



Mendip Caving Group Newsletter

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## Dve pivos, prosim!

By Tony Knibbs

The ability to speak in foreign tongues is not mandatory but being able to order two beers in Slovenian is a step in the right direction. I suppose it must have been about forty years ago that I became aware that there were some superb caves and karst scenery in what was then known as Yugoslavia. I had ideas of visiting the region a few years ago but the inhabitants declared war in all directions, so a return to peace was awaited. All is now calm in Slovenia, at least, and the possibility of having all the necessary planning work done by SMCC made the choice of joining their special club 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary visit an easy one, and the first two weeks in August were duly set aside for this purpose. The MCG attendance was enhanced by the presence of Mike and Sue Haselden and Peter Harvey.

A campsite at the village of Laze, near Logatec – the Speleocamp, owned and run by Franc Fajica – was the chosen venue. Laze is about 10km NNE of Postojna and is easily reached from the motorway which runs from Trieste/Gornica eastwards across Slovenia. Local bars and restaurants supplied most of our gastronomic needs at very sensible prices; other supplies being obtained from shops and supermarkets in Laze, Postojna, Logatec, etc. The Slovenian capital Ljubljana was about an hour's drive NE, mostly on the motorway, and was well worth a visit.

The campsite itself had the usual facilities, albeit of a more rudimentary quality than your average three-star family site but quite in keeping with the basic needs of cavers. It enjoys a pastoral location in which cavers can pursue their usual, bottle-clinking night-life without disturbing the locals! The camp population probably rose to some 60 souls, losses through departures being made up by WCC arrivals and sundry Polish and German cavers who stayed only for the occasional night.

My own activities were rather limited by lingering sciatica caused by an ill-advised caving trip (Grotte du Saut de la Pucelle, in the Lot) a few weeks earlier. However, the Slovenian karst is ideal for the elderly spastic caver and I found plenty of caving to make it worth donning helmet and lamp.

**Planinska Jama** is in the village of Planina, only 3km from Laze. It is a classic river resurgence cave 6km long requiring the use of inflatable boats, and it is under the control of local cavers who provide a guide and boats – and charge ten pounds per head for the service. But that's all part of life's rich pattern and the trip is stunning – a cruise liner could probably fit into some passages in the system!

Planinska is but one link in a chain of sinks and resurgences extending over many kilometres of karst landscape. It contains two rivers – Pivka and Rak – of which the confluence is met just inside the entrance in a chamber too large to appreciate what is going on. Water levels were low in August and our journey up the Pivka involved the occasional portage of the boats over boulders. On reaching the upstream sump (after en-route punctures) we disembarked to climb up into the well-decorated Paradiz passage for an hour or so of harmless fun.

Paddling back downstream gave ample opportunity to observe the numerous white *Proteus Anguinus*, easily visible against the dark riverbed, and the remains of earlier show cave operations – widened ledges, wire traverses and broken bridges – added interest. In all, a superb introductory trip.

But even the show caves are something special in Slovenia as we discovered in **Skocjanske Jama**, 30km SW of Postojna. A walk down into a huge doline brings one to a monumental concrete-shrouded artificial entrance. The guide verified the language requirements and set about explanations in Slovenian, Italian, German and English. Half an hour or so of steady descent through sloping, dry passages - the Silent Cave - quite well decorated at the start and gathering momentum in both size and decoration content as we progressed. A particularly large chamber contained an impressive assortment of gigantic stalagmite columns, a sight soon to be eclipsed by our arrival at a breathtaking 30m wide canyon through which flows the Reka about 100m below and audible as a dull rumble.

A narrow bridge – Hanks Bridge – spans the chasm and the path now clung to the canyon wall. The atmosphere now became notably humid and we walked, now upslope through clouds of fog, to emerge into daylight in a deep doline from which a cable rail-car made a steep ascent to the surface. Before quaffing a well-earned pivo or two, we spent a few minutes walking up to a viewpoint overlooking the upstream end of the river Reka with Skocjan village visible on the far side of the enormous entrance doline – very impressive.

Smaller-scale amusement was available in the forest NE of Laze where waymarked paths constitute the **Cave Walk** can followed to make a tour of numerous entrances in dolines: jama Stota, Za Teglovko, Na Meji, Vranja, Najdena and Skednena. These vary in length from 100m to 5km and in depth from 23m to 121m and can provide amusing hours of grovelling and/or SRT practice. Sue (demon cyclist) led three of us on a mountain-bike tour which had its moments and excused us going underground – only two bikes had lights! Be informed that walking round is more sensible.

About 10km NW of Laze is the small **Rakov Skocjan National Park**, a fascinating karst area through which the river Rak flows in and out of the limestone, initially resurging from **Zelske Jama**. The cave is 3km long and is approached by descending either of two collapsed dolines: one has a steep footpath, the other offers a fine 40m pitch from a natural bridge. Boats are required for much of the cave and several portages are necessary before the passage roof descends to within 2 or 3m of the river whose bed becomes increasingly rocky. There are interesting side passages which we omitted to visit. Indeed, this whole area is worth devoting much more time to than we did.

**Predjama showcave** entrance is well known for the 12<sup>th</sup> century castle it contains. The tourist trip is nothing special – an hour spent wandering through several roomy, dry chambers. However, guided caving trips are possible at (again) ten pounds per head and provide a few hours of mostly easy-going fun: big passages (with some very muddy stretches!), huge chambers and many finely decorated areas. Most of my photos were rather foggy, but a tripod and the use of the self-timer function would have cured this.

The **Postojna cave** system is over 19km long and is another essential visit. The trip starts with a 15-minute train ride through grandiose passages – the formations are almost unbelievable – to reach the ‘station’ from which an uphill walk brings one to Great Chamber. This lives up to its name and sets the tone for the next hour of the trip, passing through a succession of large and remarkably decorated passages linking even-bigger chambers. A momentary change of gear is felt as the walk reaches its conclusion and the profuse decoration slightly diminishes where the smoke-blackened walls of a side-passage on the left give evidence of the destruction of an underground Nazi fuel dump by partisans in 1944. (The effects of this same smoke can be seen also from the train). A final awesome scene is provided as the route opens out into the richly decorated Concert Hall, about 50m high and 80m in diameter. Gift shops and cafés are dwarfed by this void from which a short tunnel leads down to a ‘station’ to start the return train journey.

And so to perhaps the star attraction – a guided visit conducted by a local caver (costing ten pounds, again!) to **Krizna Jama** with its impressive river passage. The cave is near Bloska Polica, about half an hour’s drive eastwards from Laze; a forest road leads into a blind valley which terminates at the cave entrance with its adjacent guide’s hut. The cost of the trip includes the obligatory hire of clean oversuit, boots, helmets and electric lamps (carbide is taboo) to ensure maximum cleanliness – cave conservation is written in capital letters here! Our guide Alojz paid close attention to this aspect, and the party was limited to four cavers to aid supervision and minimise damage.

The gated entrance passage quickly enlarges to become a roomy, boulder-strewn, elongated chamber. Large quantities of cave bear bones were discovered here and many boulders had been polished in places by passing animals; over 100 complete skeletons are thought to have been recovered. The first lake is held back by a calcite barrier of which several more are crossed as the trip progresses upstream. Uniquely, the boat used to cross this 2m deep lake was fitted with an underwater floodlight which illuminated the white crystalline deposits below us. To avoid unnecessary portage, more inflatable boats were strategically positioned along the streamway, the process of getting in and out of boats being carefully monitored by Alojz.

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Such was the beauty of this large river passage that frequent use was made of a hand-held floodlight and, of course, much film was exposed. At the well-decorated Kalvarija chamber the streamway bifurcates: Blata Rov (passage) goes left and Pisani Rov is followed by boat to the right. Eventually we left the boat to walk carefully among the boulders and profuse stalagmite formations of Kristalna Gora (Crystal mountain), the climax of the 3h trip. We emerged into suffused daylight, having missed the almost total eclipse of the sun by a few minutes – but what is an eclipse compared to the wonders of Krizna Jama!

Slovenia is a long drive, even from Toulouse (1500km) but is really worth making the effort to visit. Advance planning is essential to get access to those caves (and the campsite) which require booking. The “Lonely Planet – Slovenia” guide book proved very useful. But I have reservations concerning Ian Bishop’s “Cave Guide – Slovenia” which devotes much space to introducing Slovenian caving and the language, yet gives limited descriptions of the actual caves and offers surveys of which many are almost illegible. There is room on my shelves for a better-written, more precise document.

