

From the Bottom to the Ferry.
(By Lionel Howarth)

Three of us set off into the cave early on the Friday morning with the intention of an enjoyable 'Fun' trip with no tackle and no definite plans. Brian and John had no time constraints, but I had to be out before 7a.m. on Saturday in order to be sure of catching the Cross-Channel Ferry. We dropped rapidly down to Camp1, ate a meal, and joined up with Liam and Phil who were aiming for the bottom. Brian managed to borrow a wetsuit, and both he and John also borrowed sleeping bags as we thought that a longer trip than planned was on the cards. We set off again and soon reached the Balcony. Here we descended and then used handlines to negotiate the calcite slopes beyond, eventually arriving at the Vestibule pitch.

Vestibule was a curious pitch in two distinct parts. It was entered through a door-like arch where the rope passed over rounded bosses running with thin sheets of water. Further down was another arch with an awkward hand-line traverse to a ledge over the last section, which most of us abseiled down. Soon we were all together, recharging generators and preparing for the Couffinades. Having made three journeys through the canals ferrying tackle bags on an earlier visit, I felt quite familiar with the place... the wading... the handline traverse... the stal holds on the left-hand wall... and even the leaky dinghy which had sunk when I tried to use it before.

I joined the others who were descending the Abelle Cascade, the rope rigged clear of the waterfall. Details of the Cascades region have become blurred in my memory, except that here the cave character changed dramatically into an active streamway for the first time. The rushing streamway beckoned us downwards, our movement exciting and exhilarating... wading... traversing... climbing... and scrambling. The 20m. pitch of Claudine's Cascade landed us in a large pool in an airy chamber. We carried on downstream and soon passed the Topographer's Cascade and entered the start of the Grand Canyon.

The five of us were all together again as we groped our way down the steep slopes on the right hand wall of the Grand Canyon; its dimensions indescribable as our lights revealed neither the ceiling nor the far walls; an awe-inspiring chamber. Once more the feeling of the cave had changed, the lively streamway now swallowed in the abyss, the cavern still and timeless.

We were dwarfed to the proportion of ants as we slithered down the screes in our rapid descent. When we arrived at Camp2 it was time for a rest and some food. The conversation was light-hearted and friendly as food and drink were shared, and we discussed what to do next as we had no prearranged plan, accepting that each member of the group was free to decide for himself, a free spirit within the framework and support of the group. Brian and John decided on a leisurely return to Camp1, the rest of us tentatively to see what lay ahead to the top of the Grand Cascade. After we parted I wondered if I should have returned with Brian and John, my companions since the early morning when we had left the campsite in a different time and age. How the cave played havoc with the dimension of time!

Heading towards Gaché's pitch my reverie was broken. Where were my gloves? Back at Camp 2! I called to the others to say that I was returning to fetch them, and having retraced my steps eventually caught them up at Gaché's. Liam had descended and Phil was on the rope. It was a dry pitch with a comfortable bolt change, and we landed in a passage which soon rejoined the water. The two smaller pitches of Ressaut Mât and Ressaut Singe followed in quick succession.