

## **My Account of the Masson Expedition to the Gouffre Berger - August 2010**

The Gouffre Berger was discovered by Joseph Berger in 1953, although la Fromagère, a cave which also connects to the same system, had been known since 1937. Originally christened simply "P3", the Berger was the first cave in the world to go below the magical depth of 1000m and from 1953 until 1963 it was regarded as the deepest cave in the world. Throughout the 60s there was an ongoing series of British expeditions and discoveries which made the cave a household name in the UK. I was still at school in those days, my dad was a potholer and I had started exploring caves myself. Naturally, I read everything about caving which I could lay my hands on, and of course, I dreamed about descending the Gouffre Berger ... but, there again, I never dreamed that I would ever really get the chance.

And just when I thought I was well and truly past it ... some mates of mine in the Masson Caving Group put together an expedition. How could I refuse?

### **Thursday 19 August**

At around mid-day, I arrived with Lee Langdon and Lisa Wootton at the pretty village of Autrans, having been driven more-or-less non-stop from the Peak District. The weather was warm and sunny as we pulled into Camping du Vercors to be met by John Geeson and Jenny Harding, who were preparing to drive up to la Molière, where the walk over to the Gouffre Berger begins. Also in camp were expedition leader Chris Wilson and her husband Alan, plus Mark and Angela Wright - Mark had put together a photography team which would be working in parallel to the expedition, supporting Robbie Shone who would be creating a set of pictures which were to form the basis for Mark's forthcoming guidebook to the cave.

After pitching our tents, we got back into the car and drove up towards the hole, calling at the Tunnel de Mortier on the way. At 1370m, this old road tunnel punches a route straight through the impressive ridge of la Sure. It was originally created in 1968 for the Grenoble Winter Olympics, but since 1992 has been closed to all but hikers and mountain bikers. At the far end of the tunnel, a boulder strewn road leads down to Saint Quentin sur Isère, and, where the trees allow, there are great views across to the Dent de Crolles and the Dauphiné Alps. Returning to the western end of the tunnel, we found a cave entrance which we assumed to be the Scialet du Mortier, and which had an icy wind whistling from its depths - a premonition of things to come, maybe?

Back in the car, we carried on driving along the Route Forestière de Feney's towards la Molière. This area is a ski resort in winter, and the rough twisting road we were using must be a green ski piste, crossing several steeper pistes which head on down into the valley.

Arriving at the car park at la Molière, we set out across the alp to find the cave. This is a very pretty walk which we were to do many times over the following week or so, and which never failed to delight. Starting among the tame, bell-ringing Molière cows and heading through forest glades, past the Camp des Anglais and over limestone pavements, it's a great place for wildlife - evidence of wild pigs and the occasional whistle of a marmot hailing a taxi - and alpine plants grow in profusion.

On the way, the gloomy depths of la Fromagère could be seen as we neared our destination- this is yet another entrance to the Gouffre Berger (but only divers can make it all the way) which delivers an inlet stream straight to the Hurricane, the lowest pitch in the system.

It takes the best part of an hour to do the walk, and eventually we arrived at the main entrance of the Gouffre Berger, now shrouded with red-and-white tape and looking like some sort of crime scene. Two tarps had been erected to shelter the radio operators and cavers alike, and to protect any kit left here from the elements.

As if to stake our claim to the cave, a yellow rope had been tied to a tree at the lip of the chasm and the line of the rope arced down to the first bolt rebelay where a solitary rope bag hung, waiting for rigging to start.

Back at camp, we made plans to start ferrying more gear and water up to the surface camp the following morning. Later in the night the rain started, intermittently at first ... and then heavier, with a few lightning flashes and thunderclaps to welcome us to our new home.

### **Friday 20 August**

On Thursday night I had arrived back after dark, so I left sorting my tent out until the morning. Big mistake! The heavy overnight rain had left my little tent quite damp. When I eventually got up, it was still raining, but I managed to straighten the pitch and get everything working again.

The plan for today was to return to la Molière and sherpa loads of water and more rope bags over to the surface camp. It was still raining on and off as we set out - John Geeson, Jenny Harding, Alistair and Ruth Gordon, Tony and Chris Vaude, Chris Wilson and me - and the views across the hills had vanished behind a cloudy haze. The last loads of the day were carried up by Lee Langdon and Lisa Wootton, who were to become the first occupants of the surface camp and would act as a guard overnight. They would be relieved by Richard Lockyer and Andy Foster at eight o'clock on Saturday morning, allowing them to start the rigging in earnest.

### **Saturday 21 August**

There was a total of 18 rope bags, an inflatable dinghy plus tether rope and several Camp 1 bags. These all had to be carried down the hole, but the important thing was to rig the entrance pitches to enable this. The cave starts with a very vertical feel. A fine series of roomy shafts interspersed with two sections of traverse leads to the foot of Puits Aldo - at which point you have travelled 200m horizontally, and 240m vertically. This all needed to be rigged fairly quickly so that the less acrobatic section through la Grande Galerie and le Grand Eboulis could be traversed and Camp 1 could be established.

The plan was that I should go up with Chris Wilson and we would follow Lee and Lisa down who were rigging down to Puits Garby using bags 1, 2 and 3. We would carry bags 4,5, 6 & 7 so that we would then push on, rigging the second Meander, Puits Gontard, the Relay pitches and Aldo itself. Tony and Chris Vaude, two American cavers from Georgia, would follow us down and assist as necessary, and, behind, them would be John Geeson, Jenny Harding and Peter Dell.

We arrived at surface camp to find Lee and Lisa still rigging the entrance - so there was no pressure: we could take our time kitting up, and help ourselves to a cup of coffee, courtesy of Richard Lockyer and Andy Foster.

The entrance shaft is a two stage pitch which lands at the foot of the doline, still in daylight. An awkward climb down leads immediately to a shaky wooden structure which is liberally covered in choss - this is the head of Puits Ruiz, a beautiful shaft which lands at the head of a series of short pitches, known collectively as the Holiday Slides. These, in turn, give onto the superb Puits Cairn.

Puits Cairn is divided into two parts - Ressaut du Cairn, an airy abseil in a gully followed by a swing onto a ledge, and then the main pitch, dominated by an opposing deviation to give a clear ride to the bottom. However, as Lee pointed out, the rope didn't actually reach to the bottom. It was 4-5m short.

As there seemed to be no safe way to re-rig the pitch on less rope, Lee decided to send Lisa back to de-rig the short rope. She then used the spare Puits Aldo rope from bag 7 to re-rig the pitch. (The original plan was to have two separate ropes on Puits Aldo - partly to speed up ascents, but also to give one rope which would be more protected from the water, in the case of a flood.)

Puits Cairn is followed by the first Meander. This is a traverse which isn't particularly difficult ... unless you are encumbered with two or even three bags! It is partly rigged (to protect tired cavers on their way out!) and leads eventually to the spectacular Puits Garby. After Puits Garby had been rigged, Lee and Lisa departed for the surface, leaving Chris and I to carry on rigging. We were followed by Tony and Chris Vaude, with John Geeson close behind (Peter Dell and Jenny Harding having already turned back by this stage).

Following Puits Garby, we quickly met Meander numero deux - even easier than the first, but, again, a pain in butt when you're coming back up, tired and carrying a load. The traverse leads to Puits Gontard which starts as a scrappy slither, and ends up as a beautiful pitch, split by a re-belay. This led us down to the three Relay Pitches - short, awkward, little pitches which took us down to a short traverse out onto Puits Aldo.

Puits Aldo is the largest of the pitches. It's only 42m from the end of the airy traverse to the floor but, when you look up it and realise that you can barely see the top, it dawns on you what a fantastic place this is. It is also one of the places to avoid in flood, as it is prone to flood pulses. Apparently it can pulse through an upper route via Ressaut Alex Pitcher, which results in a column of water coming straight down the middle of the huge shaft, and also part way down the Aldo shaft, via Puits Gontard and the Relays - a double whammy, and not a place to be if and when it happens.

Our intention was to rig the immediate drop from the end of the traverse, plus a further traverse to the right (looking out) followed by a second rope down. However, the latter option had to be put on hold as we had already used this rope on Puits Cairn.

As we came out, we met Dave Ottewell and Jess Eades carrying bags and boats and then Dave Philips, Marcus Evans and Helen Blyth also carrying bags - these were to be taken down and left at a safe high point above the Starless River, just beyond Puits Aldo.

### **Sunday 22 August / Monday 23 August**

Sunday was a nice day back at camp, but a weather forecast of thunderstorms on Monday, followed by rain on Tuesday, raised a question mark over subsequent rigging trips. As this was my first trip down the Berger, I couldn't really comment - but those who had more experience of the system were voicing various opinions as to whether we should carry on and rig to the bottom regardless, or simply rig to a point where an exit would be possible before the worst of Monday's weather hit.

Eventually the second option was agreed and a party of six (Dave Ottewell, Jess Eades, Marcus Evans, Lee Langdon, Lisa Wootton and me) set out with the intention of ensuring that all rope bags were taken down to Camp 1, and then rigging further pitches from Camp 1 down to the Canals. Prior to this, a team of four (Paul Dold, Johnny Latimer, Jude Onions and Alan Allsop) had gone in to rig the 2nd Aldo hang and also the short pitches between Aldo and the Rubble Heap (Little General, Ressaut du Fil de Fer and la Tyrolienne). Subsequently, Andy Foster and Richard Lockyer had followed them down, carrying more bags down to Camp 1, as did some of the photographic team.

We arrived at the surface camp in the dark and kitted up, starting our descent at about 9:45pm. The surface camp was manned by our American friends, Tony and Chris Vaude, who would be relieved by some of the photographic team when they came out of the system at midnight.

Lee, Lisa and I went down as the first party, followed by a second party comprising Dave, Jess and Marcus. As soon as we hit the Meanders, we met Johnny, Paul and Jude on their way out. They told us that only three rope bags remained at the Starless River site, and, based on this, we asked them to tell Dave Ottewell and Co (who were somewhere behind) that they could exit the system and save their strength for another trip, as we would be able to shift all the rope down to Camp 1.

On our way to Puits Garby, we met Alan, and then at the head of Garby itself we met Andy and Richard, tired after their trip down to the Salle de Treize. Descending Puits Garby, we came across Bob Toogood, Mark Richardson and Tim Nixon (from the photographic team) who were on their way out having carried three bags apiece down the Great Rubble Heap - good effort!

But from here on in, the system was ours!

In normal conditions, up to Puits Aldo the system takes on the feel of a French Lost John's, if you like, with spacious pitches and easy traverses. Once Aldo is dropped, however, a short passage leads you through to the main passage of the Starless River and everything changes. It's also called la Grande Galerie and you start to realise how "grande" this place really is. I'd heard tales of the original explorers who got to this point and thought that they had actually exited the cave, and, looking up at the blackness, I found it easy to believe.

This section feels like a night hike through a huge, broad canyon, with occasional slippery patches of moon milk to remind you that you are, indeed, still underground. We also came across the muddy Lac Cadou, waterless for now, with only the beached inflatable dinghy, which Jude and Co had installed earlier that day, to indicate that conditions could be so different.

But eventually the hike got steeper, and a scramble down revealed the first of three roped sections which herald the end of the Starless River. The Little General (this was the nickname of Charles Petit-Didier, one of the original French explorers) is quickly followed by Ressaut Fil-de-Fer, which I guess sported a wire in some earlier existence, and la Tyrolienne led to a point where the river vanished, to be replaced by a huge sloping chamber, filled with big (well, bungalow-size) boulders - le Grand Éboulis, or the Great Rubble Heap. This was a bewildering section where it was necessary to keep an eye on our direction, while at the same time being careful as we clambered over the slippery rocks. Here also we began to see some of the formations which become commonplace a little lower down. Huge stalagmites loomed out of the blackness like benign ghosts - the colossal passage was now very silent, the rushing river having been left far behind.

Soon we reached a place where a low shelter had been built by pegging exposure bags onto clothes lines! Floored by old insulation mats, this "building" was the centrepiece for Camp 1 - and it housed our Nicola Phone: our means of communication between here and the surface. We rested at Camp 1 for a while and ate and drank to make up for what our bodies had already expended ... and to try and prepare us for what was yet to come. This was to become a ritual for all cavers passing through the camp - as was the hourly call to the surface to report progress, and to learn about the weather. This call could only be made at the scheduled time slot between five-to and five-past the hour - so most people would usually have some kind of enforced stay at Camp 1.

Lisa chose to stay and have a sleep at camp while Lee and I continued on down with the next bags. Before we split, we all went down to the famous Salle de Treize which is just below the camp. Camp 1 is situated at yet another state-change within the cave, where it transforms itself from the huge boulder field of le Grand Éboulis into a fairy-tale land of calcite, gour pools and stalagmites - a bit like trespassing on some giant's wedding cake! The Hall of the Thirteen is iconic. It's the one thing that everybody knows about and expects: 13 huge stalagmites in an enormous chamber, surrounded by gour pools the size of paddy fields ... but it forms only a small part of what is the jewel in crown of the Gouffre Berger.

This section is a vast, calcite-encrusted passage of gigantic proportions. Stalagmites, stalactites and gour pools of colossal size are everywhere you look. The huge passage slopes steeper and steeper as you continue until suddenly you can hear the sound of falling water somewhere ahead, and everything in front of you is blackness. You realise that you are standing at the top of an enormous frozen calcite "waterfall" which, somehow, you have to descend.

The pitch known as le Balcon was below, defined by a fine traverse (the balcony) followed by an abseil split by a rebelay at an awkward rub point half way down. Below le Balcon we descended towards the loud noise of the water. This sounded like a huge waterfall was just below us, but we were very surprised to find that it was in fact a wide but short "straw" stalactite in the ceiling issuing a strong flow of water into a reciprocal stump of a stalagmite not far below on the floor. Previous groups had christened this phenomenon the "Elephants Urinal" ... but the French call it le Vagin (don't ask!).

An in-situ rope traverse beyond le Vagin took us to the Calcite Slopes (an odd name, considering that everything since Camp 1 could use the same title). This was a slightly confusing area where, once again, you needed to be very careful about route and direction. Eventually we emerged at the top of a very large downward sloping passage (calcite-encrusted, of course!) where we had to start rigging more ropes. This was the first of the two Coulées - huge calcite slopes where a hand line is really necessary, especially for tired cavers returning from a long deep trip. The Coulées led without a break to la Vestiaire, an awkward little pitch comprising a descent to a ledge followed by an abseil over an overhang to the Gouffre Berger's main streamway below.

And suddenly the cave had changed its character yet again: this time into an active, Yorkshire-style stream passage with white water, noisy rapids, slippery boulders ... and all the trimmings! Our night's rigging job was more-or-less finished, but we still needed to look at the Canals to see what, if any, rigging would be needed on the following trip.

Les Couffinades (or the Canals, as we Anglais would have it) form the first part of the really physical bit of the Gouffre Berger. The Berger river enters a silent, but deep, stage in its descent and the caver is forced to either wade and swim through the very deep, cold water (not easy with heavy bags), or try to traverse above it as best he can. The latter option seems to be the most popular, judging by the amount of old rope, or "tat", which festoons the banks of the Canals - but this section of the cave, together with the following Cascades section, is the most dangerous part of the system when the water level is high, and, consequently, any ropes and other equipment left in situ are constantly subjected to the extreme power of the stream, as it floods regularly here.

We traversed into the Canals and looked at the "tat" which was hanging there. Most of it was fine but there were sections where the rope's mantle had been totally worn away - probably OK, but best re-rigged. Consequently, we decided that a full re-rig of les Couffinades would not be necessary, but all dodgy sections should be replaced with either new rope or tape. Having made the assessment, we returned to Camp 1, adjusting some of the rigging on the other pitches on the way.

After a bit of warm food, a rest and a chat with surface at Camp 1, we slowly made our way up the Great Rubble Heap and along the Starless River to Puits Aldo. We pushed on up the pitches and through the awkward meanders (still carrying a significant amount of personal kit) back to the surface. Eventually we surfaced at 1:15pm on Monday afternoon, fifteen and a half hours after we started the previous evening.

We were met on the surface by a large party from the photographic team who were entering the cave for a trip which was to last several days while they took many photographs for the forthcoming book. Dave Ottewell and Helen Blyth were now doing surface support, and news that we had rigged as far as the Canals filled everybody with enthusiasm - the expedition was looking as though it might just be successful!

After a brew at surface camp, the three of us walked back slowly through the glades and over the forested limestone pavements back to la Molière. I don't know how Lee managed to drive us back down to Autrans (I certainly couldn't stay awake) but get there we did. Time for food, drink and sleep but, you know, it's never enough.

Mark Loftus (Lofty) and family had arrived at the Autrans camp while we had been underground, and chatted to us enthusiastically about our progress. I did my best to be sociable, but drooping eye-lids got the better of me, and by 9:30pm I was back in my tent pushing the zzzzeds out by the million!

## **Tuesday 24 August**

A day for festering! Last night's sleep was the best I could remember ... ever, probably! There was much gear sorting by everybody today. I managed a full English breakfast - well, jambon cubes and scrambled eggs on top of muesli, plus proper coffee, plus a pain au raisin ... I certainly couldn't complain!

We had a big meeting in the expedition tent at 11:00am to discuss tactics. We really needed to get all pitches rigged to the bottom of the system by Thursday morning, so that everybody who wanted to bottom the Berger could do so, and so that the photographic team, who were currently underground, could complete their tasks.

Since yesterday, we'd been joined by a couple of new friends - Martin Holroyd and family plus Big Nose (A.K.A. John Palmer) had arrived. John, like me, had always wanted to get to the bottom of the Berger (although he had been into la Fromagère on an earlier trip), and Martin had already been on a few successful Berger trips. We still had eight rope bags at Camp 1, representing all the kit needed to reach the base of L'Ouragan (the Hurricane) so we needed a party of eight cavers to accomplish the task.

We decided to have two teams of four. The first would comprise Martin, who had rigged the system before, and who should be able to guarantee finding all the "spits", John, Chris Wilson and me. We would be followed by a second team composed of Dave Phillips, Jess Eades and the two Georgians, Tony and Chris Vaude. We were all to leave the campsite at 05:00am on Wednesday morning, with a view to descending at 7:00am.

All that having been decided, we got down to shopping, eating, drinking etc etc while Lofty and family generously did a water carry up to "the hole" for us.

## **Wednesday 25 August / Thursday 26 August**

I awoke at 03:50am and my word it was cold! You forget that the Vercors is a high place, and, without the sun to warm you, you soon chill. I brewed some coffee, and ate some Muesli, got my kit together and wandered around the other tents making sure that everybody was up. Martin and family (and John) had already driven up to la Molière and slept in their campervan there. The remaining six of us travelled up in two separate cars and then walked over the forest path to the Gouffre Berger.

Once all eight of us were at the surface camp and kitted up, we set off down. It was 06:45am when I dropped the first pitch and Chris and I descended to Camp 1 independently of Martin and John. We had a brief transmission to surface at Camp 1 and, when Martin and John arrived, we ploughed on down. Everything went quite quickly down to la Vestiaire and the Canals, where we discussed tactics. We'd seen no sign of the second party, so we decided that Martin and John should take the next 2-3 bags and carry on through les Couffinades and start rigging the Cascade pitches. Meanwhile I would start doing the remedial rigging on the Canals while Chris went back to find out what the others were up to.

And so I spent a lonely hour or so cutting, splicing and making good the ropes which festoon the Canals. Hanging there in the eerie silence was quite spooky, but just getting along the ropes and rocks at the Canals is enough to keep both body and mind occupied! Some of it is straight rock climbing, there are several tension traverses, where you have to have complete trust in the rigging as you lean out over the water - and there is even a short horizontal tyrolean at one point. When I eventually reached the far end of the section, I still had one loop which really needed replacing (although I was sure it would hold - I'd seen far worse!), but I had now run out of all the rope I was carrying and needed to go back to Vestiaire where Lee and I had left a stash on the previous trip.

So I started back through all the traverses, and climbs and finally got into the streamway leading up to la Vestiaire and here I met Chris and Jess. Apparently the other group had got a bit side-tracked photographing the magnificence of the cave, but Chris was now worried that Martin and John would be running out of rope and would be waiting in the cold and wet of the Cascades while we caught up with them. We needed to crack on!

So back we went, over the canals, shuffling the rope bags forward, and dealing with the little "arm exercises" as best we could. Soon after the Canals, we entered the section known as the Cascades. This started with a series of short abseils and tyroleans over deep water, but I quickly caught up with John and Martin just before Cascade Claudine.

Claudine has a bit of a reputation. Basically it's a waterfall ... you are in the cascades, what else would you expect? However, to keep the comfort zone somewhere in view, the original explorers traversed left to avoid the worst of the water ... and, to facilitate this traverse, they carried a long pipe into the system and jammed it across the top of the pitch. (Don't ask why - this was obviously long ago when "spit traverses" had yet to be invented!) The result is a slippery pipe along which you walk, hoping that your wellies grip OK, and wishing you were wearing a cricket box, just in case they don't!

The pitch itself is "assisted" by yet another tyrolean - although, on the way down we dispensed with this, as the water wasn't high enough to warrant it. Martin did ensure that it was installed on the way out though - just in case.

Shortly after this pitch, we met the Cascade des Topographers - another great pitch which led to a paddle through water, and a large bouldery passageway which opened out onto the top of the Grand Canyon.

This is far bigger than you expect, and much more muddy and slippery!! If you look at Robbie Shone's photographs, you can see the vastness of the place, illuminated as it is by flash bulbs - but the ordinary cave explorer sees none of this. He simply descends an enormous boulder field in the midst of a blackness which could be outer space for all he knows.

The Grand Canyon contains two rope pitches - one of which is "not absolutely necessary" according to the various guides - but I think we all found all these ropes exceedingly handy (i.e. pretty damn essential!!) especially as most cavers would be very tired hereabouts (whether going up ... or going down).

At the foot of the climb is Camp 2 which we didn't intend to use, but which would be very necessary if the weather changed on the surface - both les Couffinades and the Cascades flood badly and sump in wet weather, and this camp is the safest place to be if you are caught by rising water in this lower section.

Beyond the Grand Canyon, we met the next pitch - Puits Gaché. Once again, we found the rope short here, and had to revert to using the in-situ "tat" to climb the ressaut up to the traverse leading to the pitch proper. Puits Gaché is a bigish pitch (40m) leading directly on to a set of three pitches - Ressaut du Mat, Ressaut du Singe and le Grand Cascade. These are all basically technical pitches traversing the left wall of the streamway, using rope tension as aid and with some "Yorkshire-ish" change-overs. Not a place to be tired or careless.

A relatively short horizontal section following le Grand Cascade led us to le Baignoire - a canal followed by a duck / sump. This obstacle is dealt with by a tight traverse on the left - and the sump is avoided easily by a crawl (the only crawl you'll do in the Berger!) on the right.

And then we came face to face with the Little Monkey. Well, that's the English name for the pitch. The French is Vire Tu Oses, which translates literally as "ledge (if) you dare!". And that just about sums it up. You're on the edge of a huge chamber with blackness and a booming waterfall to the front, and the way on is to climb up (!! ) on the right, followed by a precarious traverse on spits (!! ) and then an abseil into the abyss, before making a

pendulum across and through the waterfall to a climb up, and a rapel down to yet another ledge ... along which you traverse to the top of the Hurricane itself. A Little Monkey indeed!

Actually, the Little Monkey is a great pitch. A bit like the sort of SRT test which might be dreamed up by some dodgy, smart-arse CIC with nothing better to do. In reality, it is a very satisfying pitch, but it does require good rigging and a confident approach.

The Hurricane, on the other hand, was a bit scrappy. Starting from a bedding plane ledge looking out onto a vast, black chamber, the 50 odd meters of rope hung down a spray-lashed wall with several ominous rub points, and one re-belay under a small overhang a third of the way down.

We could hardly hear Martin's "Rope free!" for the din of the waterfall, but soon John was rapping down the pitch - quickly followed by me and then Chris. Some rigging guides show a sloping tyrolean on this pitch to guide you away from the spray, and, as you pass through the shower of water at the bottom, you realise why. In high water it would be essential!

Scuttling out of the water, I soon reached the relative dryness of le Camp des Étrangers, where Martin was cutting a French cake into eight slices to celebrate our successful descent - what a star!! After a quick scoff, Chris and I followed John down the great bouldery chamber, past the Thousand Meter Inlet, to the canal which for us would mark the end of the cave. Others with wetsuits and neo-fleeces would later swim along this, past some small climbs to the Pseudo Syphon, and maybe even as far as the final sump, but, without neoprene, this would be too great a risk. After congratulations all around, and a few photographs, we returned to le Camp des Étrangers and started our long journey back.

And what a long journey it is too! There's not a lot of SRT, but what there is seems to be hard work and awkward - more so when you are tired. It had taken almost exactly 12 hours to get from the entrance to our low point at the canal - 12 hours would be a long trip in any English cave, yet here we were only half way. As well as the pitches, the Cascades with their sloping tyrolean slides were quite energy-sapping on the way back, and the Canals had to be passed with extreme care.

It was quarter to seven on Wednesday morning when we first entered for this trip, by the time we reached Camp 1 on the way back it was 11:30pm. The camp was bustling when we arrived. The whole photographic team were in residence and the first non-rigging team (Dave Ottewell, Jenny Drake, Helen Blyth and Marcus Evans) were stopping for a rest on their way down. But there was still a bit of room for us. I elbowed my way into the "radio shack" to make the obligatory call to the surface before settling in to some serious eating - two cups of coffee, a tin of mackerel and mustard sauce, a boil-in-the-bag chicken curry, a load of tracker bars and salted peanuts for afters. What more can a caver want?

I changed into dry clothing, put on my £10 Decathlon duvet, pulled a 2 man bothy bag around me and settled down to sleep on a Sam Splint - I didn't get a great deal of kip, but the rest must have done me some good as the odd twinges of cramp that had plagued me while I was dining had gone when our second team arrived at Camp 1 at 3:30 in the morning (they'd had a rest and a brew at Camp 2 on their way up from the depths).

At seven o'clock on Thursday morning, we brewed and fed and prepared for our exodus. I kept some of my dry kit on and put yesterday's outer wet clothes on top of it, assuming, quite correctly, that the hike up the Great Rubble Heap would warm me up. Team 2 elected to have a lie, in so John and Martin led the way out, followed by Chris and me. Although we seemed to be travelling quite slowly, we weren't really stopping, and indeed we seemed to be making good progress.

At the Little General, we met Alan, Jude, Johnny and Paul on their way down to the bottom and we wished them every success as we carried on up the ropes.



By the time we reached Puits Aldo and the entrance series, I think we were all chugging away on automatic - happy that we had to simply jug up the next few ropes which constitute the entrance series. As I topped out of Puits Ruiz and clipped to the rope ascending the doline, a voice shouted down asking who I was. It turned out to be Lee who was on his way in with Lisa to do their long trip to the bottom and back.

I surfaced at 11:30am, three and a half hours after leaving Camp 1. Oh, but it was great to be out in the sunshine after over 28 hours - and I had the best cup of coffee I have ever tasted from John Geeson, who was minding the surface camp with Jenny Harding. Chris, Martin and John were soon up on the surface sunning themselves too. I reflected that this was possibly the longest non-rescue trip I've ever done - very satisfying and in great company! The day after I was going to have to catch a plane home, so, whatever had happened, this trip would have been my last chance to go deep, and I'm just so glad that everything worked out OK. Now all we had to do was to gather up the incredibly heavy, wet caving gear, shove it all in rucksacks and carry it for an hour through the forests and over to la Molière where Alan was waiting in his Bongo with ice cold beers and cokes!

### **Friday 27 August / Saturday 28 August**

So that was it for me. I felt bad leaving the team on Friday with their huge task of de-rigging coming up. Apparently the de-rig went very well, and was a great team effort with the whole place stripped out in two days.

And so, late on Friday morning, I said goodbye to a bunch of tired-looking cavers who were sheltering from the rain under the awning of Chris and Alan's Bongo van. The rain got heavier and heavier as I walked into Autrans to catch the Grenoble bus. From Grenoble, the shuttle bus took me to the airport at Saint Exupéry in Lyon where I arrived at the same time as a huge thunderstorm - the same storm hit the whole of the Alps that day causing the cancellation of three ultra races around the Mont Blanc area - including the UTMB itself!

Sleeping at Gatwick (far worse than Camp 1) was impossible. The trip had done a lot of damage to my sleep patterns, and I wondered if I would ever get back to normal. I landed at Manchester at 7:30am on Saturday morning and waited for the New Mills bus. The rain was hammering it down ... oh well!

Alison met me at Newtown - we were supposed to be moving house in a week, and she'd been packing boxes while I had been off caving in the Vercors. Time for me to get packing too!!

### **Reflections**

The Gouffre Berger is a great cave which lived up to every expectation I had. Never too technical, it gave long and satisfying trips which left most of us well and truly tired out whenever we returned to the surface. The formations, galleries and pitches were all very stunning, and I look forward to seeing these depicted in the book which will be the fruit of Mark and Robbie's work with the photographic team. One aspect which did disappoint me was the amount of spent carbide and old ropes which have been left in the system over the years, and I was also quite amazed that such a popular and noteworthy cavern should still be reliant upon rusting spits as the main pitch anchors. Surely it's time for an expedition with the objective of sorting some of this out?

Now some of the practicalities. In addition to the ropes, slings, krabs etc which we all had to carry for rigging the cave, we each had to take a sizeable bag of personal gear too - partly to cater for feeding and keeping warm during the normal stops which always occur on a rigging trip, but also to cater for the weather changing and forcing us to have to stay underground for a prolonged period.

In my bag (a standard 50m rope bag) I was carrying a 2 man bothy bag, a cagoule, a synthetic duvet, a set of dry underclothes, a fleece, a stove, lighters, a small pan, a mug, a spork, loads of food (2 boil-in-bag meals, 2

cup-a-soups, coffee, sugar, custard) plus loads of snacky stuff (jelly babies, jelly beans, salted peanuts, tracker bars, garlic sausage), 3 litres of water, nuun tablets for rehydration, and sterilising tablets in case 3 litres wasn't enough, a first aid kit and a sam splint. In addition to this we each carried a "Wag Bag". Nothing to do with footballers' wives and girlfriends, this is a small portable bag for use as an underground toilet (it is imperative that all rubbish and waste is brought out to the surface). I managed to get by without ever using mine, but I carried wet wipes (in stead of loo-roll) and hand sterilizing gel just in case.

Expeditions like this sound very much like a bunch of mates just getting on with a caving trip, but, although there are elements of that, it doesn't really work like that at all - it can't really. It's important that somebody makes sure that all the little jobs which need doing really do get done at the right time - otherwise the expedition could just run out of time and steam. Also, a phenomenal amount of work goes into making sure everything is organised, packed, booked even before the expedition starts. On top of this, somebody has to cater for changes in the plan caused by all the dodgy weather forecasts, short ropes, sudden personnel changes etc etc. The majority of all this stressful business unfortunately gets dumped upon the expedition leader, which was Chris and I'm really glad that she managed to get some good caving herself while still running a successful trip! Even better that she made it to the bottom.

Was it a successful expedition? It certainly was - eighteen to the bottom of the system, not counting the photographic team who also bottomed the cave and covered all their major objectives. On top of this there were many folk for whom a trip to the Hall of the Thirteen was the climax, there were also those who just wanted to help and have a holiday at the same time. Yes, in terms of objectives met, it was a resounding success - but, for me, the key success factor was that everybody enjoyed themselves. Although it involved plenty of hard work, everybody appreciated the effort that others were making, and this made it a really friendly expedition - one that I will always remember fondly.