



Mendip Caving Group Newsletter

Number 304 - January 2002

www.m-c-g.org.uk

CAVES, KARST AND CABLE CARS: DACHSTEIN 2001

Tim Francis

My second trip to the Dachstein but at least this year I knew what I was letting myself in for. Unlike in the previous years when the expedition personnel resided up at the Wiesberghaus, we were to be based in a campsite in Obertraun. And with G5 having effectively been pushed to a conclusion we were to be looking for new sites.

Again my plan was to fly to Salzburg and take trams, buses and trains from there. But this time I flew direct to avoid the rigours of the baggage retrieval system they haven't got in Vienna. To be honest I'm still not sure if the alternative of the massed hoards at the Ryan Air check in counter at Stanstead was preferable. But apart from that the whole travel bit worked like clockwork both ways and an added bonus was that I arrived in time to join some of the others at a local beerfest in Obertraun on the first night.

Schönberghöhle

Joel had been told fables of an undescended 200m pitch only a couple of hours caving inside Schönberghöhle. An enticing prospect if it wasn't for the fact that the entrance is located 30m down a sheer cliff face and another 150m above the valley floor. In a typically Tim understatement it was all rather exposed. Some of the cave, including the entrance pitch, had already been rigged before my arrival so my task was to help out with portering duties. Unusually for the Dachstein the walk in to Schönberghöhle is extremely civilised, ideal when you're recovering from a monster hangover. From the valley floor it's merely a case of hopping on the Eishöhle cable car followed by a 30 minutes scramble around the cliff edge path at the top.

A top camp was established in the woods above the entrance, although this was primarily used for storing kit. After a quick debrief with some of the others cooking breakfast at top camp it soon became apparent that I was unlikely to get much caving done. Much of the team had been laid waste by the exertions of the beerfest or were unwilling to descend down the exposed entrance pitch. (Eventually everyone on the expedition managed to get down the pitch into the cave). Peter Hubner and myself were going to rig a pitch (approx. 150m) down from the cave entrance to the valley floor to create an alternative exit. The cable car stops running at the end of the afternoon and it was felt that abseiling from the cave after nightfall to the footpath below would be better than prussicking back up the cliff face and then taking the long walk around. However Peter took fright at the sight of the exposed pitch. So after more discussions I elected to go for a quick solo trip and carried in a tackle bag at the same time. Then afterwards Lump and myself were tasked with rigging the big pitch to the valley floor. Lump is known for his proficiency with a crow bar and hammer and he was soon swinging away at the bolting hammer with gusto. Most of the bolts were in place by dusk so we decided to ab down to the bottom and finished the job off another day. The walk back only took an hour despite the failing light.

The next few days were pencilled in as a pushing-camping trip in Schönberghöhle. It was time to dust off my thermals. The advance party headed in early to set up camp and get a decent night's sleep, whilst the second team – myself, Tim, Mike, Jim – were to follow on later, with the aim of pushing an undescended pitch noted as “?” on the survey right at the furthest end of the cave. This combination proved most troublesome for Mike. Every time he called out a name all three of us answered. Again we chose to take the cable car and as we travelled upwards we could clearly make out the others abseiling down the cliff face across the valley and penduluming into the cave mouth. After pointing them out to some of the other tourists we easily upstaged a few parapontists who were ponceing about with their huge rucksacks.

The route into the underground camp is a quite a slog although only three to four hours. It was mostly crawling but up and down, up and down, which was no fun when towing monster tackle bags. To liven things up we went for a bumble up some of the side passages to see if there were any leads that the original explorers might have missed. The camp was particularly civilised although the first team in had already bagged the best pits, which were sheltered from the draught. So we elected for the mezzanine level that was just as salubrious. Jim and I started supper whilst Tim and Mike rigged the approach pitch to the 200m. And so to bed.

The next morning, after a four-course breakfast, we packed a couple of bags of gear and headed off to the end of the cave. We were hoping for a pleasant trip with the added bonus of virgin passage beyond. We passed the others who were starting to rig the big pitch and dallied a little for some photography. Beyond, the cave was liberally coated with mud making progress awkward and survey reading difficult. But eventually the muddy tubes opened out above a large rift. A 30ft pitch dropped us down to the small stream below but at this point we went the wrong way. We'd misread our survey and headed off upstream. The rift was extremely sharp and not quite wide enough to carry the bags on our backs. This took us into an area of breakdown and some extremely unlikely looking leads in the roof. Several perusals of the survey later and we headed back downstream to look for a junction we'd missed. *continued on page 5*

continued from page 4

And we missed it again. The rift got narrower and narrower and a real slog with tackle bags. Out came the survey again. The junction must have been in the roof somewhere. Back we went and started to get frustrated with that damn rift. A few hairy traverses later and we found the way on tucked up behind a meander. Our relief turned to frustration as we realised we were now faced with half an hour of sharp, flat out crawling to the final chamber. Things looked promising though, as the draught was strong and blowing in our faces.

The undescended pitch was soon located and we could see what appeared to be a large canyon below. There were no suitable naturals so a couple of bolts were placed. We took it in turns to shiver in the draught whilst someone else bolted. Eventually a 25m pitch was descended but the tiny stream at the bottom sumped off immediately. Not a nice ending for all that toil. At least a question mark on the survey had been ticked off but it was very little reward for a twelve-hour trip. Back at camp we rustled up some supper and turfed a lethargic team three out of our sleeping bags. The 200m pitch had turned out to be an extremely complicated rig to keep away from the water but disappointingly was also blind. Team three wandered off to check out the only other "?" on the survey but also found little new passage. Ah well at least the camp was fun.

Timony and Jimony hunt for Canyonhöhle

Schönberghöhle was a no-goer and needed to be derigged. Whilst this was going on Jim and I thought we'd go and hunt for Canyonhöhle. This was an intriguing hole that hadn't been visited for years. At the time of discovery it was thought to be an insignificant little grovel despite the draught. However since then the Hirlatz has been extended to 80km and lies only 200m away. It seemed to me that Canyonhöhle could be a possible top entrance. Just my sort of thing really. The only problem was no one knew exactly where the entrance was. We had a rough description of its location and a rough position on the map. Local knowledge was needed so we recruited the talents of two local cavers: Florian and Johannes. They were only teenagers, keen as mustard but a bit wayward. So we thought our only problem would be trying to avoid being diverted from our objective. We planned to burn a bit of our budget and crash out at the Shilcherhaus, sample a few schnapps, that sort of thing.

So it was back up the cable car, although this time the cabin was a much cosier affair and the journey required a change of cars half way up the mountain. From the Oberfeld cable car station at the top it was only a pleasant ten minutes stroll to the Shilcherhaus, our base for the next few days. Rather fortunate, really, considering the weight of our packs. After a quick spot of lunch we decided to get a feel for the terrain and go for a rummage in the bunda. With map and compass in hand everything went well until we were forced to leave the path and thrash through the dense alpine undergrowth. Ten minutes beyond the path we became totally disorientated and unable to follow a compass bearing. Admitting defeat we headed back to the Shilcherhaus to meet up with Florian and Johannes. They arrived mid afternoon and seemed to be carrying enough kit for five people for a week. Lucky we were there to help. But they were keen to show us soft British cavers how alpine exploration should be conducted and went striding off towards the bunda. Their delightful campsite was located in a verdant alpine meadow, Scheenweld, and not too difficult to find when you know what to look for. It was only an hours walk from the hut so we headed off back into the hills to help them get their camp started. Heavy rainfall from the last few days meant that we received a thorough soaking from the shrubs and grasses. So we weren't too reluctant to head back to the warm confines of the Shilcherhaus, and made it back just before nightfall.

An hour later and it was absolutely shafting it down with rain. So who should walk in the door looking rather bedraggled but the hardy mountain boys themselves, Florian and Johannes! A catalogue of disasters lead to their stove exploding, the rain putting out their camp fire and the lightning striking too close for comfort. And their mums would worry. Bless! So the whole team was destined for a decent night's sleep after all. The weather looked grim but the search for Canyonhöhle was on. The whole of the Dachstein was swathed in thick cloud with visibility down to 50ft. It was hoped that the cloud might lift later on allowing us to spot the cave. But first of all Florian and Johannes wanted to check out a small shaft close to the campsite that had been descended many years previously. A little bit of rigging instruction was provided by the British contingent before the blind shaft was descended. There was no way on at the bottom and not even a sniff of a draught detected. The Austrian lads had cobbled together some sort of SRT kit that made prussicking rather difficult, but after an hour or so we were all out safely. The plan then was for a quick brew and a hunt for Canyonhöhle. But the weather was still horrendous – low cloud and intermittent drizzle – and not ideal for gallivanting around on cliffs. After several miserable hours of shivering around at camp the cloud finally started to lift. This looked like our only opportunity so we clambered across the rocks looking for caves as fast as we could. No caves were found and by about 4pm more ominous storm clouds were brewing. Just as things were looking interesting the rain resumed followed by thunder and lightning that soon got rather too close for comfort. We ran back to the Shilcherhaus as fast as we could, pulling down the camp as we passed.

continued on page 6

continued from page 5

The third day at the Shilcherhaus was also a wash out so we bailed out at lunchtime to take the cable car back to the valley. However we had been told of a cave just around the corner from the Shilcherhaus so braved the rain to take a look. Actually it turns out that there is a large active swallet in an enclosed depression. Although there was no cave to speak of, the surface choke looked eminently diggable. Oh for a crowbar. The sight is definitely worth a go as the water is sinking on exactly the same fault as the Tiefkar area of the Hirlatz system below. So in summary, although the Timony and Jimony hunt hadn't actually found any cave, at least the scenery had been spectacular and the adventures a laugh in a 'mad dogs and Englishmen' sort of way. The following week a much larger contingent returned to the area to continue the search. A new draughting entrance was discovered but Canyonhöhle was still not located. This will undoubtedly be one of the objectives for next year.

A pushing camp in the Hirlatz

With other teams also having no luck on the plateau the main focus of the work in the second week was to push the back end of the Hirlatz. Most of the rainfall that falls on the Dachstein resurges via the Hirlatz, an 80km long system. Our aim was to push a little known area at the furthest regions of Schwabenland. This lay directly below an area of the bunda called Hirlatzalm that one team had been looking at near the Wiesberghaus. On the first trip in, one team had found some tight meandering streamway, "Yorkshire Land". Our plan was to go right to the end and take a look at a promising hole in the floor. It was hoped that this might provide an alternative way of connecting the Hirlatz with the shafts on the plateau. Apparently some ingenious rigging would be required.

Our crack team consisted of Mike, Tim, Jim, Joel and Peter (the local club leader). The trip in to the camp is an absolute classic and I would thoroughly recommend it to anyone who has a chance to go in. The draught in the entrance crawls is huge so carbides have to be lit in the first chamber a little way in. Much of the cave is huge stomping-sized stuff but later on it becomes more sporting in character with climbs and crawls. To keep kit requirements to a minimum the local club has rigged all the pitches in the earlier sections with fixed metal ladders, and some of the engineering involved is extremely impressive. There is a strict limit on the weight of tackle bags that can be carried by each person, and we were particularly amused when Peter Hubner checked each bag with a luggage scale.

The carry in to camp was straightforward enough and a convenient pool provided an adequate water supply nearby. As in Schönberghöhle I elected for the mezzanine level – a wise choice, as it was drip free. Mike and Tim soon made inroads into the serious amount of food that we'd lugged in and a gourmet underground menu was created. And so to bed...

The next day was to be the last opportunity to push the end of Schwabenland so we made the most of it. One wet lead in the floor was left and we quickly arrived at the Entrische Halle and the undescended pitch. This looked well worth the effort so Tim set to work rigging the thing. I went for a wander around the chamber but there seemed to be no other way on. There may be something in the roof but this will require a mammoth bolting epic to reach. Whilst all the rigging was going on the rest of us busied ourselves slurping tea and bashing off a suspect survey. We only had one bag of rope with us but still managed to descend a 25m pitch followed by an extremely sketchy 15m traverse and then another 30m pitch. Joel peered over another pitch and estimated it to be 40m. So an exciting prospect was left for another year. We would have preferred an ascending passage but this wet series of pitches still looks a viable prospect for a future expedition. Certainly it was an optimistic note to end the expedition with. We arrived back at camp after a 12hr trip. This included a detour to the huge Umst Ands-gang, the highest point in the system. Kit was tidied up, a fresh batch of water was collected and a hearty supper consumed by all. Lots of everything with custard if I remember correctly.

The trip out proved to be much more exciting than we had anticipated. It had evidently rained heavily across the previous few days as trickles of water near the camp had turned to torrents. An extremely rapid exit was made with all of us running full pelt down the larger passages. You certainly work up a sweat! The reason for our haste was Peter's warning that a temporary sump can soon fill after heavy rainfall. Next to the bridge, the most exposed section of fixed ladders, the sound of water was almost deafening. On the way we stopped briefly to pick up a load of carrymats from another camp just in case we had to sit it out. I was the only non-diver in the party and to be honest I think the others were secretly quite looking forward to having to dive out. Fortunately for me the sump was only just starting to fill up. Once outside it soon became apparent why the cave was flooding – it was absolutely chucking it down. Back at camp Richard had already been getting his diving kit together in readiness for a rescue but it wasn't to be.

So ended another British expedition to the Dachstein. Little progress was made this time but lots more groundwork in the area conducted. Limited holiday means that unfortunately I won't be there next year. A pity really as I think if we could just find Canyonhöhle...

ON THE TRAIL OF THE FALLEN PINES – MALLORCA 2001

Tim Francis

Taking 2000 off for the call of more exotic climes the usual rabble again descended on 14, Palma Sol for a weeks winter caving. This is now the 11th MCG trip to Mallorca since 1984 – not bad for a bunch of tea drinkers – and the 7th by the current generation of MCG / Old Moles / associates. Everyone more or less got underground despite a deliberate ploy of bringing absolutely no caving gear by some of the team. In the week preceding our visit the island was battered by the worst storms for a 100 years so we were unsure whether we would be able to reach some of the remoter mountain roads or indeed whether it be safe to visit some of the more flood prone caves. The on-line Mallorca Daily Bulletin described a trail of destruction across the island. In the event most of the roads had been cleared but it was still a dramatic sight to see snow clad mountains and flooded plains as we descended into Palma airport. Julie and I were keen to try and do some new caves this year rather than revisit the old favourites. So we were anticipating some difficult cave hunting in the week ahead.

Cova Tancada

Something of staple for the holiday caver this one and it now regularly features on the itinerary. It's an extremely pleasant walk through the pine forests to this entrance, which has the added bonus of overlooking the sea, so everyone opted for the trip. The destruction from the storm was evident all along the coast at Ca'an Picafort where virtually every tree had been blown over. This was also our first taste of trying to organise all three cars at once, which all went belly up in the outskirts of Porto Alcudia. Perhaps an over-reliance on mobile phones was our downfall. Anyhow we were all eventually reunited and managed to get fairly near to the usual car parking spot. Fallen pine trees blocked the rest of the road and certainly made the walk in rather less straightforward than usual. Once at the cave it was time for a spot of lunch. Julie enlivened the proceedings by dropping Ross's camera case into the sea, and despite Nigel's best rescue efforts it floated out of sight. Some gentle caving followed with the usual opportunities for photography and the Tancada highlight of listening to waves washing in and out of a crevice at the end. This year we climbed up a crack on the right hand side and gained access to some well decorated chambers that have been spared the ravages of vandals.

The hunt for Avenc Banc de Llorer

We'd lugged a healthy amount of rope with us this year so this seemed an ideal pot for a spot of SRT. The only trouble was finding the damn thing. We managed to park in the right lay-by and even head off in the right direction. However we spent the next few hours scrabbling around on the limestone scrub looking for several entrances. So nothing unusual there then. Avenc de S'Aigo was soon located. This impressive 100m shaft had a huge stream roaring down the back wall – not the place to be in wet weather. Wandering around on the surface also wasn't the place to be when it's chucking it down with rain. After several hours hacking through the alpine grasses and looking somewhat bedraggled, we gave up and headed home. On the return a small pot was investigated (20ft entrance pitch). A way on could be seen but would need a lump hammer to assist progress. We also spotted two other deep looking pots right near Avenc de S'Aigo that perhaps we shall visit in the future. We drove back the long route via Porto Pollensa. This tested my knowledge of Mallorca's backroads to the full as half of the sea front had been flooded and un-signposted diversions were in operation.

Cova Cornavaques

The weather looked like it might improve so James, Kirsty, Belinda and Nigel elected to pick up some snorkelling gear and visit the small cala downstream from the villa. Apparently they saw an octopus. The rest of us headed back over to Cala Sa Vicente to try and find Cova Cornavaques, a notoriously difficult cave to find. For a change the drive was across country rather than via Inca. A pleasant route that resulted in the two cars getting separated in 'a one way system that wasn't' in Muro. The Ben, Julie, and Tim car continued to the 3km marker at Cala Sa Vicente but the others didn't arrive until later. Not knowing where we were they went for a walk instead. And then there were three.

We climbed and climbed to reach the entrance of Cornavaques at 345m altitude. The description we had was fine although our chosen starting point involved hacking through some dense pine forest. Its actually quite easy to find as long as you just keep going until you're virtually beyond and above the end of the canyon (about 2hrs from the road). We arrived after 3pm so literally had an hours caving time before we would have to return to the car. It was at the entrance that Ben discovered he'd left his helmet and light so this left just Julie and I to do a quick trip. However what a trip. Just beyond the entrance is a tricky 30ft climb up a stal bank that keeps the idiots out. *continued on page 9*

continued from page 8

We sent up our boldest climber (me) to rig a rope, which then can be tossed over the other side to aid the climb back down. Beyond we walked through some typical Mallorcan large chambers with fantastic columns, helictites and calcified roots. It's definitely worth a return with a camera. At the far end is another slippery calcite bank that, without a handline, proved a tad sporting on the return.

Upon exiting the cave we reunited with Ben and dashed downhill to try and get to the car before nightfall. We became benighted just above the tree line and realised things would be getting a bit tricky. Our plan was to follow a wall through the trees and try and rejoin the farm track from there. Ever tried walking through a storm ravaged wood in the dark? I wouldn't recommend it. We emerged in some olive groves round the back of a few farmhouses and not on the road. Dogs started to bark. The GPS and caver intuition told us that we were extremely close to where we should be so we decided to try and skirt around the back of the nearest farmhouse. More thrashing around in the trees and we were virtually stranded. Unfortunately we got too close to the farmhouse and the dogs were set on us! We frantically shouted in our best Spanish and the farmer's wife sent for a neighbour. Eventually, after convincing them that we weren't axe murderers but merely mad British cavers we were able to hop out of the woods onto their drive. We got back to the car extremely relieved to be in one piece.

Cova de ca L'Herou

We returned to Cala Sa Vicente but this time made sure that everyone was clear where we were going. The walk in to this cave is from the same lay-by as for Cornavaques but is on the other side of the valley. Indeed not far from where the others had walked on the previous day. The advantage was that it was only 10 minutes from the road and extremely easy to find. The cave is almost vertical for its whole extent with the first pitch starting just inside the entrance. This pitch is more of an assisted climb for most of its length and has bolts at the top rather than naturals. At the bottom, located just out of sight from falling debris, are some excellent ancient stalactites. To the left is a parallel shaft, La Patinadora. On exit we climbed this shaft, which was mostly a tricky mud slope, and found tucked behind a corner a small pool with floating calcite. Immediately following the first pitch is another short drop leading to the end of the cave. This came as something of a surprise to us as we'd been expecting more but it seems that we'd misinterpreted the survey. So there was no need for my bodged rigging after all. Back at the car we met up with the non-cavers, who had been for a swim and a ramble, and drove to Inca for an excellent meal.

Avenc de na Maria

This was our last chance for some exercise before slobbering out in Palma. Ben, Duncan and I decided to do a final cave whilst the rest of the group went for a walk along the coast between Deia and Porto Soller. We chose a small vertical cave, Avenc de na Maria, that was right next to the road. This proved to be an excellent choice with fantastic views across to Pollensa and beyond from the entrance. Again the cave was entirely vertical but a delight to rig as apart from the surface pitch, it entirely used naturals. It was entirely dry but extremely sharp – a few more rope protectors might have been handy. Furthermore, pitch two was directly in the firing line for rocks from the top so we needed to take a bit of care. At the bottom we wriggled through a sharp squeeze to connect two parallel shafts

We were out with plenty of time to spare so drove over to Deia to meet up with the others for supper. However there was no sight of them and a quick phone call later ascertained that they still had an hour of walking to go despite it being dark. The walk, rather than being a pleasant stroll, had turned into a veritable assault course. There were fallen trees everywhere blocking the paths so the walk took a great deal longer than anticipated. We drove back to Porto Soller to meet up with them there. We weren't keen to drive all the way back to Deia again so we chose a nice fish restaurant in the harbour instead.

Julie had to leave a day early so we dropped her off at the airport. But for the rest of us the final day was spent shopping and sight-seeing in Palma – the cathedral, the Turkish baths, and an unintentional detour through the seedier end of town. I managed to pick up some useful 1:25,000 maps and some second hand caving books. Our trip was rounded off by an evening meal in a tapas Bar in Palma.

Team: James Allen, Peat Bennett, Ben Cooper, Tim Francis, Julie Hesketh, Duncan Horne, Rupert Knowles, Belinda Luke, Nigel Sampson, Kirsty Stroud.