

Mendip Caving Group NEWS

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FRAGMENTS FROM FRANCE — 11

by Tony Knibbs

It's just like caving in the UK really; at first all is new then one begins revisiting caves and there is less to report in "Fragments". After a whole year with nothing new to comment on, at last I've done something worth noting.

A year ago Denise and I had the opportunity to join an SWCC expedition to the Gouffre Berger - an offer one can hardly refuse, even if we couldn't manage to be there for the whole period of activity. Not really fit enough for a major bottoming epic, we chose a more limited objective by visiting the Hall of Thirteen which is about half way to the bottom at a depth of 495m.

We were joined by another "youngster" Keith Ball, our combined ages divided by three giving an average age of 51, and set off from the campsite at La Moliere at about 11:00am on Sunday 15th August. Bright sunshine and a temperature of about 30C in the shade made us feel glad that the 4km walk to the entrance was mostly downhill through the conifers and beech trees.

Having quickly changed and sorted out our personal sacs, we booked-in at the control tent with Bob Hall and set off down accompanied by Joel Corrigan and two others who planned a photo session at -250m.

At the bottom of the 15m entrance pitch, a narrow passage beyond an open steel door led straight to the head of Ruiz Shaft where some dodgy-looking timbers extended over the 30m pitch. This easy free-hanging dry abseil in a shaft cut through a delightful cream-coloured limestone set the scene for the following 200m of descent.

The steeply sloping Holiday Slides followed immediately, giving a split 10m descent to the head of an impressive 30m pitch at Cairn Shaft with a deviation about 5m down. Crossing the gravelly floor brought us to the beginning of the First Meander, a deep sinuous rift involving bridging or the use of dubious-looking wooden stemples over the "bottomless" bits. About 150m of this led to Garby's Shaft of 38m with a deviation 10m down.

A further 100m or so of shuffling through the Second Meander opened out at the head of Gontard's Shaft of 35m, followed by three consecutive drops of 10m, 3m and 6m to reach the take-off for Aldo's Shaft, a fine 40m free-hang down to a short passage into Grande Galerie at -250m where the aspect of the cave changed abruptly.

Emerging from small passage into huge passage some 30m wide and 20m high, I could imagine the sheer amazement which must have gripped Joe Berger, Aldo Sillanoli, Jean Cadoux and their team members in 1953 as they pushed deeper into their new discovery. Since conditions were so dry, the Starless River which flowed from Mud Passage, on our left, was simply a streamlet.

We followed the stream bed a couple of hundred metres to where Lake Cadoux was temporarily absent, then continued over piles of breakdown beneath which the stream had vanished. Navigation became a question of spotting cairns and trying to keep to the obvious worn paths. Calcite formations were becoming more numerous by the time we reached the Little General Cascade, a 10m rope descent with a tiny stream entering halfway down, where Keith easily won the Men's 5m Free-Fall event.

Continuing downstream, we followed handline (tyrolienne) traverses, first bypassing a cascade, then avoiding deep pools. The stream disappeared once more and we found ourselves gaining a little height as we navigated between the immense blocks and boulder piles of the Great Rubble Heap which seemed to stretch ahead to infinity. After maybe half an hour of this we stood at the top of a 30m boulder slope looking down on Camp 1 nestling beneath the right-hand wall which rose sheer above the sleeping bags and cooking pots. Several coloured balloons hung on the wall above the camp, sharply contrasting with the grim surroundings.

We stopped briefly to talk to two cavers who had just emerged from their bags and were preparing to carry on out of the system. Only a few metres beyond Camp 1 we carefully picked our way across mostly dried-out gourd pools to reach the Hall of the Thirteen where the stalagmite formations were much more impressive than in any photo I had ever seen. We ourselves took a few photos here, and I reflected on the fact that the discovery of the Berger and my caving career are both 40 years old this year. How time flies when your having fun!

With almost 500m of ascent in front of us, we took our time trudging back upslope and along the streamway to the foot of Aldo's Shaft. We also dallied somewhat on the various pitches: passing the too-low y-hang at the head of Garby's was a pain, and we found the blue Edelrid Supersoft to be truly abysmal for SRT ascent. Surprisingly, a fine spray of water was coming down Cairn Shaft and the Holiday Slides. It transpires that this resulted from a thunderstorm which had passed over the plateau in the late afternoon.

A brilliant starry sky greeted us at the entrance and we duly reported our return to the new occupant of the control tent. It was 2:30am and we all felt very tired after a 14-hour excursion which we shall never forget - a fine trip, indeed. Once all the kit was repacked, we set off on the last stretch back to the tents at la Moliere, Keith deftly navigating by the odd splash of red paint, an arrow on a rock, or reflective markers in the trees. We made slow time on the walk back -200m downhill yesterday was now the same amount uphill (it seemed more) and I was glad to see the tents once more. After a cup of coffee and a bowl of soup, Denise and I drove back down to our own tent at Autrans, arriving at about 5:30pm; we rose late that Monday morning!

As a footnote on equipment, let me say that my new plastic Alp carbide generator worked well; I was unaware of its presence on a shoulder sling and it provided six hours per fill. On the other hand, my Petzl laser seems to be fitted with a splendid (4.0V, 0.5A halogen) bulb which gave maybe 4 hours light on a new Duracell battery, but it died almost instantly when it finally passed out.

And maybe you wondered what the Men's 5m Free-Fall event was? Well, it involves abseiling down a rope using a descender and going into free-fall mode at some point. The best descender for this is undoubtedly the Petzl Plummet (alias Stop) which opens at the touch of a lever... Yes, I know all about locking-off, but some people are optimistic enough to think that its stop function (i.e the only reason for buying it) needs no back-up when doing such simple things as passing a deviation.

The event referred to was discussed amongst several expedition members with a strong rescue interest - the "Plummet" cachet comes from Yorkshire apparently, where the device has earned quite a reputation. This was the second time I have witnessed this type if accident, so it cannot be that scarce. In short, unless you are into pitch rigging and your technique is flawless, think twice about buying a stop - and certainly don't recommend it to a beginner. A simple two-bobbin Petzl or a rack are much safer.