

MCG, SWCC and OFD

Introduction: Ogof Ffynon Ddu (OFD) is the second longest cave system in Wales (around 60 km) with the largest vertical range in the UK (274 m). It is managed for Natural Resources Wales (NRW) by South Wales Caving Club (SWCC), whose cottage at Penwyllt lies directly above the cave.

MCG has 'reciprocal rights' with SWCC. This means MCG members may stay overnight at Penwyllt for the same nightly rate, currently £8 (cf. £11 for other guests). A letter formalising this (SWCC secretary, 9 Mar 2019), and the annual entry permit, are available on the MCG www site. Note that all caving groups are limited to a maximum of 6 people.

The MCG Committee has recently asked me act as a "contact point" between the two clubs. My main task will be to keep MCG members apprised of things like access details. But I also hope to encourage more visits by MCG members to SWCC-Penwyllt, and in particular to OFD.

Overview of OFD: there are three entrances: OFD1 (the bottom entrance, near the stream resurgence), OFD2 Top Entrance (the 'normal' entrance), and Cwm Dwr (more constricted). The upstream part, OFD3, is only accessible from these other entrances, and gained by some delicate unprotected traverses (very) high above the streamway. The imposing main streamway, with a total length of some 3 km (although it cannot be followed continuously) is one of the finest in the UK, but dangerous in flood when it must be avoided. The system is complex, and route finding accordingly challenging. An impressive (10-m long) colour survey is available, at £22, from SWCC.

See also: <http://www.ogof.org.uk/ofd2.html>

Routes: amongst the popular standard routes are:

- (a) the 'round trip' in OFD1 (in up the streamway, out via the high-level Bolt Traverse);
 - (b) the 'round trip' in OFD2 (via Salubrious, Shatter Pillar and the President's Leap);
 - (c) from OFD2, down to the main streamway via Maypole Inlet, then upstream to Top Waterfall;
 - (d) the OFD2-OFD1 through trip: downstream to Marble Showers, and the connection to OFD1.
- Although the cave is largely "pitch free", there are a number of free climbs, and also a few SRT routes, amongst them the three Nave Pitches down to the main stream; Pendulum Passage; and the top gate route to The Columns (a 16-m pitch into Columns Hall). See Adrian Fawcett's South Wales topo guide: http://www.ogof.org.uk/Downloads/Adrian_Fawcett_South_Wales_Topos.pdf

The Columns are particularly fine calthemite formations, gated for the past 40 years, and unlocked (and warded by a SWCC member) half a dozen times per year. Access is either via the Lower Gate, or the Upper Gate (where the fine 16-m Columns Pitch is rigged for visitors by SWCC). Open days in 2023 (all Sundays and linked to Bank Holidays) are:

9 April (Easter Sunday); 30 April; 7 May; 28 May; and 27 August

See the events calendar: <https://www.swcc.org.uk/joomla-swcc/swcc-calendar>

Cottage Bookings: The same page shows advanced cottage bookings. The first weekend of each month is SWCC Members Weekend, when the cottage tends to be quite heavily booked.

Arriving and staying at SWCC:

Penwyllt is a 2-hr drive from J18 on the M4 (via M4 to J32, A470 to Merthyr Tydfil, and A465 to Glynneath). The SWCC "cottage" actually occupies 10 old quarryman's cottages, high above the valley. There are various bunk rooms (some reserved for members, others for married couples); a large well-equipped kitchen with 6 fridges etc.; changing room and showers, and drying room. Payment of overnight cottage fees (etc.) is by bank card only, using a SumUp system.

Buildings: <https://www.swcc.org.uk/joomla-swcc/accommodation/accommodation-plan>

Booking: <https://www.swcc.org.uk/joomla-swcc/accommodation/accommodation-bookings>

Access to OFD: the three entrances are all at walking distance from the cottage. The route to OFD1 is a 20-min walk back down the road, then down the hillside on a steep footpath. The route to OFD2 is a 20-min walk up the hillside. Both entrances are obvious when you know what you're looking for, but I have gpx tracks available for anyone who wants them.

Keys etc: various details are given at the SWCC www site, but a number of these are now out-of-date. Let me give the main points here.

As a “reciprocal rights” club, up to 5 members of MCG can stay overnight at Penwyllt *without* making a reservation. For larger groups, cottage reservations should be made, in advance, in the normal way (see the SWCC www site). Day trips are, of course, also possible.

Until a few months ago, access to the cottage and changing rooms was by means of a physical key set. Today, all access is via combination locks and combination key safes. These combinations are changed regularly. They are accessible to SWCC members via the SWCC www site, and are assigned to visiting clubs when they make a booking. Relevant amongst these are:

- (a) a key safe containing the main cottage door key: this is in the alley between buildings 5 and 6 (to the left of the main cottage entrance), behind a locked gate (yes, it is awkward to access);
- (b) the changing room (and drying room), F on the plan, is accessed by a separate 4-digit code;
- (c) inside the changing room area (separate male/female facilities) are a number of cave “key safes”. The largest, with a 6-digit combination, is for SWCC members, and contains a number of (identical) cave keys (the same key opens all three OFD entrances). There are 10 smaller (numbered) key safes. When you book a visit, you are given the combination to a specific one of these, which will contain your OFD key (again, covering all entrances).

For a party of up to six *including* a SWCC member, that member will have knowledge of all these combination numbers, so that access to the cottage and the changing room is ensured. However, such a group is asked to request a visitors’ OFD key, in advance, as for other visiting clubs.

Other caves in the area: Dan-yr-Ogof (another Welsh classic) is just across the valley, north of Craig-y-Nos (advanced permission required). Another popular cave reached on foot from Penwyllt (albeit a 30-40 min trek across the moors) is Pant Mawr (open access).

Pubs and restaurants: there are nearby (driving distance) pubs that do evening meals at Pen-y-Cae (Ancient Briton), and Abercrave (Abercrave Inn), some 3–4 km from Penwyllt respectively. Another popular eatery is Tiffins Indian Restaurant, 4 Wind Rd, Ystradgynlais, 10 km to the SW.

Call-out: until recently, the call-out system was a board in the cottage. This is no longer used. Instead, either use your own call-out, or use the phone app DDB (Digital Destination Board: <https://www.modapkdown.com/com.Vaughan.DDB/digital-destination-board-mod/> available from the Apple Store or Google Play. The system is quite intuitive. If you fail to de-activate after your trip, texts are sent to SWCC and SMWCRT members who monitor the system.

Stream level: finally, let me stress again the dangers of the main streamway, both in OFD1 and OFD2. The stream responds violently and unpredictably in heavy rain, for example with sudden flood pulses, depending on the degree of saturation of the peat bogs above. The stream is awesome in high water conditions, and lives have been lost in OFD in flood. Do not enter if heavy rain is expected. In OFD1 there is a natural “marker” (a flat slab in the stream bed where you first normally join the stream), and if this is covered or invisible it is wisest not to proceed.

Another valuable aid is the live water level gauge in the River Tawe at Craig y Nos (below the entrance to OFD1), operated by Natural Resources Wales. In combination with a local weather forecast, this is a very useful indication of the state and expected trend in water levels:

<https://rivers-and-seas.naturalresources.wales/Station/4091>

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