

Mendip Caving Group

NEWS

NUMBER 240

SEPTEMBER 1994

EIGHTEEN GO ON AN ALPINE ADVENTURE

One day, Timmy and Julie were telling their friends in the MCG all about their adventures in Belize. Everyone thought that cave exploring in the jungle sounded great fun! All their MCG friends wanted to discover caves as well, but Belize was such a long way for them to go. Suddenly, Ralph had an idea. "Do you know that the ozone layer is being depleted by CFC's? This is leading to global warming, causing the world's ice sheets to melt. Why don't we all go off to the Alps! It will be so hot there that all the snow plugs will have melted and we can go hunting for new caves, just like Timmy and Julie and their friends did in Belize!!" Everyone cheered at his idea. "Yes, we can be famous cave explorers again - how exciting!" said Julie. They all thought this was a brilliant suggestion, except Joel. "That's not fair," he cried. "I won't be able to join in as I'm starting work in Hong Kong." The others thought about this. Joel was the Meet Secretary, and everyone agreed that it would be a good idea for him to be on the trip. "Can't you go to Hong Kong after the Alps?" they suggested, but Joel could not. After a while, they hit upon the answer. "Tough shit then - we'll go without you!" they all said. "Yes, and you'll lose your £20 deposit!" added Joe.

The Eighteen drew up a list of all the caving equipment they would need and went to the Committee for funds. Some Committee members wanted to know why a caving group needed ropes and tackle bags and bolts and hangers and other useful items, but eventually the Committee was very kind and bought everything that was needed (with the AGM's approval). Indeed the Committee said it was immaterial that 5 out of 8 Committee Members were going on Ralph's adventure. Charlie hired the Royal Holloway minibus, and everyone was told to meet in a carpark in Egham on the evening of Friday 19th August. The Famous Eighteen's Alpine Adventure was about to begin!

Martin Rowe (with apologies to Enid Blyton)

Dave, Lee, Michael, James and Dr Andy loaded as much gear onto the roofrack as they could, then struggled to cover it with a huge tarpaulin. The gear that couldn't go on the roofrack was eased(!!) into the back of the minibus, along with 10 expedition members. At 7pm, Martin, Yvonne, Marcus, Joan and Joe set off by car for the ferry. The minibus waited until the last moment because Ralph and Tim H had not turned up. Meanwhile, Ralph and Tim H were waiting in the wrong car park, wondering why the minibus hadn't arrived. Eventually the minibus had to leave without them otherwise the ferry would be missed. Luckily, they were found on the way, and everyone (except Tony and Denise who were already in France, and Linda who was flying out to join the party for the second week) set off.

The minibus enjoyed a very smooth ferry crossing from Dover to Calais. The car, however, went by Seacat from Folkestone to Boulogne. Being a catamaran, the Seacat pitches and rolls like crazy on anything less calm than a millpond. With a 20 knot southeasterly which had been blowing for 48 hours, the Channel was no millpond! As the crossing takes only 55 minutes, none of the party was ill although it seemed that everyone else on the Seacat was. The car and minibus met again at 3.30am on the A26 at St Omer. The car arrived first, so the occupants were asleep when the minibus arrived. Julie came over to the car to wake everyone. "Are you both driving?" she enquired of Martin and Yvonne. "No, only one at a time," replied Martin.

From St Omer, the car and minibus travelled together to our destination - the Marie (or Town Hall) in Samoens. On the way, Ralph (who was holding the kitty money, some £1000 or so) had his wallet "stolen". He had consumed one or two(?) glasses of wine en route and had fallen asleep in the minibus.

(cont. on p4)

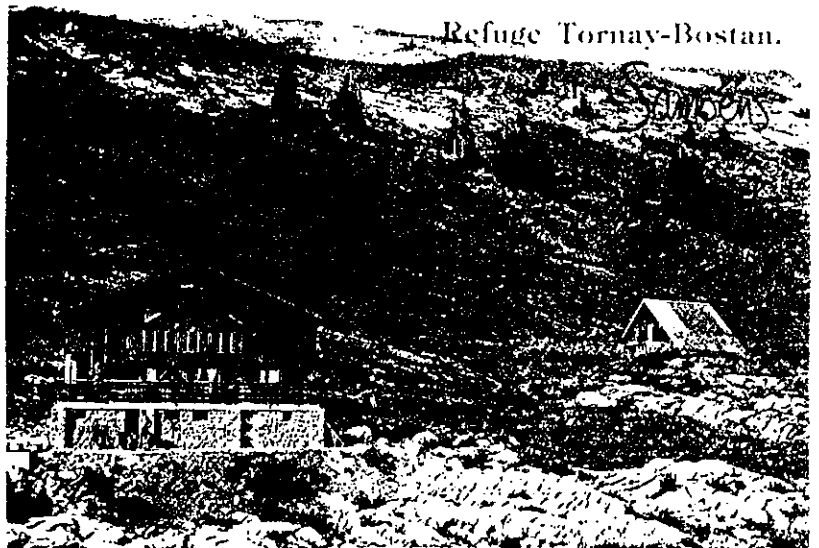
EIGHTEEN GO ON AN ALPINE ADVENTURE *continued from page 1*

Unbeknown to him, the wallet was lifted from him and given to another expedition member. He only realised it was missing some time later, and the rest of the party had fun winding him up! Even when he was told that it was a prank, he refused to believe it until the wallet was finally produced, much to his relief.

James, Charlie and Tim F shared the straightforward minibus driving on the motorway (and French motorways are quiet compared to ours), and Julie took over once we reached the really hairy, narrow, mountain roads. Little wonder that she made a mistake or two!!! But then, when you have never driven in France before, it can be difficult remembering to stop at red lights and drive on the right!

We arrived unscathed at the Marie in Samoens at 2.30pm and 30mins early for our meeting with Patrice, our French caving contact. He guided us to a carpark at 1096m from where we would have to walk to Refuge Bostan Tornay at 1763m. By 6.30pm we had unloaded the car and minibus and we set off, with extremely heavy rucksacks, up the steep winding track to the refuge. Patrice had a 4WD Lada van which took some of the heavier gear like rope, carbide and caving gear (at least some peoples!), which was a great help. Unfortunately it was only a one-way trip as Patrice would be unable to get off work on the Friday we were going home (but we'd worry about that nearer the time).

We all made it, eventually, to the refuge and bunkhouse - some did it in just over two hours, others nearer three. Our bunkhouse, 100m beyond the main refuge, was basic - no electric, gas or toilets - but the beds had comfortable mattresses, pillows, and plenty of blankets. Cooking was on our own stoves on the patio outside (there wasn't room inside), and lighting was carbide or zooms. Fortunately we were able to use the toilet facilities at the main refuge. The bunkhouse water supply, which we were assured was there somewhere, was elusive. It turned out to be a black hose, underneath the bunkhouse, with a tap in it - obvious when you knew where to look! The water itself came from a small lake



further up the valley and although untreated and laced with baby leeches, it was drinkable once water and leeches were separated. This bunkhouse provided us with much amusement during the fortnight including various cottage games, agility exercises, and not least the spectacular views of thunderstorms as they crept up the mountain towards us almost every evening. On the storm-free evenings we had beautiful sunsets - Beaujolais sunsets, as Dave described them.

Needless to say there was the usual leg-pulling, with Marcus getting ribbed for not only bringing his mum to look after him and do his cooking, but also letting slip that he used to be a t***n s****r. Mind you, Dr Andy went one better, firstly by admitting that he once knitted his own Dr Who scarf, then falling for both the spoons trick AND the three man lift on the same night! (Has he really got a PhD?) Oh how we laughed, didn't we Dave!! Tony told us all about his visit to the obstetrician, er.. osteopath. Joan advised us that she couldn't do it through a coat hanger. Mike and Tony lost their trousers doing it through a coat hanger. Joe was prepared to pay 10F for Julie. Then there was the one about the artificial inseminator.... but that's another story.

We all slept soundly the first night but were rudely awoken with an early morning alarm call by a herd of cattle with huge bells (I said BELLS!). As we ate breakfast, Tony and Denise arrived, having camped in Samoens the night before. After breakfast, we all set off for "Area D", the area of karst allocated to us for exploration. The bunkhouse is situated at 1763m in the the floor of a double glacial valley, with a high moraine on one side and even higher, vertical cliffs on the other. From the bunkhouse it was necessary to climb the valley side for about 100m to the top of the moraine, then gradually ascend the valley until a vast expanse of barren limestone rock on the valley side was reached. This has been divided into areas A,B,C and D, each being progressively higher up the valley. Area D consists of lapies - bare, razor-sharp limestone pavement - which until recently must have been covered by snow and ice. Being on the valley side, the area slopes at an angle of about 30deg from the ridge above (to the north) before ending at cliffs to the valley below (to the south), and is bounded east and west by two major north-south joints. It is roughly rectangular, measuring about 350m (n-s) by 150m (e-w). The only possible place to camp is a small grassy area at 2200m, some 200m below the ridge, but even this site slopes at 24deg so that those who camped would wake up to find themselves hard against the

side of their tents. They were often shrouded in cold cloud too which made life up there a bit miserable at times.

The lapies had to be traversed carefully when cave hunting as it was razor-sharp, any mistake would be serious as Charlie found to his cost. He slipped on the first day and badly cut his shin. It really needed stitches and medical attention but he was in no condition to walk down the mountain to the car. Back at the bunkhouse, he and Yvonne drew the wound together and applied butterfly sutures and Savlon spray. This worked so well that when Charlie did see a doctor a couple of days later, he was told that no further treatment was necessary other than antibiotics as a preventative measure. Not to be outdone, Dave also fell onto razor rock, cutting his leg, back, shoulder and arm. His excuse was that he thought the sight of his injuries would impress the girls in Samoens! It didn't.

At the head of the valley was Col de Bostan, the other side of which was Switzerland. After visiting the top camp, Martin, Joan, Tony, Denise, Charlie and Yvonne climbed up to the Tete de Bostan (2406m), the peak above the camp and found the footpath along the ridge and down to the col. The views from the top were really superb, both the French views on one side and the Swiss views on the other. There were still a few patches of snow around at this height although the temperature was in the 70s. From the col the obligatory photo was taken on some snow in Switzerland then the path was followed down the valley floor to the refuge. This route was scenically totally different to the route to Area D. There were

*(Haute-Savoie - France)
Le Col de Bostan 2 290 m
Les Dents Blanches 2 727 m*



huge boulder heaps, some of the boulders being as big as houses. At the foot of the cliffs below Area D there were fresh boulder falls, and every now and then we'd hear a strange crackling noise which we soon realised were small rock slides taking place nearby! The Alpine flowers here and elsewhere on our adventures were plentiful and beautiful - blue, purple, and yellow gentians, asters, saxifrages, stonecrops, wolfsbane, monkshood, arnica, eidleweiss, alpine rose, scabious, campanulas, and many, many more. Joan and Yvonne, being wild flower lovers, were in a seventh heaven! Some creatures seen on our adventures were marmots, an alpine rabbit, chamois, eagles, vultures, lizards, strange spiders, huge crickets and luminously marked grasshoppers.

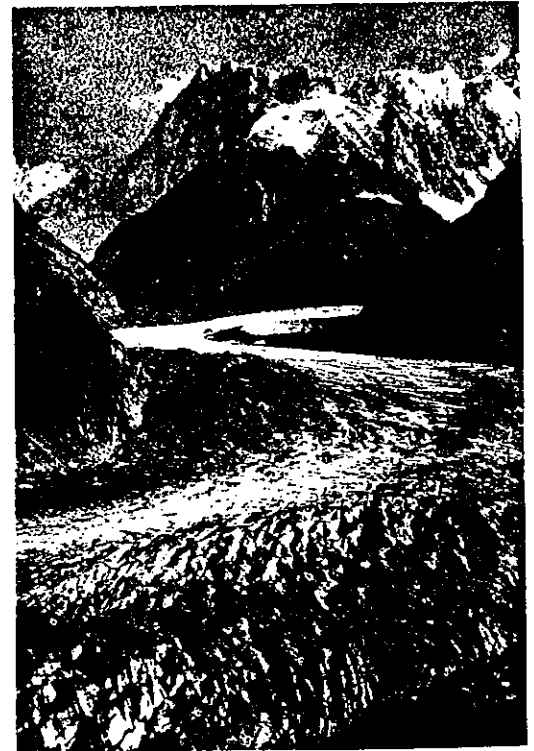
As the exploration of Area D continued, it became apparent that we were not going to find an easy way into the cave system which undoubtedly exists below the lapies. Any rainfall along the ridge only flows a short distance before reaching bare limestone. As a result, the many small streamlets do not have the opportunity to combine into larger streams, and the water disappears down innumerable tiny fissures. The best potential seemed to be along the major n-s joints which bound the area and the many smaller joints which criss-cross the lapies. There are many dozens of openings on these joints but they are all hopelessly choked so that progress was always halted after no more than 50-100m. The keener members of the party, no doubt spurred on by the knowledge that the world's deepest cave lies over the ridge in the next valley in terrain that is not dissimilar, persevered and were still exploring new caves up to the day before we were due to leave. The caving stories I'll leave to those who were more involved - hopefully I'll be able to print these in the next newsletter.

Halfway through the holiday (sorry, expedition!) Martin and Yvonne drove to meet Linda, who had flown to Geneva from London then caught the train to Cluses. We knew that by then we would all be suffering from our diet of Beanfeast soya meals (an understatement!) so, as it was also Tony and Denise's last day with us, we all decided to have an expediton meal in Samoens. Everyone came down for the day and had a good look round the town which although a bit touristy, was very pretty and interesting. We had a splendid meal and lots to drink at a little restaurant that Tony found for us (with a huge picture of the English Lake District's Tarn Hows across one wall!). The diehards planned to walk back up the mountain to the bunkhouse after the meal but the crusties booked into a nearby campsite for the night. In the morning they found they had been joined by five non-crusties! Tim F and Julie were two of them but as Tim had been quite ill and was getting very thin, he decided to see a doctor while he was there. We never did find out what was wrong with him - perhaps it was mountain sickness! The doctor prescribed him various preparations and he quickly recovered.

When not at the top camp we spent the evenings in the main refuge as it had light, until the generator ran out of fuel at around 10.30pm, then it was candlelight. We passed many a happy hour here but drinking was dear - £2 for a 330ml bottle of lager!

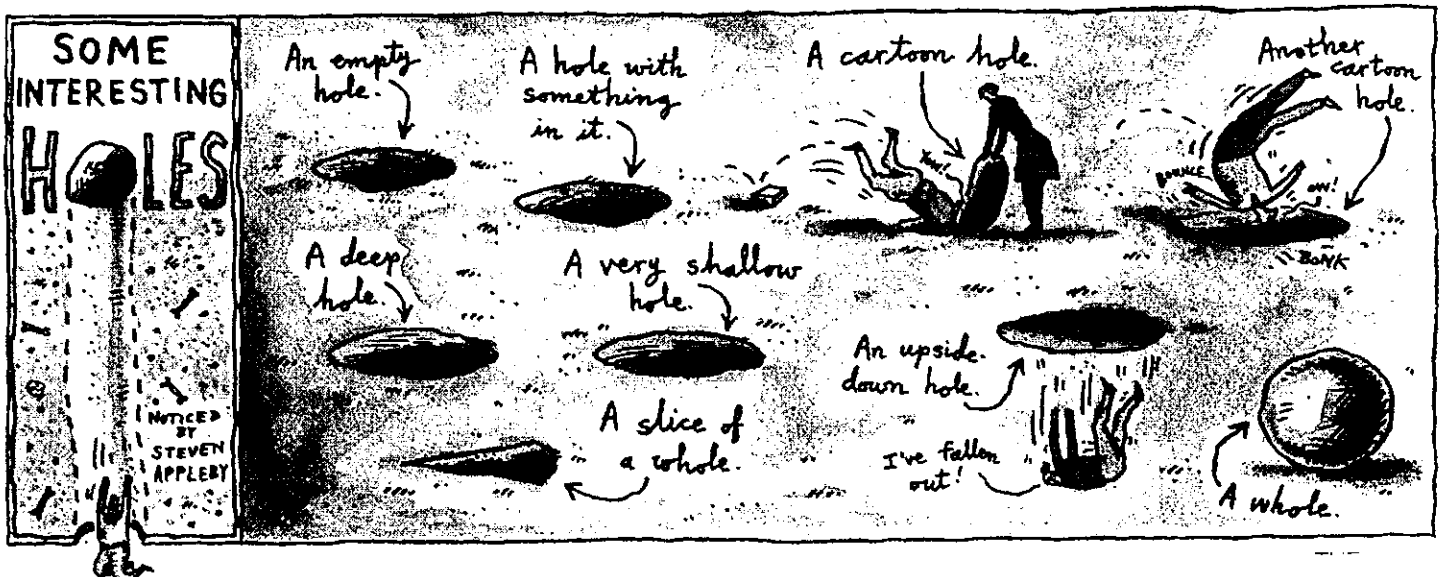
Julie had her 23rd birthday while we were there and the refuge warden produced a huge bilberry tart with 23 candles on it. His stocks of beer and lager were not planned with the likes of the MCG in mind and he often ran out which meant he had to keep going down the mountain (he had a 4WD) to stock up. However, he must have welcomed our business as we would get the occasional free round of drinks and on the last night he invited everyone over for free aperitifs! Not everyone brought two weeks of dehydrated food with them so some also had meals here which were really good with very generous helpings (at least they were if you didn't sit next to Tim Haynes! Only joking Tim).

We were aware that Geoff Barton, Brian Snell and friends were over at Chamonix during our stay, and we did wonder if they might call in for a cup of tea. They did - on the day that we all went to Chamonix for the day! We met on the path down to Samoens and briefly exchanged greetings. When we arrived in Chamonix, most went in search of banks, shops and bars but Martin, Joan, Marcus and Yvonne went off in search of a glacier, taking a rack and pinion train up Mont Blanc then a cable car down to the snout of a glacier called la Mer de Glace. This was much more impressive than expected, as although the snout is melting it is still enormously high. From the railway, the glacier could be seen snaking around the mountains for quite a way, with huge boulders under the melting side edge being dragged along, to be eventually dumped at the snout, and lots of scree and boulders that were being carried along on its surface, eventually to form moraines. The surface was melting in a way that left it faceted and uneven. Some areas were either snow-covered or covered with rocks, but others were clean faces of ice which were turquoise with the sunlight refracting through them. The whole scene was extremely beautiful and totally overwhelming. As a tourist attraction a tunnel had been excavated through the glacier and, although gimmicky, it was quite an experience to walk through this cold, turquoise tunnel of ice. You could even have your photo taken inside sitting on carved ice armchairs!! There was also a carved ice bedroom, an ice bathroom, an ice polar bear, and more. There's always something tacky to spoil it but fortunately nothing spoiled the view of the glacier itself. Whilst we were in Chamonix, the weather turned, and the last few days consisted of dramatic thunderstorms and torrential rain. With no transport from the bunkhouse down to the carpark, we began to carry all the gear back down, making several trips. On one of these trips, Ralph, Tim H, Charlie and Dr Andy failed to return to the bunkhouse. By 9.00 the next day, which was the day we were leaving, they had still not arrived. Everyone packed their own gear and cleaned the bunkhouse, and we left a message with the warden about the unpacked gear belonging to Ralph et al which we were leaving behind - we had enough of our own gear to carry and were unable to carry theirs as well! Fortunatley, they all arrived just as the rest of us were departing, having been stranded in the minibus all night by torrential rain.



La Mer de Glace et ses séracs
Les Grandes Jorasses

Taking everything into consideration, this was a successful expedition. The bunkhouse was spartan but adequate, and it was suprising how quickly we became used to showering in ice cold water. There was a lot of laughter, walking, and even caving (although we didn't find the master cave), and the scenery was breathtaking. There will be a slide show soon, and a full account of the caves in a future newsletter. Yvonne Rowe



LECHUGUILLA

by Pete Hollings

After attending the NSS convention I spent a little over a month in the UK before returning to the States to take part in an expedition into Lechuguilla Cave. The expedition was organised by the Lechuguilla Exploration and Research Network (LEARN). However, access to the cave is controlled by the National Park Service who reserve the right to assign two people to each expedition. I was one of these.

I flew from London to El Paso and then caught a greyhound bus up to White's City, the tourist trap at the gates of Carlsbad Caverns National Park. The only problem was that the visitors centre and the huts where we were staying were another 6 miles away, however the huts themselves were fairly luxurious, almost on a par with the MCG.

On the first official day of the expedition (Saturday) we were scheduled for an 8am meeting with the Cave Specialist from the Park Service. For the next two hours we were informed of the various do's and don'ts (including the infamous rule that all solid wastes must be removed from the cave), split into teams and assigned areas of the cave to examine. While some people were going on 5 day trips to the far reaches of the caves, most of us were to be underground for only 3 days. The rest of the morning was spent packing and repacking rucksacks and by 2pm I was following my three team mates up the well-worn footpath to the cave entrance.

By now I was fairly nervous, the stories of high temperatures, 95% humidity and arduous 3 day caving trips were preying on my mind. The 35-40lb rucksack was not helping much either. The first sight of this famous cave is not overly impressive, the moderately sized sinkhole being invisible until you are almost on top of it. A 60ft pitch drops you into the bottom of the sinkhole and then a further 10ft drop brings you to the culvert. This is the point where the gate has been installed, both to keep out unwanted cavers and to stop the cave drying out. The draught when you open the lid is amazing and has been measured at 60mph, it was probably about half that when we entered the cave. From the bottom of the ladder in the culvert it is only 20 minutes to the top of Boulder Falls, a 150ft pitch, named because of the loose boulders on the walls. We were unlucky enough to witness this when one of our team dislodged some material at the top of the pitch which only just missed the person on the rope at the time.

We left some food and water at Packs Peak, one of the few safe spots at the bottom of the pitch, and headed off towards the Near East, our designated area. Initially most of the caving was in large walking passage, although the fact that you are always climbing up and down over breakdown and boulder hopping makes life difficult, especially when your pack is constantly putting you off balance. We passed through Glacier Bay, where the giant gypsum blocks look like ice, on to Windy City and into Sugarlands. From there you enter the Rift, an initially awkward passage that opens out into a series of easy roped traverses.

At the end of the Rift are found the junctions to most of the major branches of the cave. Our route took us down Apricot Pit. This is made up of four pitches in a rift that slopes between 60degs and 85degs and in places is only 18 inches wide, which makes descent awkward. The last rope drops you into the High Tide room with a short climb taking you into the Low Tide room. It was here that someone had left a burrito bag (remember that rule about removal of solid wastes?) which the Park had asked us to remove, however we decided to leave that until our last day. Up until now the cave had been really impressive with large passages and numerous small formations, however they paled into insignificance compared to what I was about to see before we got to our camp at the Rusticles. Both the Emperor's Throne Room and Nirvana were stunning. The latter is a beautifully decorated area, the walls covered in what the Americans call popcorn, there are numerous straws over 2m long, complex helectites, stunning lakes and the aragonite bushes for which the cave is famous.

The next two days were spent examining a number of leads, unfortunately none of them opened out into big passage and few of them were virgin, however we managed to survey 300ft of passage. Apricot Pit proved to be even worse on the way out than on the way down, it is the first time I've ever crawled up a pitch on my hands and knees, this being the easiest way to do it. Boulder Falls wasn't too bad although it would have been easier if I hadn't initially climbed the wrong rope, a push rope left by a previous expedition. Back on the surface the desert smelt wonderful, which is more than I could say for the four of us.

At the meeting on Tuesday morning the various teams discussed their finds and people started making plans to return to the cave on Wednesday. This time I joined a group heading to the Chandelier Graveyard off the Western Borehole; they'd just come back from there and reported plenty of leads into virgin passage, with the potential of a big breakthrough. As Tuesday was a rest day some of us headed into Carlsbad Caverns. The showcave section of this 25 mile cave is extremely well developed with tarmacked trails throughout, not to mention the underground cafeteria. The lighting of the cave is so good it is sometimes hard to believe that you are actually underground. During the trip someone pointed out the cord that runs down from the roof of the Big Room

some 300ft above. This had initially been floated into place using helium balloons, allowing a rope to be hauled up. The first man up must have had nerves of steel!!

On Wednesday the three of us joined the procession back to the cave. We yomped through the now familiar route to the top of the Great White Way. This consists of three easy drops sloping at around 70degs and comes out into Deep Secrets, a huge room with car sized blocks covering the floor. Boulder hopping along well flagged trails (all the trails in Lech are well marked to help preserve the cave in its pristine condition and to prevent people getting lost) through the Deep Seas room, over the Fortress of Chaos and into camp. As it had only taken 3 hours to get to camp and we were all feeling fairly fresh we headed off to do some surveying. It took about 45 minutes to get to the bottom of the rope leading to the Chandelier Graveyard, the route taking us past the beautiful Lake Louise, through the ABC's room and into the Western Borehole. We replaced the rope, which was showing signs of wear, and then checked a couple of leads, picking up 300ft of survey before heading back to camp.

This time we were planning to stay in the cave for 4 days, the extra day was to give us time to thoroughly examine our area and survey 1300ft of passage but with no major breakthroughs. The Graveyard is a spectacular place, everywhere being covered with white gypsum crystals that look just like snow, and just like snow they manage to get into your clothes but with more painful results. The area gets its name from the collapsed chandeliers that litter the area, these are similar to those seen in photos of the Chandelier Ballroom but somewhat smaller. Surveying virgin cave in this area was not only painful, the sharp crystals being very tough on bodies only covered by shorts and t-shirts, but also tough on the conscience. Someone pointed out that in 2 days of surveying I had probably destroyed more gypsum crystal than can be found in the UK!!

Everyone had to be out of the cave by 4pm Saturday so we spent the evening swapping stories and finding out what other teams had found during the week. In total some 9000ft of passage had been surveyed making Lechuguilla 76 miles long and the third longest cave in the US.

Anyone with the time, money and inclination to go caving in Lechuguilla should get in touch with Dale Pate, the Cave Specialist at Carlsbad Caverns National Park. All you need is a knowledge of SRT techniques and a lot of stamina. The caving itself is not particularly demanding, however the heat, humidity and heavy packs required for the 3 or 4 day trips can really grind you down. But believe me it is well worth the effort!!