



MCG News

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by Roy Kempston

All those readers with a good memory (i.e. one that has survived the onslaught of repeated doses of alcohol over the years) may remember that two years ago I produced a stunning article for the MCG newsletter that detailed two visits to showcaves made during our family holiday to Western Ireland ! As that article was met with such widespread 'appreciation', I have been encouraged to detail the family's visit this year to Tuscany !

For this family holiday we (Fiona, Ellen, Neil and Nicholas) decided to visit Tuscany, (that's not strictly true – Fiona decided and I and the others went along with the decision). I apologise now that this article also does not contain any mention of real caving, but we did visit a showcave. It's rather difficult to go on a two weeks holiday by a charter flight, followed with five in a hire car and have room for caving gear as well (anyway that remains my excuse !). Note for all those who get bored easily, the cave information starts at the asterix (*) below.

Once we had decided to go to Tuscany, a long time was spent researching the area that we wanted to visit – Tuscany is quite large with an area of nearly 9000 square miles, so there were no plans to cover every part of it in two weeks. We finally settled on the north of the region where there were mountains including the limestone Apuan Alps, which produce the best marble in the world ('a Triassic limestone recrystallised under the pressure of folding movements'). The villa that we finally selected was about 75km north of Pisa airport, but more importantly it was about 300m up in the hills, which provided cool nights (and allowed ideal conditions to sleep off the effects of any alcohol sampling that may have occurred during the evening !).

The patio was at the front of the villa and at its edge there was a drop of about 6m to the mountain road below, and on our first evening at the villa we were relaxing on the patio following a meal as dusk started. As we sat admiring the views we became aware of 'things' flying around, which on closer inspection were bats – these were feeding on insects above the road. We went and stood on the edge of the drop and watched at least 20 bats feeding as close as arms length away, a wonderful display of aerobatics as the insects ducked and weaved. The bats reappeared every evening just for our enjoyment ! This was also a good indication that there were roosts nearby.

* After a day to relax following the journey we prepared to visit the Grotta del Vento (The Wind Cave), which was about 15km from the villa. The drive was very interesting on the narrow winding roads that we had to share with car driving Italians and large lorries loaded with massive lumps of marble. The views from the valley gradually opened up to the limestone mountains of Mt Pania del Croce (1858m) and Mt Pania Secca (1709m), with the cave at 627m. The showcave is interesting (if not unique) in that you have to select from the 1, 2, or 3 hours tours – these generally cover three separate parts. The first part which is generally flat with many formations, the second having a deep 'abyss' which down slope gets to the small river, and the third with large chambers and a long vertical shaft.

Being young, fit and hard cavers (well one of us is young, and between us we make up at least one fit person, and also thought we once knew a hard caver !) we elected for the 3 hour trip and had our €17 tickets annotated by hand with 'GB' and waited at the entrance for our guide. We were joined by two ladies whose tickets were also GBed, but they turned out to be from the Netherlands and hence spoke good English. Our tour guide was a lady who spoke immaculate English, even with

the caving terms. We had to wait for the one hour trip to get ahead and were then lead into the natural cave entrance and at about 10m in met a solid steel door. When this was opened by hydraulic rams the most almighty outward wind ensued (hence 'the Wind Cave') and was eventually stopped when the door was closed again, (a phenomena caused by two entrances at different heights).

A 60m to 70m length of downward sloping passage then leads to a sump, which opens depending on the weather conditions, but is now bypassed by a short length of blasted passage.

The photo, below, shows the sump (siphon) with, in the distance, the start of the last hour of the three hours trip – of which more later. A large uphill gallery follows, passing the Crystal Lake, Pendant Room, Pink Chimney, and Monument Room to reach the top of the Giant's Abyss.



'The initial siphon' from 'Discover Garfagnana' published by Grotta del Vento.

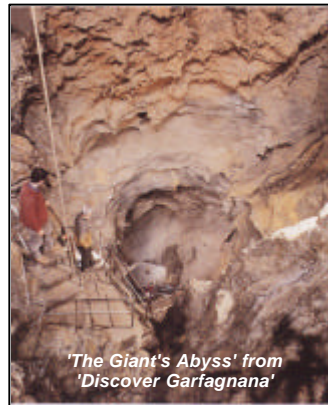
This is the second part and goes down at about 70° for 45m to the Hall of Voices, and is followed by some low parts that involve a lot of bending to reach the point where three streams join to form the Acheronte river which is followed for quite a while to the inevitable sump.



Fiona wearing a bright white jumper and standing by a particularly white formation in the Crystal Gallery



The Pink Chimney from 'Discover Garfagnana'



'The Giant's Abyss' from 'Discover Garfagnana'

The return from this point to the start of the third part is up a 'path' that clings to the side of the passage, the latter being covered by numerous grey formations 'which remind us of miniature pine forests, a procession of monks, underwater vegetation and groups of mushrooms'. These appeared to be made of mud, and up to about 5cm high. The photo, right, is one of mine – the organisers allow photos to be taken for personal use.



The next part of the cave is different to the rest and is reached through some decorated passages and rooms, the last having many decorations. Climbing a few steps brings you to the bottom of a 90m shaft – 'the Shaft of Infinity' which has very few formations. The path climbs up the side of the shaft via natural and man made bridges with a very impressive view to the bottom at about 40m. From here the trip goes into 'the Hall of Infinity' with a fine vaulted ceiling 50m above.

This is the end of the trip, but the path back down the shaft is very interesting – ask Fiona ! It was quite a shock to the system when leaving the cave at 11°C and instantly being in the high 30s – this demanded a sit down with some food and a drink, so it was lucky that there was a good restaurant opposite the cave complex.

This was a very good 3 hour trip to a well kept showcave, and well worth the money, with a very well informed guide. For those who are still awake (and want to know more) there is a good website at <http://www.grottadelvento.com/>, which has lots of history, a cave guide and photos as well as links to show caves in the world (very useful to any readers who have become armchair cavers !).



The Wind Cave is open every day from the 1st Apr - 30th Sep; Sat and Sun only in Oct and Nov and Sun and Public Holidays during the remaining period.

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