

So it was with some trepidation that I jumped up and down on one of the aforementioned timbers on my first encounter. Satisfied as to its safety, and thankful for the footholds and support for my tackle bag that it provided, I set off across the Meanders where there are no large drops under very wide traverses at all!

In fact boys don't listen to anyone who, with pint in hand, tries to impress you with awe inspiring tales of when he was a lad and did the Berger and was terror stricken by the Meanders. Such a person will invariably sport a beard, wear a check shirt and big unsightly jumper over his belly, smoke roll-ups and speak with a strong Northern accent. Still, perhaps it was harder using electron ladders. Why else does Ralph keep all those bits of wire in his garage?

Enough of this banter. Suffice it to say that due to well placed stemples, the glories of S.R.T. rope, and camp cooking, the Meanders are easily negotiated, even by a bearded dwarf with short legs and National Health glasses. The Meanders are split into two sections by Garby's pitch, which has some good bolts in place with which a shared belay and a good hang are easily obtained. Once down, the next set of Meanders, which were dampish, culminated at the top of Gontard's pitch (where there are large drops and awkward climbs). Be careful not to drop tackle bags here! At this point Mark took charge of the somewhat nervous band and rigged this pitch for us. Due to this much appreciated help, we were soon at the bottom and Brian and Mark rigged the 'Relay' pitches with ladders. (We put safety ropes in as well and most people abseiled on these in preference to the ladders which were very tedious to negotiate, both ascending and descending.) After this was Aldo's where Mark again proceeded to astonish us by rigging a traverse out to a ledge and then leaning out on a cow's tail to rig a shared belay on a chunk of rock in the middle of the shaft. It was not nice to watch! It was then my turn to complete the seemingly bottomless traverse, which turned out to be quite straightforward once I was on it, but wasn't I learning things fast on this trip! (Later on, a second rope was rigged here by Russell to relieve some of the traffic, and he had even more fun than Mark!)

Aldo's was wonderful, it was big and black and vertiginous. Vertical caving at its best! Of course it was dry when we did it, a sort of benign Battleaxe. Once down Mark and I set off for Camp whilst Brian and Russell returned to the surface. From Aldo's we went down a couple of short climbs emerging under a huge boulder in an enormous passage which grew in size as we sauntered along it. We passed Petzl gallery and crossed Lake Cadoux which was dry. We found a dinghy and vast amounts of white polypropylene cord to cover the lake's return. Mark acted as a show cave guide, pointing out this and that whilst I stumbled along in awe through the vast blackness around us. Turning a corner I saw what appeared to be an array of missiles. Frantically searching for my 'Ban the Bomb' badge, I realised that these were stalagmites and that we had reached the Bourgin Hall. Weaving our way in and out of the Stal we came to the Little General's pitch. Here we stopped, both deciding that we had done enough for one day, and stashed the gear for the next party. A feast of sardines, pâté, Mars bars and Chlorinated water was followed by a burpingly punctuated walk back through the Bourgin Hall and along the Grand Gallery. Here we met Doug Staff and Paul Bates, the latter considerably more sober than on our first meeting. They were having a romantic entanglement with a reel of telephone wire and we heard a few choice words from them about not paying their telephone bill again, and we pushed on out leaving them to discover the delights ahead of them.