meticulous plans altered because of our early start, my job was to carry tackle bags K and L (6kg and 5kg respectively) from the entrance to the Balcony (-580m). Essentially the entrance series consists of ten pitches split up by two sections of meanders. The entrance pitch is 15m and can be free-climbed, if your keen, and is directly followed by Ruiz, a fine 27m free-hang. The take off for this pitch is from an extremely dodgy wooded platform thats been there for ages, so a traverse line is vital. The Holiday Slides (15m0, and Cairn (35m) follow in quick sucession. These are both easily negotiated. With hindsight I would of rigged Cairn with a long traverse on the left-hand wall. This would obtain a completety dry hang. Later on we were to discover that Cairn (apart from Aldo's) is the only pitch in the entrance series that is completely impassable in flood.

Our group of six including the expedition leader, John Day, quickly headed off down the meanders. As previous expeditions have noted, this famous twisting traverse is actually dead easy. The only awkward bits are aided by dodgy looking wooden stemples. Most of these lie many feet below, having been dislodged. The next pitch is Garby's, a fantastic 38m drop. It is completely dry, and very

much like a Yorkshire pot. Rope burn from hot descenders proved to be a problem here. A second section of meanders then follows until Gontard's (28m). This has a slightly awkward take-off, and care needs to be taken to avoid rope rub. The three small Relay Pitches (5m, 10m, 5m) follow and the final entrance series pitch, Aldo's (42m), is reached. An exposed traverse gives this pitch a real sod of an approach; not for those with frayed cow's tails.

At the bottom a quick crawl downstream and you suddenly emerge in a massive canyon - The Great Gallery of the Starless River. From this the going is downstream through huge Daren sized passage. We made good progress despite the large tackle bags. The next obstacle reached is Lake Cadoux. At this point we knew the bottoming trip was off as the lake needs to be virtually dry: it was a good 20m wide! A quick dingy ride and more boulder hopping follows through the Bourgin Hall with its large stals. Only Little General (10m) and the Tyrolienne Traverse (5m) break the yomp down the Great Rubble Heap to Camp 1. Bus sized boulders can be fairly disorientating here. One party (not mine I hasten to add!) did a complete circle on one trip. Past Camp 1 its off to the Hall of the Thirteen. The formations here are breathtaking with the huge gour pools particularly impressive. Dumping our gear at the Balcony we began what we thought would be an uneventful exit.

Unfortunately as we made our way back up the Grande Gallerie water seemed to be appearing from all over the place. Great volumes were pouring out of the Petzl Gallery and the stream at this point had developed into a sizable lake. Myself and Richard Hill raced to the foot of Aldo's to find it totally impassable. A dry hang had suddenly become a roaring torrent. Returning to the lake we negotiated a tricky traverse to reach a safe(ish) pile of boulders. Grabbing a mars bar we dived into survival bags - two people per bag for extra warmth. I left several cairns to mark the water level, and checked the conditions as to whether we could get back every hour or so. We estimate that the water rose fifteen feet in under an hour. Despite the cold and rocky bivvy site we were able to catch some sleep. After a long ten hours we were able to pass the lake and headed out. We exited the cave after a 26 hour trip, much to the relief of the others at the campsite. A quick meal and it was down to Autrans for a welcome drink or ten.

My second trip proved to be as eventful as the first. Our 'Crack Team' was supposed to be the bottoming trip, but now we were aiming to get as far as possible. It had been raining all week. Previous trips had made it past the canals in extremely high water levels and rigged to Abelle's cascade (-650m). Carrying camping gear and sleeping bags we made it to the Camp 1 in the respectable time of two hours. Dumping our gear we headed down Balcony (-15m). The highlight of this section is a jet of water gushing out of a hole in the roof - The Elephant's Ass. Beyond, the Calcite Slopes and Vestibule (10m) lead to the famous canals.

Fortunately the waterlevels had dropped and the frayed handlines were two feet out of the water, the day before they had been completely submerged. However the water levels were still very high so the cascades had to be rigged where normally a rope would not be required. The head of Claudines (17m) was reached, but at this point we decided to call it a day (-720m). We knew more rain was due so we rigged as far back as the canals, and took several bags back to Camp 1.

Unlike the previous bivvy the rest at Camp 1 was luxurious. Even those horrible instant foods taste good when you're underground! Several other 'tourist' trips joined us making over twenty people at the camp. In the morning we decided to leave in two waves to avoid congestion. My group wouldn't get out of bed, so I decided to set off on my own at 6.00am. I made rapid progress up the rubble slope and caught up two slower moving Belgians at the Tyrolienne. The three of us arrived at Aldo's to find it again very wet. Not wanting to get stuck again I decided to go for it. With hindsight this was a

took ages to climb the pitch and I was extremely cold. Not wanting to hang around at the top I started to race up the relays. Halfway up the second I noticed a Disconcerting rumble upstream. Realising it to be a flood pulse I quickly snapped my tackle bag onto the rope and jammed myself into a crack. Unsure of my Flemish I yelled a warning in French to the Belgians. Fortunately the last man up had passed the point at which the water hits the pitch.

When the water had subsided I abseiled back down to the small ledge above Aldo's which was relatively dry. After some discussion the two Belgians decided to carry on out while I decided to sit it out. It's amazing how much steam a wet sleeping bag can make! Five hours later I was awoken by the following party who had sat it out below Aldo's at the bivvy site. With lower water levels we headed out together. We arrived at the campsite only half an hour after the Belgians, who had had one hell of an exit. Michel had huge lacerations on his hands from hauling his tackle bag - his hands had been so cold he had not noticed the pain. I made further trips to the Petzl gallery and to assist with the de-rigging. These were uneventful except for a few hairy moments at Cairn which was extremely wet. No fun when the deviation is right underneath a waterfall.

Upon reflection we all agreed that despite the disappointment of not bottoming the cave, the expedition had been worthwhile. We had done well to get as far as we did considering the wet conditions. I would certainly recommend the Berger to anyone looking for that little bit extra. Anyhow, weather permitting, I'll probably return. For as the expedition motto said (in the words of Ken Pearce 1963):

"If you're not hard Sonny, you shouldn't have come!"