

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

SPELEO MERCENARIES – CAVING IN THE AGE OF GLOBALISATION

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When I explained to a non-caving friend the idea of caving mercenaries, of caving in the biggest and best caves I could get to with whoever it took to get there, he replied “Sounds more like caving whores to me”.

Way back in the ‘old days’ cavers used to run ‘expeditions’ to exotic locations like Tasmania and New Zealand. Now we go there for weekends and tourist trips. Australia’s international caving expedition debut was in fact quite early on in our caving history.

In 1965 a bunch of 6 crazies decided to organise an expedition to the Star Mountains in Papua New Guinea - 40 years on it is still one of the more remote parts of PNG - and the world.

It was, however in the late 70s and 80s when it really started happening with expeditions to the Muller Ranges in PNG where we explored some big river caves, ate witchety grubs, and generally played in the mud and slime.

We found a lot of caves in PNG, but even though it is close, PNG is one of the more expensive places to look for caves - difficult access, septic jungles and so far no deep caves to show for it.

Nothing for it but to search for a friendlier caver’s paradise. Mexico seemed like a good choice: cheap flights, easy access, big limestone mountains and no stone-age inhabitants. In 1985 we found an ‘untouched by cavers’ area called Zongolica and over the next ten years six expeditions found and explored a lot of caves in the 600 m to 950 m depth range, and, eventually we dived a sump in Soncongá to get an Australian first: to break the 1000 m depth barrier, even if 1014 m made it the second shallowest 1000 m+ cave on the list. Zongolica caves are uncompromisingly vertical and we learnt much and had a lot of fun.

Eventually however, the prospects of going deeper were beginning to look too doubtful to justify the time and effort and it is a long way from home just to go poking around in grotholes...

Fortunately, just as I was wondering where to go next, I got a letter from Jean-Paul Sounier: “You are coming to New Britain, aren’t you?”. Just as I was thinking about it, Rabaul disappeared under a blanket of ash from a volcanic eruption. Well, that was that - I HAD to go!

The aim was not overly modest: redescend Muruk Cave - nobody had been there for ten years - and dive the sump at -640 m, then explore it to the resurgence to get the Southern Hemisphere’s first 1000 m+ cave.

It is always interesting to go on an international expedition as the non-national and French cavers are a great bunch to go with.

It took two expeditions to get all the way through and the Muruk-Berenice traverse still rates as the best sporting cave I



PHOTO: ALAN PRYKE

Alan Warild abseiling in Mutmut Cave, Yarrangobilly, NSW.

have ever done. I have not even heard of any that come close: Spotlessly clean beautiful pitches and wonderfully reflective creamy white rock.

You enter Muruk at an intermittent streamsink and it just gets bigger and better as you go: pitches, traverses, swims, rapids, lakes and to finish, a few cumecs of bluer than blue water to climb over and wade through before emerging at dawn to climb back the 1150 or so metres to camp.

The Muruk trips also had the side effect of introducing me to some like-minded caving mercenaries with global caving ambitions.

Ultima 2000 was a French big-budget extravaganza to explore the karst of Isla Madre de Dios in Chilean Patagonia. We had sponsorship from National Geographic, Rolex, Saramite (a French motorway construction company showing



PHOTO: ALAN WARILD

Muruk Cave, PNG.

people how warm and green they really were), and plenty of others.

We managed to spend it all on a leaky boat doing a one way trip south, but we did manage to get a few weeks on and around Madre de Dios.

It must be one of the wildest places on earth. It rained almost every day - usually horizontally. We went caving anyway and just put up with getting wet and cold.

The caves were as expected: young, active, wet and prone to flooding. The glaciated karst is spectacular. We did discover a nice vertical cave that went to an active sump at -375 m and another system just over two kilometres long.

So with all these contacts, where to next? I tagged along on a club trip with the Furets Juenes du Seyssins (Seyssins Young Ferrets) for some prospecting in classic alpine karst in Slovenia and a couple of summer seasons pushing almost 1000 m deep holes in Spain's Picos de Europa. Really though, these were just 'holidays'.

The real objective of any good speleo-mercenary is something really big: Voronia in Abkhazia has been the deepest in the world since the beginning of 2001 at 1710 m. It lost its No 1 spot for a while to Mirollda in France, that was until someone realised that if the depth claimed was correct, the water in the bottom of Mirollda would have to be ~150 m below its resurgence - not likely!

After an official Fédération Française de Spéléologie enquiry, the depth of Mirollda shrunk back to something more realistic.

In August 2003 I got a spot on a Russian/Ukrainian/Spanish/French/Australian trip to Voronia. The objective was to

push a sump at -1440 m. We got two divers through and they ran out of time and gear at -1680 m looking down another pitch. A follow-up trip would surely follow.

In the meantime, there is an interesting wannabe deepest cave mountain in Southern Mexico - with 2400 m of dye-traced depth potential, there is a world-beater there, it is just a matter of finding it (so I'm told).

This time our group of Australians, Poles and Spanish were with the USDCT (US Deep Caving Team), not that we saw much of them during the weeks we spent bashing around the jungle trying to find the entrance to that world-beater. Towards the end (Why is it always towards the end?) we started down 'Barbie' Cave.

Eventually we reached ~400 m, with the cave still going. This actually got the USDCT out from their underground camp at -180 m to have a look. Another trip would surely follow.

Another northern summer and Voronia was on again, but this time the scene had changed. The Russians and Ukrainians had fallen out. The Ukrainians wanted 'their' cave back.

The two cavers who made the breakthrough the year before (a Russian and a Ukrainian) wanted to go back with their friends rather than a national expedition with someone else calling the shots, so off we went in July - just before the first of two Ukrainian expeditions... We had just three weeks to get down there, push it to the limit, and get out. Everything was organised to perfection - sacks were pre-packed and marked with their destination, there was no spare time and minimal allowance for time out.

We got two pushes, on the first, Ilia and Mouhen discovered a couple of new pitches and probably passed the old record.

On the second, Denis and I spent two very cold nights beyond the sump, camped at the foot of a waterfall pitch, and bottomed two more pitches to a sump that we surveyed to a depth of 1830 m below the entrance. Despite the haste and cold, it was a euphoric finish, but it did not last.

In August 2004, the big Ukrainian expedition descended



Alan Warild (R) with (L to R) Denis Provalov, Maxim Dzaganaya, Andrey Shumeyko at the -1400 m camp on the way up from the July 2004 bottom of Voronia Cave.

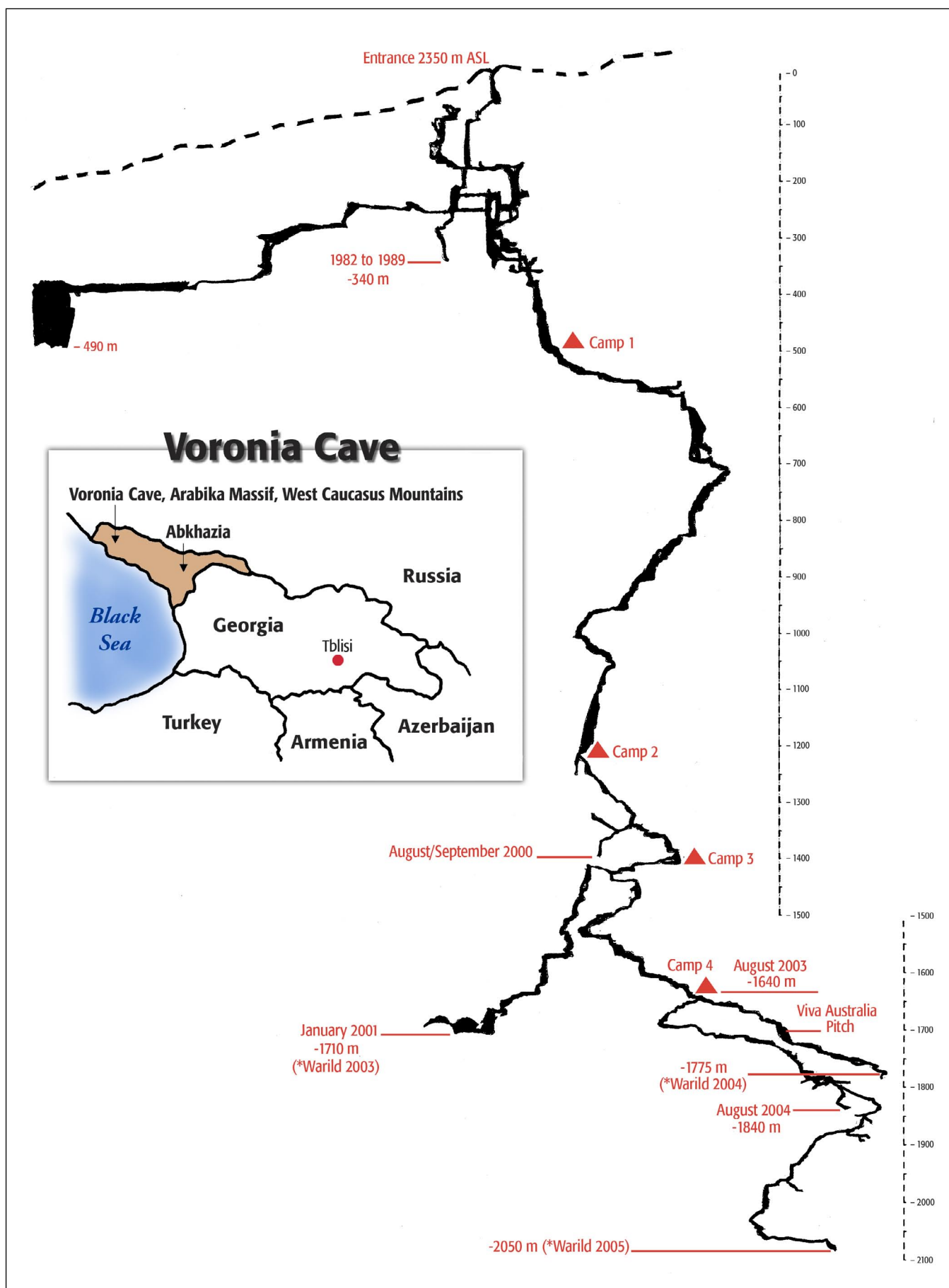


Figure 1: The Voronia Cave System, detailing exploration by Alan Warild.
Adapted from Klimchouk, A (May 2005) The Call of the Abyss Project.



PHOTO: ALAN WARILD

Karst on glaciated pavements in Patagonia

and dived 'our' sump, but the cave only continued for another 10 m. Then, towards the end (Why is it always towards the end?), one of the party wiggled down a tiny passage that they had been camping beside and walking past for over a week.

They surveyed this new passage to a depth of 1820 m and claimed a record (simultaneously claiming that our depth was wrong). The October Ukranian expedition was definitive. The party followed one of the many remaining leads and was stopped at a depth of 2080 m. Quite fittingly, the expedition was led by Yuri Kasjan, who back in the late 90s was not allowed to play with the 'big boys', so he went poking around in some of the other caves that did not go anywhere, including one they called 'Voronja' because it had crows living in the entrance, and found a meandering passage going off half way down a pitch.

POSTSCRIPT

- While I was presenting this talk, the Russian group was preparing to return to the area. As they were approaching base camp, their helicopter crashed. No one was killed, but several injured cavers had to wait two days while another helicopter was found to get them out.
- Alan Warild bottomed Voronia Cave again in July 2005 as a member of a survey party which confirmed the cave's depth at 2050 m. ■



PHOTO: CAVEX TEAM

Living in the helicopter wreckage