

# Mendip Caving Group

## NEWS

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### ALPI APUANE, ITALIA '93

by Tim Francis

After last year's fun and frolics in the Vercors, myself and Julie Hesketh decided to tag along on another Hades expedition. This year's expedition was to the Apuan Alps in Italy. Two other MCG faces on the trip were Pete Collings-Wells and Dave Little, the expedition leader. Camp was pitched at la Piella, Castelnuovo: the only site in the area. All the catering was done by an expedition chef (a Welshman of Italian ancestry!) leaving us to concentrate on the caving. Over the two weeks we tackled Complesso Fighiera Farolfi Corchia and Abisso Paolo Roversi.

#### *Fighiera Corchia System*

At 1208m deep and 49800m long this system ranks as one of the worlds most "sporting" caves. Due to limited time and resources we concentrated on the Corchia end of the system. Two entrances, Buce d'Eolo and Ingresso del Serpentè, were rigged.

The first day was spent hunting for the entrances on the limestone scrub of Monte Corchia. Additional inconveniences were the petrol-tanker drivers strike and the famous marble quarries of Massa. We found it extremely difficult passing the quarry lorries whilst perched on the side of a mountain on a steep dusty track. Once found we spent several days exploring the cave from the lower Serpentè entrance, a convenient ten minute walk from the eoad. The gale blowing from this entrance has to be felt to be believed - carbides are rendered useless for the first ten minutes. Once beyond the draught two small entrance pitches (20ft, 70ft) provided a useful introduction to dodgy, badly placed Italian bolts. Mind you it was either the bolts or a slab of knobbly conglomerate! Below the pitches we yomped along a large fossil passage for half an hour. Several traverses are permanently rigged with 20mm rope.

It was then that our somewhat sketchy and out of date survey came into its own. Several pitches and avens were not marked. Matters were not helped by a confusion of colour coded arrows to which we did not have the key. Reverting to bloodhound techniques we took a side route. More rope climbs, monster fossil passage and a picturesque traverse around a lake lead to Pozzo Gronda. In this section the local cavers have a campsite complete with electricity cable and sockets!

Gronda marks the start of the downstream section. This is a serie of 15 pitches, the largest being 150 feet. The lower section contains fantastic formations and cascades. It's very Mendippy in character - a bit like an overgrown Longwood/August. Most pitches hang from naturals making for a classic rigging trip. The bottom terminates in a large blue sump and a grotty series of chokes. Above Gronda the through-trip from Buce d'Eolo emerges (described elsewhere). There are some particularly fine gour pols and stal forests which were well worth the detour.

#### *Abissi Paolo Roversi (OK3)*

Though not as deep (-755m) as some of the other caves in the area, its particular claim to fame is a 1000ft pitch. It's difficult to imagine how bad this cave is until you've been there, but I'll do my best to describe it. Having rigged the Corchia I was somewhat obliged to help out with the derig of OK3. I was mildly concerned having seen the glazed eyes and knackered bodies of other returning cavers. *continued on page 4*

## ALPI APUANE, ITALIA '93 continued from page 1

On our first trip we were to attempt to bottom the cave and heave out 100m of rope each. At 6am four of us left the campsite. An hours drive and we reached the bottom of Monte Tambura. Donning rucksacs, what follows is the most horrendous walk to a cave you'll see: a two hour climb of 2500ft with the last 45 minutes in the blazing sun. A brief rest at the entrance and we split into two pairs - myself with Paul Medhurst, Pete Collings-Wells with Dave Hammond. The entrance begins with an outward section of thrutches - awkward with SRT kits, feels like the West End with tackle bags. The first pitch, Pozzo Saknussemm, is a fine 121m pitch which breaks you in gently! A further 17 pitches of varying lengths, quality of bolts and severity of rub points are descended to -445m to Campo Base. With each pitch we wondered how on earth we were going to get out.

A quick Mars and we started down Pozzo Mandini, 310m. Getting on the rope was a real stomach churner. The first 120m was a free hang but on 9mm rope you are soon wishing you had more than five bars on a rack. Below, three rebelay take you to a final 90m hang in the spray of the waterfall to the bottom. Previously only Dave Little had made it to the bottom. On the way out he had half derigged in case nobody else was brave enough to have a go.

Being the first down in our group I spent half an hour trying to rerig a rebelay out 150m down. I sheared a bolt in an attempt to get it in further than 3 turns. Not wishing to hang on such a belay I called it a day. The others had a go but were also hampered by two factors. The new rope had shrunk removing all the rebelay loops and so preventing an abseil once rigged. Poor Paul had to reverse prussik 60 feet to remove the bolt. Secondly, Dave's rigging may have been a little tight - OK for the first man down, impossible for the followers.

A little dejected we began the derig, a difficult task in itself. All manner of counter balance systems came into play. We cut the rope into four 100m sections, each taking one bag out. On the way out things got a bit monotonous with pitch after pitch. A few hours later it was the final slog up the 121m entrance pitch, a few squeezes, and we emerged in time for sunrise. After a 17 hour trip we were greeted by a magnificent view of the mountains. Two more hours walk to the minibus and it was straight to sleep.

After a day's rest I returned with Paul Medhurst to complete the derig. This involved heaving out 5 bags from the entrance pitches. Not surprisingly, volunteers for this thankless task were a bit thin on the ground! On a previous trip a caver had spent the early hours of the morning sleeping on the quarry road, too knackered to walk down the hill! He was rudely awoken by a lorry load of quarry workers. Surprisingly our derig went relatively smoothly even in the entrance squeezes. We were, however, extremely relieved to see three others walking up the hill to help us carry down the bags.

In conclusion the trip was enjoyed by everyone, despite the awkward logistics of tackling two systems. With hindsight I would suggest devoting two weeks to the Corchia System, as we barely scraped the surface. Mind you, if any of you fancy that little bit extra then Paolo Reversi is a must!