

Words flowed to and fro. Fifty aggressive cavers were weighed against two hundred stampeding cows. The patronage of the Mayor of Engins was balanced against the shepherd's boss. The impeccable demeanour of English cavers was compared to the vile habits of the French tourists. Liam opted out and returned to base for a brew.

About half an hour later, amicable relations had been established and, chatting about country life in their respective lands, John and the shepherd strolled across the plateau with the dogs at their heels to view the shepherd's idea of the ideal campsite. This was located in a sheltered hollow, out of sight of the car-park, fairly close to the water supply, and large enough to meet our needs. There was some evidence of previous occupation, and we later learned that this was the site of the Engins village barbecue. The shepherd seemed sure that his herd would not be offended by our presence there as it was near the woods and off their main grazing routes. Bidding the shepherd farewell, John returned to the others who were still valiantly guarding the gear and beginning to wilt in the hot sun. His news was received with some relief and a further inspection of the site confirmed that the location of Base Camp was now established.

A steady stream of equipment soon began to flow down the hill from the cars and tackle dump. Tents were erected on the prime sites, with people vying for the best chances of shade at mid-day and with the least chance of hitting the rocky surface. As the afternoon wore on, other arrivals appeared on the scene, and by evening most of the C.C.P.C and Orpheus members had arrived. Paul Bates and Dave Pike arrived too, somewhat the worse for wear after an experience with the local red biddy.

We now had all the necessary equipment and enough cavers to make an early start in the morning to rig the cave. Preparations were made and Ralph, the two Tonys, Paul and Terry went off to drink up all the beer in Autrans! In the early hours of the next morning everyone was hugely entertained by the hilarious attempts of Ralph and Cliff to establish a basis for a competition between their champions, Tony Gamble and Cliff's brother respectively. They eventually went to bed leaving the campers to grab what sleep they could. The scene was set, the actors on stage, and the curtains ready to open on the first day's engagement with the Gouffre Berger.

The Portage.

The early morning sun was blazing down by the time that people had consumed breakfast and the tackle loads had been sorted out. Ralph's work in the U.K. now proved to be extremely useful. There were twelve loads altogether, including the underground camping gear, each packed in a separate rucksack. Like ants, the expedition members carried all these over to the cave entrance some two miles away. As each load arrived at the Entrance, it was lowered to the snowplug above the Ruiz Shaft to keep it from the attentions of the inquisitive tourists. At this stage of the expedition we were a day ahead of the original schedule, and as there were still several others yet to arrive, it was not possible to mount a continuous guard on the Entrance. Also at this point we discovered to our chagrin that the C.B. radios brought to communicate between the Entrance and Base Camp would not work because of the lie of the land. Undeterred by this minor blow, the Sherpas worked on, and the rigging team set to work on equipping the Entrance Series. At this point, Liam's narrative comes in.