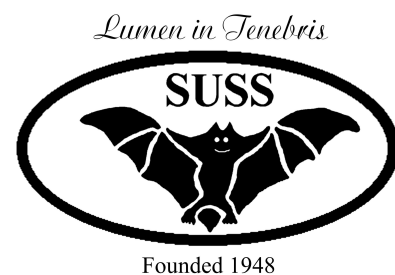


# *SUSS BULL 45(1)*

*APRIL — JUNE 2005*



Bulletin of the Sydney University Speleological Society

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PO Box 35 Holme Building, Sydney University 2006

**Cover Photo:** Paul Mackrill, Megan Pryke and Andrew Matthews  
enter Gournier Cave, Pont-en-Royans France

Photo Alan Pryke

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## NEWS AND GOSSIP

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### **New Regime!**

At the Annual General Meeting on the 3rd of May, 2005, the following people were elected to the committee. Congratulations, one and all:

President:	Mark Lowson
Vice President:	Michael Fraser
Secretary:	Kevin Moore
Treasurer:	Jo Cho
Minutes Secretary:	Brett Davis
Equipment Officer:	Max Midlen
Librarian:	Richard Pfeil
Editor:	Phil Maynard
Safety Officer:	Steve Contos
ASF Councillor:	Keir Vaughan-Taylor
General Committee:	Michael Collins
	Matt Fischer
	Kylie Webber

### **Kija Blue Sinkhole**

Kija Blue is in the remote Kimberley region of Western Australia. Paul Hosie has been exploring this area for some time, and on a recent trip with Paul Boler and Ken Smith the Kija Blue sinkhole was pushed to 75 m depth. The sinkhole has a very large entrance, warm water, perfect visibility – and no end in sight. More details and photos will be published on the Trimix Divers website in the near future.



*Canyon Hazard*  
*photo Michael Fraser*

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## A BRIDGE TOO FAR

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JENOLAN CAVES 2 – 3 APRIL, 2005

BY BRETT DAVIS

**Participants:** Grant Brennan, Alison Fenton, Natalie Brennan, Ashley Brennan, Stephen Kennedy, Max Midlen, Simon Goddard, Verity Morris, Brett Davis

Max, Simon, Verity and I arrived at the Caver's Cottage at Jenolan Friday night but we were surprised how warm it was for early April and we were a bit disappointed that we didn't need to light the fire. Stephen's mother, Sasa, delivered him to the cottage Saturday morning before going on an adventure cave training trip with the Jenolan Guides into Mammoth Cave. Stephen's brother Richard didn't join us this time due to an injury and homework that Sasa said could not be avoided. Grant, Alison and their children, Natalie and Ashley also arrived in the morning for their first family caving trip with the intention of joining the club.

In the week prior to this trip, Max was keen to take scaling poles into Spider Cave but I informed him there would be no one to help carry them. I had no intention of subjecting first time cavers to the joys of carrying scaling poles through all of the tight passages in Spider – we would never see them again. A pleasant walk in the warm autumn sunshine up Mckeowns Valley to Wiburd's Lake Cave was a more popular suggestion.

We left the cottage at 10.30 am and entered Wiburd's just after 11.00 am. First we went down to the Yawning Gulches but unlike in February, it was dry although there was plenty of mud and evidence of the water that had been flowing recently. Everyone except for Simon and I slid down the tube and had fun playing in the mud at the bottom. Max climbed the rock pile but was unsuccessful in finding the missing link between Wiburd's and Mammoth Caves.

Apparently, not everyone had had enough mud, so then I took them to North West Passage which always has lots of thick, clinging mud. We squelched our way to the end and back but unfortunately, the mud slope back down to the main passage wasn't as wet as we had hoped so we were unable to slide down. We were going to have lunch in Dyke Passage, but as there was a cool breeze blowing, and everyone was quite muddy, we went outside and enjoyed lunch in the warm sun.

After lunch, Max wanted to go back in and have a look at Henry's Dig. I was not keen on it myself as it is a silly place, completely covered in thick, clinging, squelchy mud even during droughts. Simon and Verity were of the same opinion but the eyes of the younger ones with us lit up at the mention of the mud. Max wasn't sure where Henry's Dig was so I gave him directions on how to find it: "Second passage on the left at the Five Ways and follow the muddy hole down until you can't go any further" and we left the mud larks to their fun and returned to the cottage.

Max led Alison, Grant, Natalie, Ashley and Stephen back into Wiburd's and had no trouble finding Henry's Dig. The mud was as thick as ever but Max was very enthusiastic about the dig's prospects but there have been others before Max who have been just as enthusiastic before they started, but this soon turned to frustration as the mud is washed back in whenever it rains. Natalie, Ashley and Stephen thought the mud was great fun.

After her day of training, Sasa joined us at the cottage and awaited Stephen's return as they were only staying for Saturday. Max led his muddy band back to the cottage as dusk was approaching. It was again too warm for a fire although Max wanted to light one but I suggested that the windows should be shut and he'd need to wear more than a t-shirt before a fire was warranted. With children present, we couldn't enjoy the usual debauched SUSS Saturday night in the cottage, so we were all in bed fairly early.

Sunday's visit was to Mammoth Cave as it was free of any adventure tours or training groups. Grant and Natalie decided not to go as they weren't feeling the best and I had some large blisters on my heels from my new boots so also stayed at the cottage and cleaned the gear before going to Caves House for morning tea.

Max led them down to Lower River via the rock pile and across to Slug Lake. Being only 8 years old, Ashley was too short to bridge across the stream at Lower River so Alison carried him across on her back – that's what I call maternal devotion not to mention strength. After Slug Lake, it was up to Oolite Chamber as it contains some of the better decorations in Mammoth Cave. After this it was back up via the rock pile to the Railway Tunnel as far as the Skull and Crossbones, returning to the cottage mid afternoon.

After cleaning the gear and the cottage, we were all away by 4.30 pm and were blessed with one of those rare occasions when there are no traffic jams on the Great Western Highway over the mountains so the drive back was much more pleasant than usual on a Sunday evening. Even though the Brennan family was exposed to Simon Goddard on their first weekend, he was on his best behaviour and I'm happy to report that they have joined SUSS.



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## SHAWL BE RIGHT

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JENOLAN CAVES 18 – 19 JUNE, 2005

BY MAX MIDLEN

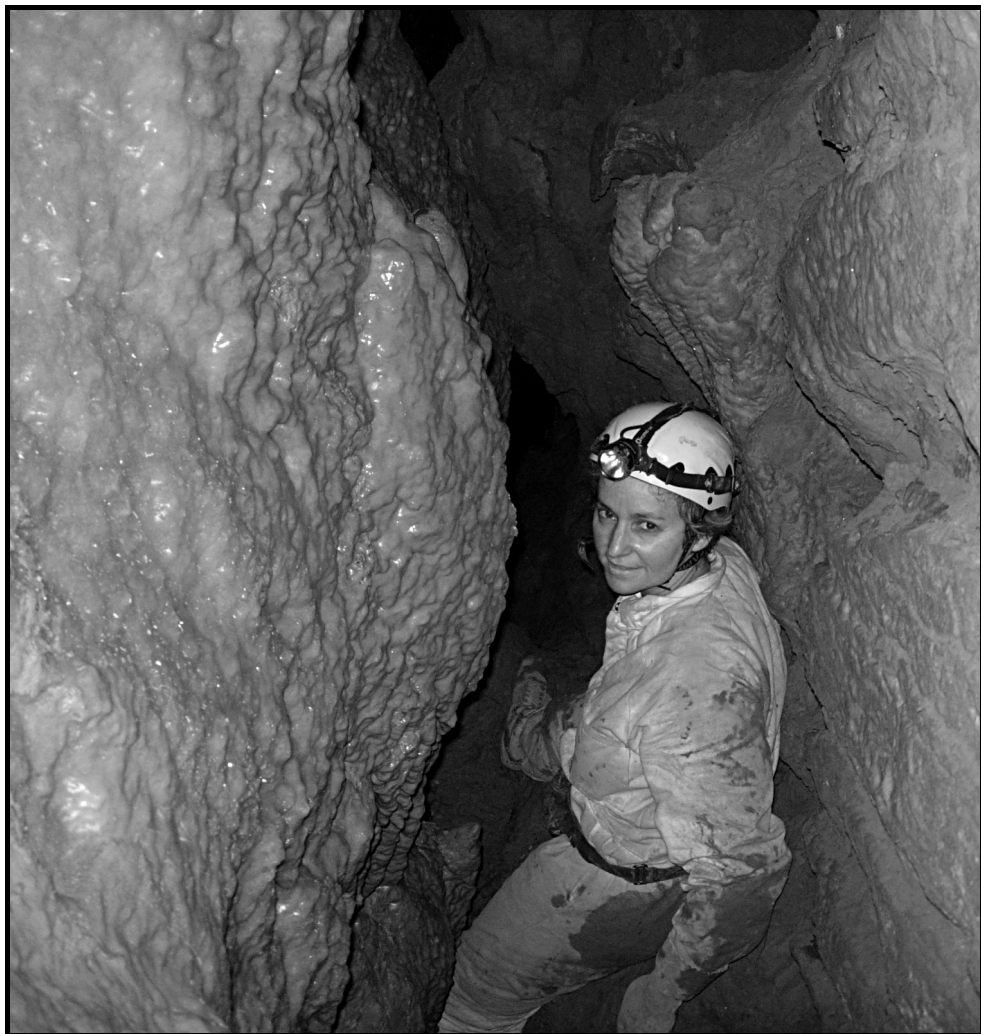
PHOTOS MICHAEL FRASER

**Participants:** Phil Maynard, Michael Fraser, Tina Willmore, Max Midlen, Todd Helies

It started off a promising weekend – when picking up the key from John Bonwick, he asked Phil had he been to Wilsons Rift – “No,” Phil replied. Not Mammoth again, I thought but as Phil replied no I thought ah that sounds interesting.

The word survey was mentioned! Anyway, five of us trudged down to the entrance and into and onto the Railway Tunnel and there it was – opposite the Skull and Crossbones in the most visited part of the cave apart from the entrance and Phil had not been there. *[Hardly anyone has been there – SUSS hasn't visited Wilson's Rift in fifteen years and the Guides have no knowledge of the area. ed]*

Wilson's Rift is split basically into two sections. The first, on the right hand side was a high rift with a couple of tricky climbs, which led into a widening of the rift, which was well decorated with shawls and the usual, a final climb led up to a narrowing of the rift in flowstone, which ended with the mark of Wiburd and his mates – not bad at all for 1891.



*Tina at the signatures in Wilson's Rift*

The left part of the rift had two parts: the low part which means just that, and a higher part – the High Shawl Room – which again was accessed by a fairly tricky climb. This has loads of flowstone and amazingly long stal curtains. *[This is more like a whole upper level than a room – it's directly above Railway Tunnel, with some holes in the floor to dangle out of. ed]*

Todd had been telling us about the first time he went caving he found a blue stone and hid it somewhere in the cave on an adventure course – well, it was not up here so off we went to search for the blue stone with some very descriptive directions on where he had hid it. Amazingly, Michael hadn't been there – Slug Lake it was.

We decided to go via the Forty Foot to bypass the nasty boulder choke. Tina showed us an unusual abseiling technique. I don't think it will catch on! No blue stone along the way or at the lake. Finally on the way out in desperation to find the elusive stone, we pointed at this small rift, and Todd was off. We did not tell him it was the Mammoth Squeeze!

He loved it.



*Phil climbs into the High Shawl Room*



*Phil and Todd bridge the drought-stricken Lower River*



*The dive line disappears into Slug Lake*

My heart sank when the word survey was muttered early next morning. I quickly thought how about a compromise – Phil Id love to as long as we can have a look at Henrys dig afterwards. Deal. In a couple of hours the survey was done, not nearly as painful as I expected. I actually quite enjoyed it because we were in the Railway Tunnel and using the forestry compass – nice, big and easy. The final three hours were spent at the end of Henrys dig having a look. Best part of the weekend. There was a strong breeze flowing into the dig the whole time!

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## ON THEIR SATANIC MAJESTIES' SECRET SERVICE

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FRANCE, ISÈRE (RHÔNE-ALPS), OCTOBER 11 - 17 2004

BY CHRIS NORTON

PHOTOS ALAN PRYKE, EXPLANATORY DIAGRAM KEVIN MOORE

### Participants:

*(In approximate order of baggage economy)*

Mark Lowson *(Flying Ryan Air with a 15 kg luggage limit has its drawbacks)*

Alan & Megan Pryke *(Got to leave room for impulse buys in Expé)*

Andrew Matthews *(Just that little bit further to travel back home)*

Kevin Moore *(Well, you couldn't expect me to drink French wine, could you?)*

Don Matthews *(Does my daughter count against my weight allowance?)*

Chris Norton *(What do you mean, I can't carry a carbide generator in hand luggage?)*

### Special guests:

François de Felix and Caroline Curfs *(Who don't appear much but sorted a lot out for us)*

Thierry Larribe, Yannick Madelenat and Laurent "Enzo" Minelli *(Who can help you out of tight places)*

Pascal Guillermier and Martine "Tartine" Gazelle *(Cave guides extraordinaires)*

Robi, Xavier, David and Zuli *(Firemen and chick magnets)*

Paul Mackrill *(Mad nuclear scientist)*

Estelle, Xavier, Odile and Claire *(Stray tourists)*

*In the last episode, our doughty band arrived in France and, after some interesting airport experiences, a market or two, and some tourist caves, finally arrived in the Vercors for "warmup" trips in the Cuves de Sassenage (exsurgence for the Gouffre Berger) and the Dent de Crolles system. They also ate lots of cheese, drank lots of wine, shorted out the electricity and had lots of inferior showers.*

### Day 7: Prepare Yourselfs to be Disappointed

Okay, this was the deal.

Every two years, cavers from around Grenoble get together for a week-long rescue exercise organised by the Société de Spéléo Secours Isère (SSSI), along with some ambulance guys, policemen, heck, even firemen. In 2005, the major focus was to be the Gouffre Berger - 5th deepest cave in France, 24th deepest in the world, but best known as the first cave in the world to be explored to more than 1 km in depth. Somehow or other, through some skilful negotiating on the part of François de Felix, SUSS managed to score itself an invitation to come along and do some caving with the locals.

Normally, if you want to do the Gouffre Berger you book the cave for about a week, turn up with a few kilometres worth of rope, and spend several long days laying siege to the cave putting your rope in place, then pulling it all out again. A major drawcard for this particular trip was that, if all went well, the French would rig the Berger and we would be at liberty to hop onto their ropes without all that troublesome carrying in and out. A chance worth jumping at? You bet.

Of course, François assured us repeatedly, you may well not be able to go far in the Gouffre Berger. In fact, you may not be able to go into it at all. Because in a few spots the cave is prone to flooding when it rains, and it can rain quite a bit in October. So if you're thinking of coming on the trip to do the Berger, don't. You'll probably be disappointed.

Despite all this, there could be no denying that those who went on the trip were fully prepared to be disappointed. And, much to our surprise, things weren't looking too bad come Sunday night. Our hotel was full of French cavers who seemed enthusiastic, the storms of the morning had disappeared, and the gear room downstairs contained

several hundred karabiners and enough rope to equip an Indonesian prison to deal with several 747s full of drug smugglers.

Monday morning, and a motley crew was herded into the conference room for a briefing. Thierry Larribe is president of SSSI, and was the big boss guy in charge of the exercise. His power was indeed awesome, as he dispatched cavers hither and thither to the dark depths of the underworld of the Vercors with a wave of his magical white-board pen. "These people are going to the Fromagère", he said, indicating some names. Several people blanched and looks of horror washed across their faces. "No, really....it's not quite as bad as you might think...." he said, fairly unreassuringly. The Gouffre de la Fromagère, the upper entrance to the Berger system, is reputed to contain lots of nasty thin rifts and a pitch almost 200 m deep. Fortunately, we were not on that list.

"We have some Australian cavers joining us", said Thierry. "They'll be coming to the falaise with us today. You will notice that they use some .... interesting and novel techniques. They descend using racks...." This had clearly put the cat amongst the pigeons. Several frowns emerged on people's brows and there was much whispering of: "Racks? Racks?!"

The falaise, it turns out, aside from being a cliff, is a type of field exercise. We were bundled into cars and drove for about 20 minutes to a cliff above a blocked forestry trail. The object of today as far as we were concerned was for the French to observe us and decide whether they would let us into the Berger. No worries, we thought. However, our hosts were keen to do a proper job.



*Kevin, Andrew, Megan, Mark, Chris and Don model the latest season's Australian cave fashions at the falaise*

Overseeing things were the tall, gangly Yannick Madelenat and the much shorter Enzo Minelli, two professional cave and canyon guides, who made an incongruous couple as they respectively stalked and scurried around the cliff. First on the agenda was a gear check. Enzo would run up to unsuspecting cavers and start running his hands over their gear, checking knots, snappiness of karabiners, and furrows in rack bars. The racks usually drew a sharp intake of breath from all who saw them – the French are almost universally committed users of bobbin descenders such as the Petzl Stop – but were given a grudging pass.

Next up was rigging the wall. This involved Yannick dangling off the cliff with a heavy duty drill, perforating the limestone and banging in bolts to erect a veritable spidersweb of ascents, descents and traverses. It was while the wall was being rigged that we realised a drawback of our location: there was a thick layer of loose and crumbly



rock which, when kicked, tended to fragment and discharge shrapnel liberally over the ground below. Of course, no-one likes crumbly rock so the riggers tended to give the rock a really good kicking to garden it, resulting in many fist-sized stones raining down, many giving the ropes a bit of a pounding on the way.

We went through a series of exercises to test our skills. Going up, changing over, going down, crossing knots, traverses. Then Yannick wanted us to rescue someone from on rope using only our regular ascending gear and no pulleys. Most of us didn't find that too hard, because it was merely a variant on the technique that everyone learns in SUSS.... or rather, everyone except Alan, whose query of "Rescue? Wassat?" met with a few raised eyebrows.

Our hosts were very keen to introduce us to their French habits and break us of our evil Australian rack-using ways. Several folk borrowed bits of gear and made some impromptu modifications to try things out. François and Caroline were particularly keen to introduce us all to the Petzl Pantin, a small foot ascender with a loose spring to assist in giving rope weight when using a frog prussik system.

In the mid-afternoon, Megan, Alan and Chris snuck away to go gear shopping at Expé, a gear shop in the nearby town of Pont-en-Royans. Nearby as the crow flies, but of course the closure of the direct road meant another hour-long trip through the Grands Goulets to get there. Being there during the daytime meant we could suddenly see the precarious nature of the road, with lots of 100m+ drops over the edge into the rocky gorge below. We were hurrying in order to make it to Expé before it closed, so Chris was displaying his best high-speed rallying skills whistling round the hairpin bends and through the tunnels accompanied by the tune of the Propellerheads' version of 'On Her Majesty's Secret Service' on the MP3 player and the sound of Alan's gasps, moans and prayers.

Expé itself does not look like the World's Greatest Gear Shop, probably because it is mainly a mail order business. It comprises a very small shop-front with a few items of clothing and gear sitting around, but this is deceptive – behind a small door is a huge warehouse. You shop by looking in the 200-page colour catalogue, telling the guy behind the counter what you want, and, in a few moments, he reappears with a handful of bounty. More than 200 euros later, they were on their way back, but not after coincidentally bumping into Estelle, Xavier, Odile and Claire at the main junction in Pont-en-Royans.



The shopping team made it back to the hotel just as dinner was beginning. Unwrap-

*Navigating the Grands Goulets requires the right musical accompaniment*

ping their new shiny gear at the dining table attracted the attention of Yannick, who grabbed our new Pantins and held them up triumphantly shouting "Régardez! Régardez!". The French whooped and applauded our good taste in adapting to their techniques.

After dinner, Don took us to see the whiteboard with the allocations for the next day. A fellow called Pascal, a member of the Spéléo Groupe de la Tronche (François and Caroline's old club) would be taking most of us down the Berger – Don, Andrew, Mark and Chris to -640 m, and Alan and Megan to -500 m. Kevin was scheduled to join Pascal's partner, Tartine, in the Gouffre Jean Bruno, which was not quite as deep. So it was off to bed for everybody.

### **Day 8: The Cave We Weren't Supposed to Do**

I don't think we could quite believe it. It was early – so early we didn't quite realise what time it was. It was pitch dark. The temperature gauge on the Touran said it was -3 C. And we were heading off for the Sornin Lapiatz towards the Gouffre Berger.

A rough translation of the cave's name would be something like "Shepherd's Cave". However, translation isn't really appropriate. The Gouffre Berger was named after Jo Berger, who found the entrance on May 24, 1953. "The

Berger”, as it’s affectionately known by many, is 1271 m deep, although that includes an extra 80 m elevation above the main entrance from the secondary entrance of the Fromagère. In the Summer it can be hard to get into the cave, as endless streams of British cavers pour over the channel on week-long Goofy Bugger expeditions. But we were going to have the Berger experience in just one relatively short day.

The temperature had risen by the time we reached the carpark high above the small village of Autrans – it was now a bracing -1 C. We had thought the Berger was a cold cave, being about 3 – 6 C, but that sounded pleasantly warm as we wandered across a ridgeline paddock with the sun lazily peeping above the Alps to the east and bathing the cloud-filled valley below in a golden wash. It’s about a 45 minute mostly downhill walk to the cave, and pretty much the only thing we could think about was “Uh oh – that means we’ve got more ascending to do once we get out.”



*En route to the Gouffre Berger at sunrise*

Eventually we reached the entrance, on a large dissected slab of exposed limestone laced with thin rifts and blind shafts. The French call this a lapiaz, and it looks like a huge flat tablet of limestone that’s been lifted up and dropped on a hard stone floor. Those wandering a short distance into the trees came upon a number of plaques – memorials to the various cavers who hadn’t made it back out, situated just far enough from the entrance so as not to startle those who didn’t look too hard. We also noticed a group kitted up and starting to descend. Pascal waved at them, but confided to us that these were actually a group of cave pirates who weren’t associated with our exercise. News had got out that the cave was going to be rigged and folks from all over were keen to take advantage of the opportunity.

The entrance itself doesn’t look too prepossessing. A 5 m depression in the rock leads, at one end, to a shaft about 8 m deep finishing in a muddy floored chamber. However, a small drop and crawlway leads to a rickety wooden platform poised at the top of a 30 m shaft.

This is where the fun really begins. There were not one, but two ropes rigged down the entrance, and pretty much the whole entrance series down to -260 m had been rigged with two sets of ropes in order to accommodate the large number of people who’d be accessing the cave this week. Mark and Chris took the lead and were soon racing each other down the shafts and across the traverses, over and under one another. The pitches were broken up by long sections of serpentinous rift (or méandres, as the French call them) which involved sidling, bridging and chimneying along, sometimes with the aid of dodgy wooden stemples as footholds. The deepest rift drops to almost



***The twin rope route begins at the Berger entrance***

30 m below the traverse level, so we were thankful of the odd piece of rope to clip into. At one stage we encountered another couple of pirates – a bloke trying to coax his reluctant girlfriend through the meanders. We climbed over them and kept going.

Let me let you in on a little secret. Given its depth the Berger is actually a very easy cave (or at least, the bit we did was, particularly given that we didn't have to carry ropes or rig – and we must give great thanks to our French hosts in that regard). Even in the relatively confined entrance series, there's plenty of room, no squeezing, and passage is pretty straightforward (although some of the sounds escaping Alan in the meanders may have led the casual listener to believe otherwise). The longest pitches in the entrance series are a little over 40 m deep and don't tax you too much. Also, despite horror stories from Berger veterans like Max Midlen and Phil Cole about bolts that rattled in their sockets and stuck halfway out of the wall, the rigging looked pretty sound. By the same token, it was easy to be complacent. Whilst the cave was pretty dry, with only a few trickles of water down the pitches, our research had produced all sorts of tales of the flash floods that could turn these beautiful shafts into torrential downpours making passage impossible.

Before long, Chris and Mark hit the bottom of the beautiful Aldo's Shaft. Jean Cadoux, second person ever to descend this pitch after Georges Garby, described the experience of what followed thus:

"Gradually the noise of the waterfall behind us grew fainter as we crawled along among the bounders; I said nothing, but I greatly feared that this was to be the end. The gallery

narrowed; intrusions of calcite blocked it. Was it all over, our splendid dream?... No, not yet; a cat-run appeared and drew us through into a small chamber, where, to our surprise, we heard the sound of water...

"Garby had suddenly stopped at a sort of porthole in front.... I took Garby's place at the window in the rocks and was lost in admiration of what I saw.

"What a sight it was! What an ample reward! The full assurance of victory at last! A river, a really magnificent river, the sort of river every cave-explorer dreams of, was actually flowing just below us.... I glanced to right, to left, then up into the roof; the spaciousness of night everywhere. The river flows in a vast gallery, big enough to match our happiness, worthy of this great collection of caves....

"Like tiny glow-worms, astray in this dark impressive scene, we pushed on, now going along the banks, now jumping from stone to stone; not walking, but running, such was our urge to feel the intoxicating effect of all that our eyes cannot take in...."

This is the start of the Great Gallery, which at this point is around 50 m high and 15 – 20 m wide, and along the base of which runs the Starless River. Chris and Mark were soon joined by Andrew and Don, and then Pascal, who said Alan was taking his time: "He is making a lot of noise. I think he does not like the méandres. I do not know much English, but he uses the words ..... [*family magazine edit. ed*] a lot. Those I understand."

Eventually, Megan arrived, followed by Alan amongst a shower of profanities, and we set out along the Great Gallery. From here on, the cave is generally wide and open. After passing the Petzl Gallery and Lac Cadoux (an intermittent lake, unfortunately dry on this visit meaning that we didn't get the chance to use the installed rubber dinghy), the first significant decorated area encountered is the Salle Bourgin (Bourgin Hall). Here, dozens of stalagmites up to 15 m or so tall sit awkwardly atop the rockpile. Alan started diving for his camera. "No, on the way back!" we chorused. We still had a fair way to go and spending half an hour being exposed by Alan wasn't quite what we had in mind.

From here on the passage starts sloping more steeply. Several hundred metres are descended climbing over steep rockpile, with only occasional short roped sections at areas like the Cascade of the Little General and the Tyrolean Cascade. Below these abseils is the start of the Big Rubble Heap, a steep pile of boulders up to 60 m wide with the roof up to 75 m above. The passage has wonderful echoing acoustics which provide a good venue for impromptu



a capella performances of 'On Her Majesty's Secret Service'. Alan was keen to test this facility at two minute intervals.

The Big Rubble Heap tumbles down over 100m into the famous Salle des Treize (Hall of the Thirteen) at -500 m and around 1.6km horizontally from the entrance. The Salle des Treize is one of the most photographed and best-known places in the speleological world. Jean Cadoux writes:

"I can only compare it to a cathedral, to a nave with a profusion of columns and other architectural features on which the calcite had lavishly indulged its fancy. There were majestic domes of complicated design soaring above a forest of small, elegant, beautifully sculptured columns, which some malevolent force in past ages had shaken on their bases and bent in all directions. Their feet were dipped in a number of pools at varying levels, whose lacelike edges traced upon the floor patterns of tin bands as of pink foam, intricate as the filaments of a jellyfish. The water in these pools was of such perfect purity that through ten or twelve feet of this pale green screen we could distinguish the most delicate crystalline formations, resembling those of coral."

The Salle des Treize is so named after the team of 13 cavers who, led by Fernand Petzl, first discovered the room in March 1954. They set up a camp on a ledge overlooking the formations, which has become the traditional camping spot for deep penetration cave teams to rest on their way back out of the cave. No doubt there have been plenty of careful, conservation-minded cavers in the cave, but there has also been a few messy grubs (possibly the 'feelthy English' as Kevin called them). The campsite area does contain a disturbing smell which isn't the most conducive to eating lunch. You can probably guess why. And if you can't guess why, lift up a few rocks and you'll soon see why. A large pile of carbide waste was also dumped in the middle of the ledge – fortunately it seems this practice is not currently condoned and our party carried all our waste from the cave. There was a small group of people returning from the bottom tucked into a tent made from survival blankets in one corner, so we let them be and climbed on top of a pile of rubble to eat some snacks whilst overlooking the formations.

The Poms have installed a through-the-ground radio at this point, which they had given the French cavers permission to use. Pascal wandered over and tried to make contact with the surface to get some news on the weather. "Un, deux..... Un, deux...." No response. They'd probably gone to chase pirates away from the cave entrance, we figured.

## THINGS AL'S BOOK DIDN'T TELL YOU ABOUT...



8. DON'T LOOK UNDER  
THE ROCKS NEAR CAMP 1.

Of course, we hadn't come to the Salle des Treize to eat lunch and admire the camping ledge. As Andrew remarked later, many of us from our early days of caving had seen pictures of the Salle des Treize decorating the pages of many of the epic tales of exploration that we'd pulled out of the library and eagerly read when we should have been doing our French homework. Now we had the chance to walk through those very same photographs. Reaching the Salle des Treize might not require the same feats of physical endeavour as climbing Everest, but it must surely rate as one of the classic destinations in the speleological world.

This was as far as Alan and Megan were going, so Alan finally got out his camera. Uh oh – it turned out that the camera had been switched on since the entrance. Is that a problem? Apparently so. For some reason, Alan and the camera were not talking the same language (maybe it doesn't know words like ..... [*still a family magazine. ed*]). Finally, he managed to let a few flashes off and capture us standing around amongst the stals. That was quite enough, and suddenly the deep penetration team evaporated leaving Alan and Megan left to remonstrate with the camera.



*The team, desperate and duckless, contemplate the Salle des Treize*

After the Salle des Treize, the cave gets steeper once more – and, it must be said, even prettier. There's lots of climbing down cascades of flowstone and traversing stacks of stalagmites. So, if the Salle des Treize isn't the most beautiful bit of the cave, why is it the most famous? One might as well ask why Paris Hilton is famous (although it is doubtful whether there is any silicone in the Salle des Treize). Such are the vagaries of fame.

There are a few more short pitches and handlines to the river, which has been flowing for 800 m underneath the massive piles of boulders and enormous swathes of flowstone. The passage then narrows down (and by "narrows" I mean it's slightly smaller than the Railway Tunnel in Mammoth). Off in the distance is a roaring noise. Was this a huge waterfall? Or were we finally going to meet one of the famous mammoths immortalised in the Air France Caveman game?

In fact, it was neither. Rather, it's a feature which the initial explorers called the Enormous Cascade, possibly because, in the fine tradition of misleading nomenclature like the Forty Foot in Mammoth, it's not an enormous cascade. Somewhere in the roof is a hole letting through a substantial flow of water. Splashes out from the spout have formed a round cylinder a few centimetres from the spout. Underneath is a basin into which the water pours, and in the confined cave space the noise is amplified to such an extent that the early explorers thought they were about to encounter a waterfall. Close up, however, the effect is rather like an elephant relieving itself. With that

problem out of the way, Don could resume filling in for Alan in humming 'On Her Majesty's Secret Service'.

We then climbed up above the river once more through St Matthews Hall. No-one told Don or Andrew the name of the chamber at the time, so we were spared the need to pay obeisance. On the other side of this chamber, a long flowstone slope led through a window onto a traverse around the top of a chamber followed by a 5 m pitch down to the floor, where the river chattered round some rocks before vanishing down a narrow canyon. This was the Vestaire (Dressing Room), where bolder cavers than us back in the '50s had stripped off their overalls and rubbed each other over with liberal handfuls of kitchen butter mixed with something called Dolpyc (described by the early explorers as "a revulsive agent which had proved an excellent thermogene in damp conditions"). We opened our lunchboxes. Alas, no butter and no Dolpyc, only more pâté and some caramel rice puddings. We shrugged our shoulders at Pascal. Looked like we could go no further, unless we wanted to smear pté all over ourselves – and that could get smelly.

We did chimney out a short distance along the river to see what the cave held in store. Basically, this is where the cave starts getting fairly sporty. This area is known as the Coufinades, and once the walls get too far apart for chimneying you have to clip onto a length of fixed line and traverse strenuously above the river for a couple of hundred metres (unless, of course, you have remembered your Dolpyc). This section of the cave is infamous for flooding up to the roof very rapidly following surface rainfall, so the fixed line has taken a hammering and looks like it could be used to walk eight dogs simultaneously going in different directions.

We could easily have gone on, but alas – Chris' cave duck was missing. Duckie, a veteran of many deep caves in Tasmania and New Zealand, not to mention being one of the only cave ducks to make it to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, had dearly wanted to do the Berger. However, come the night before the trip, Duckie was nowhere to be found. Duckie had overcome great odds even to make it to France, since he was the victim of a daring kidnap at Sydney Airport, but the kidnappers were foiled when he was discovered in Alan and Megan's room one night shortly after arrival. The Prykes' chequered history with Duckie had caused a few glances to be thrown in their direction when he disappeared once more, but Duckie did not emerge. And so, standing at the entrance to the Coufinades, our gallant team just couldn't bear to venture further without their duck.

It was time to beat a retreat. Andrew and Pascal led the way back towards the Salle des Treize. Chris was bringing up the rear, and was very surprised when he reached St Matthews Hall to find Don ascending into the roof. Surely this was taking this sainthood thing too far, particularly as he had already attracted a young acolyte, Mark, who was preparing to join him in the heavenly heights. In fact, the way didn't lie up in the heavens but down in the infernal depths. Chris gleefully took off as Don decided that sainthood wasn't quite all that it was cracked up to be.

It was a rapid and steep ascent to the Salle des Treize. We finally stopped amidst a lather of perspiration and complaints about the cave being far too warm. Ah, these balmy alpine temperatures in positive figures (4 C). We stopped to munch down a few snacks, and someone must have turned the air conditioning on, because in about ten minutes it had got much, much colder. Time to head out and see where the others were up to. First, however, Pascal tried the radio to the surface again. Still no response. We started feeling uneasy. Had the pirates ambushed them? Had a group of wild boar overrun the radio tent and gored the operators? Had someone keeled over after a dodgy bit of pâté? Only time would tell. On the way back up, we passed another large group of cavers; plus a solo caver over 70 years old. Pascal assured us that they were all pirates. We pondered whether a name change to the Gouffre Napster would be appropriate.

After huffing and puffing up the Big Rubble Heap, we were surprised to find Megan and Alan just starting up the entrance pitches at the inlet from the Great Gallery. They must have stopped in the Petzl Gallery to go gear shopping. We gave them a few minutes to get under way up the ropes as Pascal took up a food collection. He said that there was a deep penetration party on their way up who would be very tired and hungry, and could we please leave food for them? He took up a collection and we forked over chocolate bars, sweets and gourmet foodstuffs, which Pascal placed carefully into a bag. Come to think of it, I never did see what happened to that bag.... Pascal also pointed to a big pile of rubbish sitting near the turnoff to the entrance series. It comprised lots of tatty cut-up rope, antenna wire, and a few deeply rusted tins which Pascal assured us were probably antiques from the '50s. Of course, now that we had just made so much space in our packs by emptying them of food.... We got the idea. Mark was actually quite pleased because his friends back home had been urging him to bring home some appropriate souvenirs of this famous cave. Since they didn't sell snowdomes of the Salle des Treize, a foot or two of vaguely historic rope would have to do.

Some people were putting into practice for the first time their new French techniques and equipment. Chris had a new Pantin strapped to his foot, but soon discovered that when you have a 14-year-old chest ascender with worn teeth, weighting the rope from below with the Pantin can pull it thin enough to slip right through the chest ascender. Since he hadn't brought his spare ascender into the cave with him, this meant he had to judge his rhythm carefully; and since Chris has as much sense of rhythm as a lapsed Catholic he found himself on quite a few sudden and unexpected slides down the rope. Meanwhile, Alan was making heavy work of the prussiking. Not that he was tired, mind you, it was that this damn new French chest harness was pulling his harness waist belt up.

Mark was hooning out of the cave but was brought to a halt by a queue on the last series of pitches, due to a bankup of pirates (in particular, the caver-plus-girlfriend combination who we had met in almost exactly the same point going in). Chris managed to catch up to him at the bottom of the Cairn Shaft. After some finger-twiddling, one of the twin ropes became free and Mark set off.

Chris was about to start following up the second rope when some mutterings of "Oh dear!" and "Hmmm..." came down the shaft. He inquired what was wrong. "Oh, just a bit of a tangle of sorts, but I can sort things out" said Mark. Was it OK to come up, or should he wait? "Err.....um....yeeeeeeeeeah....I think...." was the response. That didn't sound encouraging. "Are you sure?" "Oh, ah, yes....um....."

Chris had only gone a short way, however, when there was a bit of commotion in the ropes, accompanied by some more grunting and muttering. He sat still getting drizzled on from a great height as Mark wrestled above with some unseen complication in the rigging. He finally got the all clear after five minutes or so of jiggling and continued ascending, much damper than before. He met an equally damp-looking Mark waiting for the next set of ropes. "What happened?" he asked. Mark pulled a face and said, enigmatically, "Ah.... some of the pirates had done something very odd to the rope. It was a bit more tricky to fix than I thought." This did not bode well, but they were on the home stretch and were soon dragging themselves up the entrance pitch and onto the lapiaz to catch the last of the sunlight.

A few other cavers had interposed themselves in front of the rest of the party, so it was a little while until Pascal emerged. "There has been a bit of a problem," he said. "Alan's camera has fallen down a pitch"

"Oh dear – how far?"

"Forty metres".

Ouch. "This has happened to him before, you know."

## THINGS AL'S BOOK DIDN'T TELL YOU ABOUT...



11. THE FRENCH WORD FOR "ROCK" IS "CAILLOU". IT MAY ALSO BE USED FOR "PELICAN CASE WITH EXPENSIVE CAMERA INSIDE".

“Uh, yes – he told us.” Probably very loudly, too.

Andrew was the next to exit the cave. “I hear Alan dropped his camera down a pitch”, said Chris.

“Um, not quite,” said Andrew. “Actually it was, uh, me who dropped it.”

Well, that was a surprise. Apparently, Andrew had taken pity on Alan, who was still progressing slowly up the ropes (remember, that harness thing) and offered to take his heavy cave pack with the camera box in it (in addition to Andrew’s own heavy pack filled with rubbish and dead rope from the Grande Galerie). Andrew clipped Alan’s pack onto his pack haul alongside his own. At the top of the 40 m Garbys Pitch, he was pulling the packs over the edge when the karabiner twisted into such a position that the gate popped open and the pack slipped off. There was one of those long silences with a dull swooshing in the background (or, a much larger swooshing very close to Don, part way up the rope and idly wondering if the cave was starting to collapse)....then, a terrific explosion – and not just from the pack.

Eventually more people emerged, including Alan, with a cracked Pelican case filled with a lot of broken glass. This camera was about \$3,000 worth. Ulp. But hey – we’d got the photos from the Salle des Treize, right?

The trip had taken us less than 12 hours from entry to exit, which was not bad at all. Of course, we still had a 45 minute walk back to the car in the dark, and a further 100 m+ of ascent, but so long as we kept a firm hold on our cameras we’d be OK. And due to the open nature of the cave and the dribbles down the pitches we actually came out of the cave marginally cleaner than we went in.

Back at the hotel, Kevin was getting stuck into dinner. He’d just used the last of his Australian wine, and was getting stuck into some of the local produce, which he informed us was just not up to par. (Of course, some of you may think that using several kilograms of your baggage allowance to transport red wine to France is an act akin to carrying a pack full of mud to Dwyers Cave, but who were we to grumble?) “Prepare yourselves to be disappointed”, he announced. Well, it’s not every day you get the opportunity of an effortless trip into one of the world’s classic cave systems, but thanks to our French hosts (and particularly Pascal who’d given up a day to make sure we didn’t drown in the Coufinades) we’d managed it. Perhaps we could handle a little disappointment.

(Kevin’s report of his trip into Jean Bruno will appear separately.)

### **Day 9: Choranche**

According to the whiteboard, Wednesday was supposed to see us led to a cave called Scialet du Lapin Pédé by Tartine. Scialet du Lapin Pédé translates literally as ‘Gay Bunny Cave’. This is not, in fact, a reference to deviant local wildlife, but in fact commemorates the fact that the cave was discovered by a Mr A Gay and Mr H Grousson (nicknamed “Bunny”) , and someone thought it funny to do a translation of the names into French. Despite the allure of being able to return home and say we’d done the Cave of the Gay Bunny, Don broke the news to Tartine that we Australians were such wimps that the Berger had poleaxed us, and all we were up for was a bit of pleasant tourism.

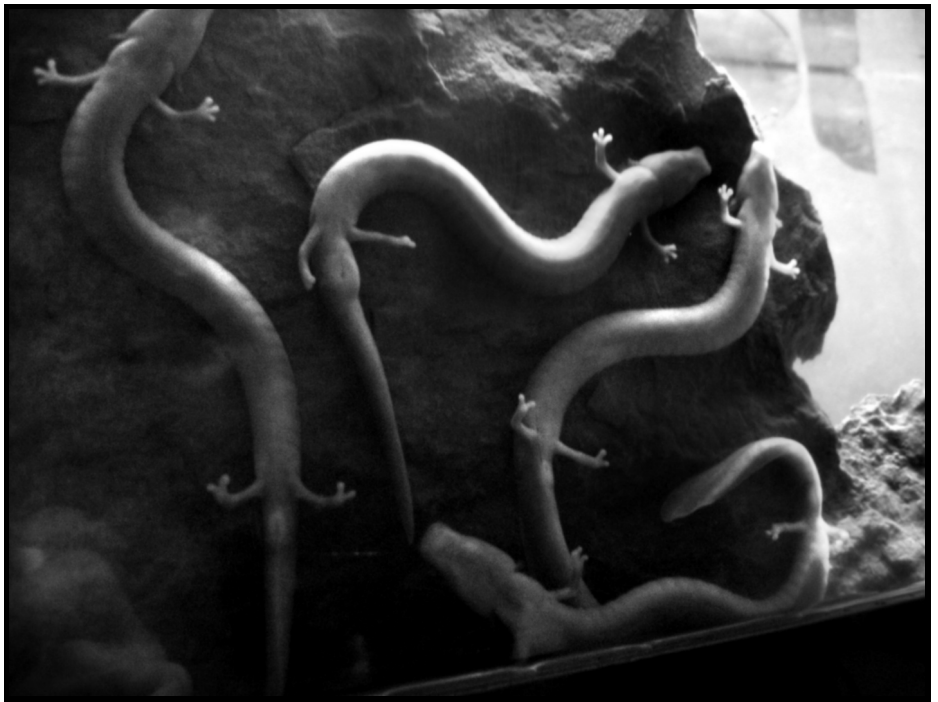
And so it was that we soon found ourselves driving through the Grands Goulets towards Pont-en-Royans once more. By special request, ‘On Her Majesty’s Secret Service’ was booming from the stereo on repeat so that people could work out what Alan had been humming the previous day all through the Berger. We were joined by Duckie, who had been found nesting in a quiet corner of Chris’ room trying to keep out of sight of the French chefs.

There must be some magic to the main junction at Pont-en-Royans, for no sooner did we arrive there than Estelle, Xavier, Odile and Claire appeared there too – just as they had two days ago when Alan, Megan and Chris were in town. Spooky stuff. We stopped for some quick drinks underneath the clock tower, and stayed for some longer ones whilst Estelle took the time to remind Claire what her father looked like before we headed off to the Grotte de Choranche, a nearby tourist cave.

The developed section of the cave was smaller than the Grotte de Clamouse, which we’d visited last week, and shared many similar “improvements”. Yes, there were tanks containing not one but several proteus, and there was a Son et Lumière spectacle. The Son et Lumière was rather better done than in Clamouse, with a less strident score and lights actually staying on in one place for longer than five seconds. The moment when the cavern was in darkness save for a single light shining behind a stalagmite and backlighting a rapid drip of water that plummeted towards the stal before splashing out in all directions on impact was one of those “Aaaaaah!” moments that dentists only dream about.

The Son et Lumière display takes place in an upper level chamber, which is connected to the main tourist section by a path that runs along an underground streamway into a spectacular lake beneath a ceiling festooned with long straws (or ‘fistules’ as the French call them). The lake glows a brilliant turquoise from the underwater lights, and the light-coloured walls of the chamber mean that there’s a considerable amount of light in the chamber. This was a good thing because there was a ban on both flash photography and tripods in the cave, so the extra reflected light helped those who were balancing wobbly cameras on their knees in order to take shots.

Once back outside again, we went for a walk to look at Gournier, a cave just around the corner from Choranche with another picturesque turquoise lake at the entrance, which is in turn halfway up a very tall cliff. The water that flows out of the lake burbles a short distance through forest before cascading over a large tufa waterfall and into the valley below toward the town of Choranche. We were planning to return here later in the week, and had been told that you needed a boat to get across the lake. Andrew took one look and thought “Those French are wusses. I bet you could swim across that.” He then stuck his hand in the lake and added “But you’d probably start feeling really cold and cramping up about half way across.” Better a live boat-riding wuss than sinking like a stone in the middle of a cold lake.



*Proteus gather to observe rare Australian cavers at close quarters, Choranche*

Our nerve was to be tested once more on the track back to the cars.

Alan, Andrew, Chris and Kevin were stopped at a lookout where Chris was setting up his tripod to photograph the town of Choranche below. There was a vague swooshing noise from the bush to the right of them followed by a terrific crashing noise as half of one of the nearby trees suddenly disappeared in a great puff of leaves. Either there was a particularly voracious tree-eating eagle in the vicinity, or the cliff had suddenly decided to start bowling television-set sized rocks down at us from on high. Whatever explanation, those with an instinct for self-preservation dashed off to take cover. Chris, however, had a stronger instinct for photography and stood there calmly finishing his shot whilst Alan screamed “God, NO! What are you doing? The eagle will get you!” (or something along those lines, anyway).

At dinner that night we were joined by Paul Mackrill. Paul is a mad English scientist who works at the Grenoble cyclotron. Paul invited us to go caving with him and another French girl, Séverine, the next day to a cave called Trou qui Souffle. Without even asking why a mad nuclear physicist would have been turfed out of his homeland and whether he was safe to hang around, Andrew, Don, Megan and Alan were eagerly agreeing to follow him, no doubt because they thought the cave had something to do with a famous French dessert (who said accents aren’t important in French?).

In the meantime, Chris was waylaid by some French firemen who invited him and Mark to a cave called Grotte Vallier. The cave was about 400 m deep and featured a pitch called the Black Hole (or, in French, “le Black Hole” – I kid you not) which is 98 m deep – or, as the French so lyrically say, four twenties and eighteen metres deep. I suspect they say it that way because it sounds so much shorter.

### **Day 10: Fire in the Hold**

Chris and Mark stayed up late helping the firemen pack for Grotte Vallier. There seemed to be rather a lot of rope needed. Chris was also a little worried because the firemen were only packing half the ropes listed in the rigging description. He asked whether this was wise. “Non, non, ils sont seulement cordes facultatifs” (they’re only helpful ropes). Well, didn’t we need all the help we could get? The firemen didn’t think so.

It was up early the next morning for both teams. As the Trou qui Souffle party sat around waiting for Paul to arrive on his motorbike, Chris and Mark hopped in the fire truck (no, not one with ladders and hoses unfortunately) and set out for Grotte Vallier.

The guides for Vallier were Robi, Xavier, David and David, although fortunately one of the Davids also answered to the name of Zuli. Only Zuli spoke more than a couple of words of English so Chris thought he might have a lot of translating to do for Mark’s benefit. Robi was introduced as “Our leader”. We were told the walk was going to be uphill for about 45 minutes, then really really steeply uphill at the end (Zuli held his hand at about 70 degrees to demonstrate). It didn’t help things that it was starting to rain lightly as we were getting out of the truck. It also wasn’t a good sign that there were six of us and ten packs. However, after much thought one of the packs was

slung back into the truck. "We're not going to do the Black Hole, not enough time", they explained. Mark was a bit disappointed but Chris was secretly relieved as he was sure he'd heard something about black holes being rather difficult to get out of, and not very fun places to be inside.

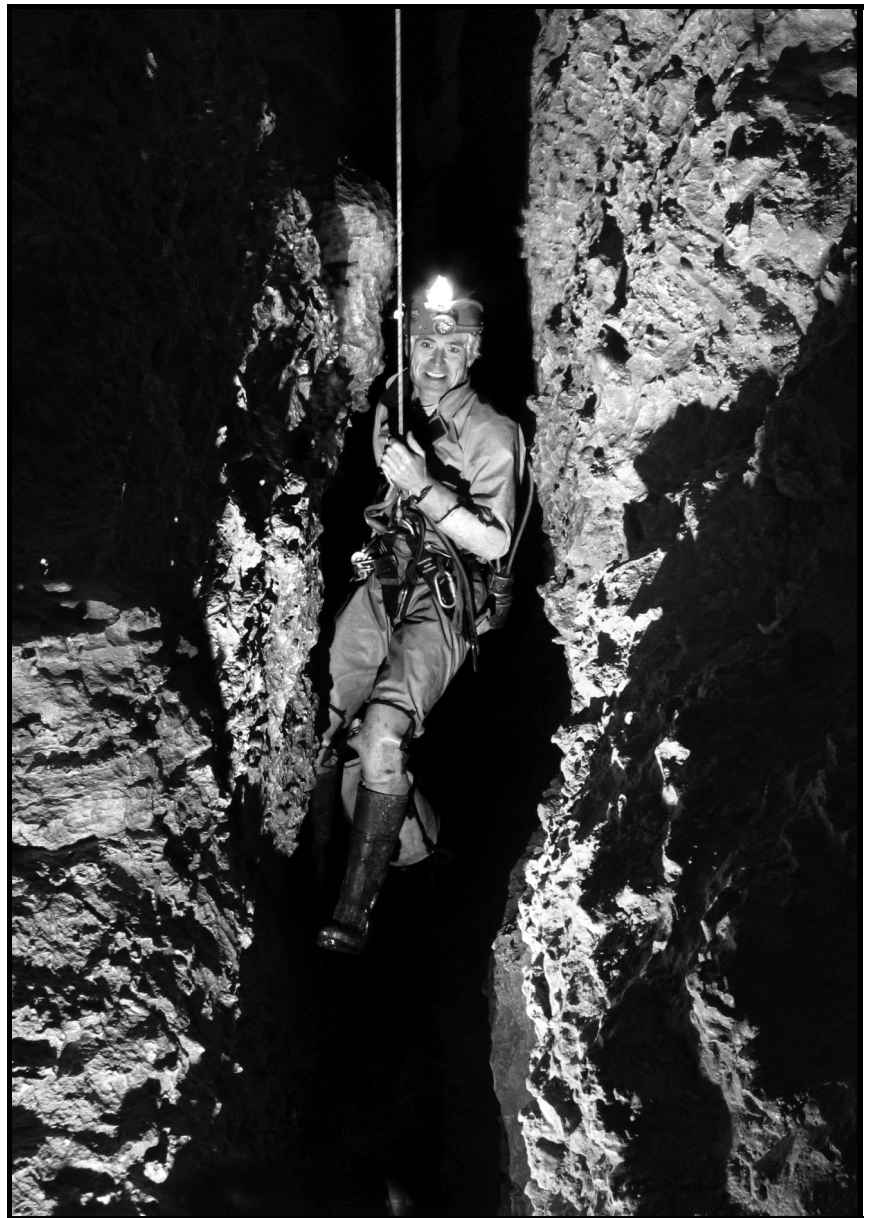
The walk to the cave was certainly uphill, but the firemen hoisted the spare packs on their shoulders like damsels in distress waiting to be carried from the flames and set a cracking pace up the trail. The track was a spectacular one, winding around the foot of the cliffs on the eastern edge of the Vercors with a magnificent view over Grenoble below and off to the first craggy peaks of the snowcapped Alps to the east. The track then entered a forest and began a series of switchbacks up the hill. "You weren't joking when you said it got steep at the end," gasped Chris. Zuli smiled and said "We're not at the steep bit yet!" Sure enough, this was just the regular walking track, but an offshoot led up the side of the cliff to a scree chute underneath a gaping cave mouth in the side of the cliff. The last ten metres or so was a hand-over-hand job up a wire cable hanging down the cliff.

There was a fantastic view of Grenoble set out below us, and the firemen could point out their fire station. They also told us that it was a traditional ritual before entering into any cave for everyone to hug each other tightly and wish each other good luck. Oh-kay. "When in Grenoble...", etc. We paused for a snack before entering the cave. The boys got out some sweets and handed them around. "Les bonbons! Les bonbons!" they chorused. "We call them bonbons, because they are good-good!" ventured one, upon which the others all fell about rolling on the floor helpless with laughter.

Grotte Vallier has been known about for a long time. Apparently all the firemen knew very well where it was, but none of them had actually been beyond the entrance chamber before. However, we were armed with a description (in French of course) from the guidebook to the local caves and reckoned we'd be right.

The first thing to look for was a sign warning people that the cave was labyrinthine. This took some finding, due to the fact that the cave was in fact labyrinthine, and required some awkward crawling through some boulders to get to the sign chamber. The labyrinthine nature didn't let up, leading to frequent consultation of the description, and frequent wrong turns. We found a metal grille, from where the route was supposed to go down, then up, then down again before leading into a "toothy" passage. Of course, the description didn't tell us how far down or up to go before changing direction, and due to the many levels of cave and an apparent profusion of toothy passages. Mark kept wanting to know what we were looking for so that he could help search. Chris kept giving dodgy and uncertain translations so we weren't an awful lot of help.

Finally, we stumbled upon the right toothy passage, and after squeezing through the tonsils found ourselves atop the throat of the first pitch, which was rigged and descended by Robi first. The rest of us followed to find Robi already hard at work on the second pitch, which was reputed to involve a pendulum across into a side passage about 20 m down. However, it turned out to be the wrong shaft, and Robi started grumbling his way back up the rope. Mark went wandering off in the opposite direction and found a lovely round shaft plunging into blackness. He came back to let us know of his discovery, and was shocked to find the ground below the first pitch spattered



*Whilst rigging the Trou qui Souffle, Paul Mackrill knew not to make fart jokes near an open carbide flame*



with blood. Uh oh. Were these the dreaded Vampiric Caving Firemen of the Vercors that the Lonely Planet guide had warned us about? Fortunately, no (according to the whiteboard, they were off in another cave today). As Zuli had swung over the edge at the top of the pitch, his carbide generator had flicked up and hit him on the nose, causing it to bleed copiously. By the time he got to the bottom of the pitch his face was a mess of blood, and once he started touching it with his hands things got really messy. The other firemen were not very sympathetic at his plight, calling him a big wuss and a purse-carrying nancy boy (or at least, the French equivalents) when he asked if anyone had anything he could use to mop up the blood.

Time to attempt the second pitch for real. Xavier led off down this one, peering round for the “sloping side passage” into which he was supposed to pendulum. We could hear a lot of moaning and grunting coming from below, interspersed with cries of “La pendule! La pendule! AAAAHHHHHH!”. Eventually, after a lot of banging and moaning, it was time for the rest of us to descend. Chris was hoping that he hadn’t mistranslated and that this was the entry to some sort of Edgar Allen Poe-style torture chamber.

The pendulum was certainly a big one, although fortunately it was of the swing-across-on-rope type and not the massive-scything-blade-swinging-ever-closer-to-your-stomach type. Although you could climb round a good deal of the wall, the last little bit involved quite a bit of arm strength to pull up into the side passage. We ultimately all made it across and began crawling along a not-very-promising passage with a lot of crystal crunching underneath us. However, this, too, turned out to be a dead end, and we were soon on our way back to the pendulum to check out a passage on the opposite side of the shaft. Robi rigged an awkward multistage traverse around the edge whilst the others loudly sang the theme from Star Wars.

One thing that all the messing around trying to find the way encouraged was chatter amongst the firemen. Much of it was a bit too fast for Chris to get the full details, but he was able to tell Mark that the bulk of it comprised talk about girls, drinking beer, or fart jokes (the latter were usually quite easy to distinguish as they were accompanied by sound effects), or even telling fart jokes while drinking beer with girls.

It turned out the alternative passage was the right one, and after bombing down the third pitch we weaved our way through a series of narrow passages and short climbs into a big room which, in truly romantic French style, was called the Fart Room. Here, the nature of the cave changes markedly as the Fart Room is in fact the start of a large fossil passage that leads for several hundred metres up to the top of the Black Hole. However, like much of the earlier part of the cave, it’s been the subject of a lot of rockfall, presumably at least partly frost shatter (because this cave is high up and is damn cold). It does contain some lovely sections of beautifully sculpted and cleanwashed stream passage, however, including a big round ‘swimming pool’ at one point. There were also quite a few sudden drops that required some nifty climbing manoeuvres to negotiate, which were no doubt where the ‘cordes facultatifs’ were supposed to be installed.

We finally reached the top of the Black Hole pitch, although it was a bit hard to see into the hole without a torch on a very long string. By this time Chris was sick of calling it the four twenties and eighteen metres pitch and was relieved to see that someone had written “P100” on the wall at the top, so that he could call it “la puit cent” from now on without looking like he was shortcutting. The boys were obviously champing at the bit to do some exploring and since they couldn’t do the Black Hole, Robi led them on an exploration to climb around in a muddy tunnel in the roof until one of them stepped on a loose rock and came crashing down amongst much colourful language.

Time was getting by, however, and Xavier seemed to want to get out very quickly, so we turned tail and headed back through the Fart Room towards the entrance. Whilst we waited at the top of the first pitch, the firemen quizzed us about Tasmanian Devils, only to be very disappointed to find out they weren’t big brown things with large slavering jaws that spun around very fast. Ultimately we emerged at the entrance chamber to find that the really important thing that Xavier had to do was call a hot girl on his mobile phone to arrange a date for tonight. In the meantime, the others solemnly told Chris and Mark that it was traditional upon exiting the cave to hold hands, and jump up and down shouting “We made it! We made it!”.

When picking packs up for the walk down the hill, Chris thought he’d be a sport and pick up one of the extra cave packs. The walk down the hill wasn’t too bad, although the firemen set a cracking pace. Of course, being competitive fellows, upon reaching the start of the short uphill section back to the car they decided a race would be fun. Despite being burdened with extra packs they sprinted up the hill, leaving Chris staggering in their wake in a lather of perspiration, panting heavily under load, whilst Mark offered encouraging words and apologetic looks.

Of course, once we got back to the truck the other boys, who hadn’t been as forward-thinking as Xavier, all pulled out their mobile phones and got to work arranging their dates as well. Poor Chris and Mark. All they could do was go back to the hotel and order some 1664 beer. The particularly clever thing about this beer is that it’s impossible to get completely drunk on it, because after about four of them you’re incapable of ordering another “Seize-cent-soixante-quatre”.

Just as dinner was getting under way, the Trou qui Souffle party returned with tales of pitches that turned into turbulent waterfalls when it rained outside, and desperate sumpdiving at the behest of the mad nuclear physicist.



Seemed like Chris and Mark had had the slack trip after all.

*With any luck, someone in the Trou qui Souffle party will be able to get past the repressed memory syndrome and tell the tale in more detail sometime soon.*

THINGS AL'S BOOK DIDN'T TELL YOU ABOUT...



10. ENGLISHMEN ARE LOONIES.

#### **Day 11: Picture yourself in a boat on a river....**

Remember Gournier? The cave around the corner from the tourist cave at Choranche? The cave with a lake at the entrance that you probably actually do need a boat to get across, no matter what Andrew might think? Well, it turned out that Paul the mad nuclear physicist had managed to track down a boat, owned by some local caving policemen. He also somehow managed to persuade the policemen that it was essential to their cave rescue training to bring their boat to Gournier and use it to ferry seven Australian cavers across the lake. Clearly, this sort of thing is considered important in French policing, because we were soon standing in the tourist cave carpark unloading an inflatable boat and paddles from the Gendarme van. Obviously Séverine didn't know when to quit, as she joined us as well.

Duckie watched on with interest as Andrew attached the pump and began pumping up the boat with gusto. Before long we had a boat big enough for three to four people ready to set sail. Paul, Andrew and Megan were the first across, then Andrew returned for another load whilst Paul started the difficult task of freeclimbing the wall on the other side of the lake and traversing across above the water, fixing a rope for the rest of the party. Soon everyone had teetered across the traverse without falling in, and was standing in the large main gallery of the cave.

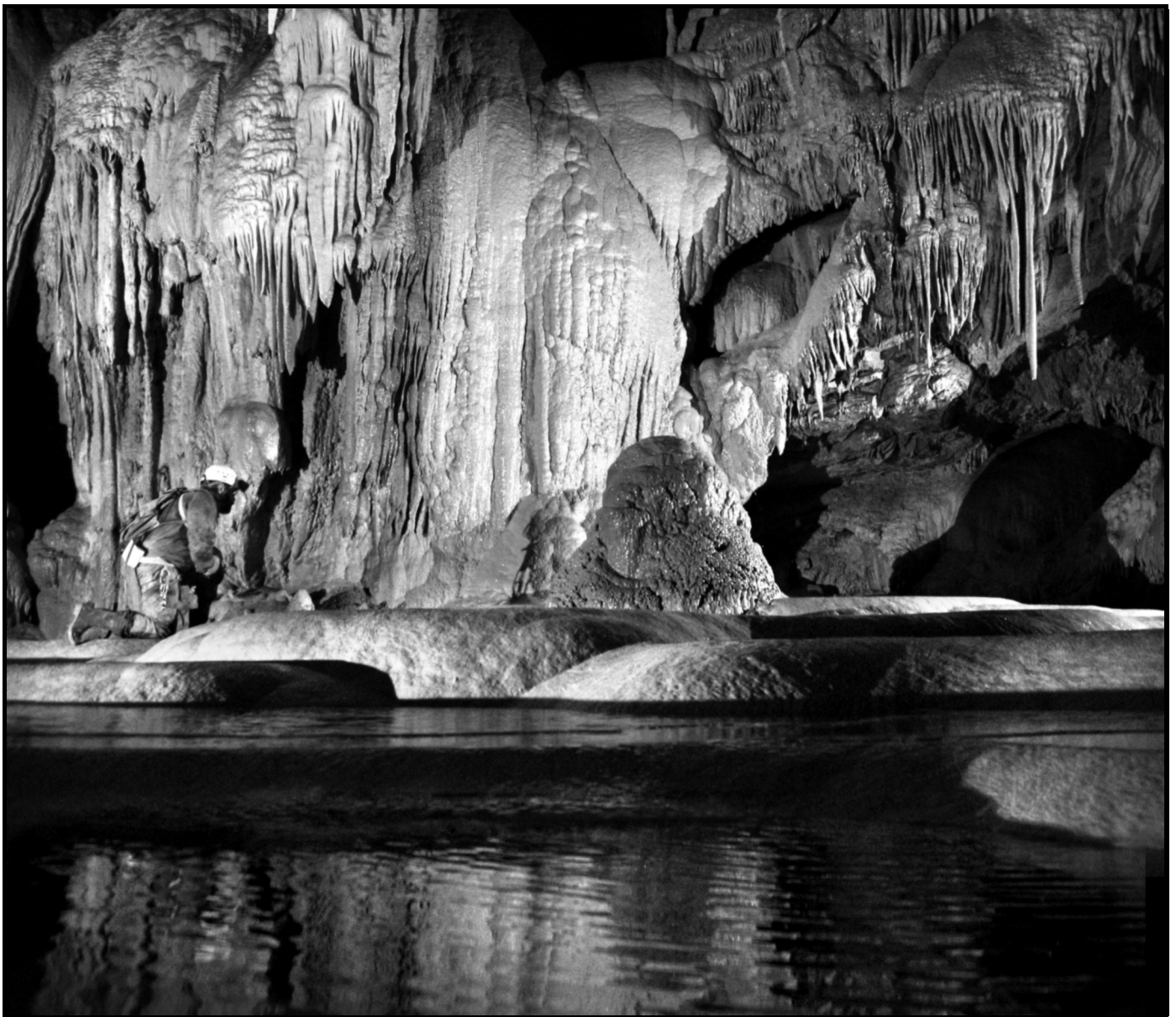
Gournier is a very impressive cave, racking up a respectable 18 km in length. The main passage through the cave is a higher-level borehole with a floor often stacked with rockpile and occasionally profusely decorated with giant stals. Meanwhile, at a lower level a respectable streamway gurgles its way through a clean-washed lower passage. Given the relatively easy access to several kilometres of varied caving, it's not surprising that Gournier was chosen by the team that was later to discover and explore the Berger for the filming of *Starless River*, an hour-long film about caving in the Vercors area made in 1952. Filming was still difficult, however, taking some 21 weekends in Gournier as well as more filming of additional scenes in Sassenage and other nearby caves. The batteries for the camera lights would last for about three minutes before they needed to be connected up to petrol-driven generators to recharge, and those generators were prone to short circuit and catch fire.

We wandered along, accompanied as ever by Don and Alan's looped rendition of 'On Her Majesty's Secret Service'. Alan was relishing not only having been permitted to bring his camera into a cave, but having plenty of formations to photograph. Whilst Alan was posing Kevin in front of some attractive flowstone cascades, Paul beckoned the rest of us to follow him down through the rockpile into the streamway.

The streamway section had clearly been designed to throw ever-increasing challenges at French cavers, who as a rule dislike getting their feet wet, let alone any other bits. At the entry point, the streamway is a barely ankle-deep ribbon of water chattering over rocks, but as one progresses upstream the pools get deeper and the bridging manoeuvres required to avoid them become more and more difficult. In order to keep dry, the poor gendarmes were finding themselves having to contend with moves that would make the Cirque du Soleil blanch. Of course, being both English (therefore used to wallowing in damp caves) and long-legged (therefore able to easily span wide distances), Paul was powering ahead, urging us to disregard the odd splash of water down our boots and dive in.

In the meantime, Don was glancing at his watch. Once we turned around, we had to sail back over the lake, deflate the boat, drive back to Villard de Lans, pick up everyone's luggage, and then make our way back down the autoroute in the general direction of Montpellier to find somewhere to stay that night. We didn't want to leave things too late. Eventually, Paul came to a deep, boiling pool in a broad fissure that would mean total immersion for anyone who ventured into it, and hoisted himself up on his broad legs to span the crevasse. "Who's following me?" he asked. No-one, it seemed (although Mark and Duckie looked very keen). We all made excuses about having electronic car keys in our pockets and not wanting to get our watches wet, and turned around to hasten back downstream in a cloud of steam.

We emerged from the streamway and swept back along the passage, to find Alan in pretty much the same place as he was before, urging Kevin into even more ludicrous poses. We persuaded him that if he didn't pack up and return now, he might find no rope or boat waiting for him at the entrance, necessitating a big water jump and bracing swim.



*Kevin contemplates being a permanent addition to Gournier*

Getting into the boat at the cave entrance had been easy, as there was a shallow rocky beach to step onto. On the other hand, getting into the boat inside the cave to depart was much more difficult, as the small landing ledge ended in a steep drop into a very deep pool, and the boat was prone to move around. Dainty movement was the order of the day to avoid a premature and undesired dunking. Kevin, however, has never really gone in for this dainty movement thing, and decided the best way to assure himself of a place in the boat was an emphatic lunge. Small inflatable rubber boats are not really the place for emphatic lunges, and Alan, sitting on the opposite end of the boat, nearly lost a second camera as he was catapulted up into the air in a wonderful display of Newtonian physics; but thankfully he fell back into the boat rather than the blue depths of the lake.

We beat a hasty retreat to the carpark. Chris, Andrew and Don were to take Paul back to Villard de Lans and collect the bags, whilst Megan, Alan, Mark and Kevin were to go for a tourist drive and then do some shopping at Expé before we joined together in convoy to drive southwards. The baggage collection was likely to take some time, due to the need to circle through the Grands Goulets, but Paul assured us that he knew a special back route that was much shorter. This back route involved climbing several hundred metres up a series of switchbacks, passing numerous puzzled mountain goats, navigating a series of dirt trails through the forest, then descending again, in a trip where Andrew confessed he was never able to get out of second gear. As a result our shortcut added about 15 minutes onto the time needed to get back to the hotel, where things were winding down as the hotel planned to hibernate once more until the ski season.

We farewelled the Grenoble mob, including François, Caroline, Yannick, Paul, and Thierry, whom we no doubt confused greatly by presenting him with a copy of 'Delving Deeper', a history of caving in New Zealand. Obviously we did something right, though, (perhaps by adeptly covering up everything we'd done wrong) because we were invited back in two years' time. Piling everyone's luggage into the car was a difficult feat, but we finally set off through the rain to collect the others at Pont-en-Royans where, for once, they hadn't run into Estelle, Xavier, Claire and Odile.

In the interests of experiencing a wide range of French culture, we called into the Aire de Montelimar fine dining restaurant Autogrille, and decided that "Aire de..." must be French for "fairly cruddy roadhouse beside the autoroute". We climbed back into the cars for the final stretch to our destination for the evening, Orange (no, not that one). Chris asked Mark if he had any particular musical requests. "Uh, can we please not have 'On Her Majesty's Secret Service'?" he asked, pleadingly. Anything to oblige.

It was getting late when we pulled into Orange and started doing the rounds of the discount motels. Somehow, we ended up at the Motel Première Classe. Of course, this was one of those very subtly witty French names that means "Cheap and tawdry". Not to worry – they had some big tables and so we could get cracking on our first six-player version of our perennial entertainment, the socialist barter-economy board game Les Colons de Catane, using the super duper expansion set that Xavier had presented to Don as a gift. The poor guests who had rooms close to our tournament arena were liable to be awakened by drunken shouts of "I've got some wood for one of your sheep", but hopefully didn't understand enough English to be disturbed by the implications.

#### *In the next thrilling installment....*

The team goes touring – Duckie hides from the foie gras makers – Alan gets automatically disinfected - a boat ride across the Styx – we drink a lot more wine and eat a lot more cheese – the lairs of the cave bear....and the cave cheese – we discover how close you can build a hut to a cave – a shortcut only 1000 explosions long – the year-old cheese of doom – and we finally meet the French cave mammoths.

#### *Endnote*

Those contemplating mourning the loss of Alan's camera in the Berger should know that once the lens was replaced, the body continued to function perfectly.

#### *Special thanks to:*

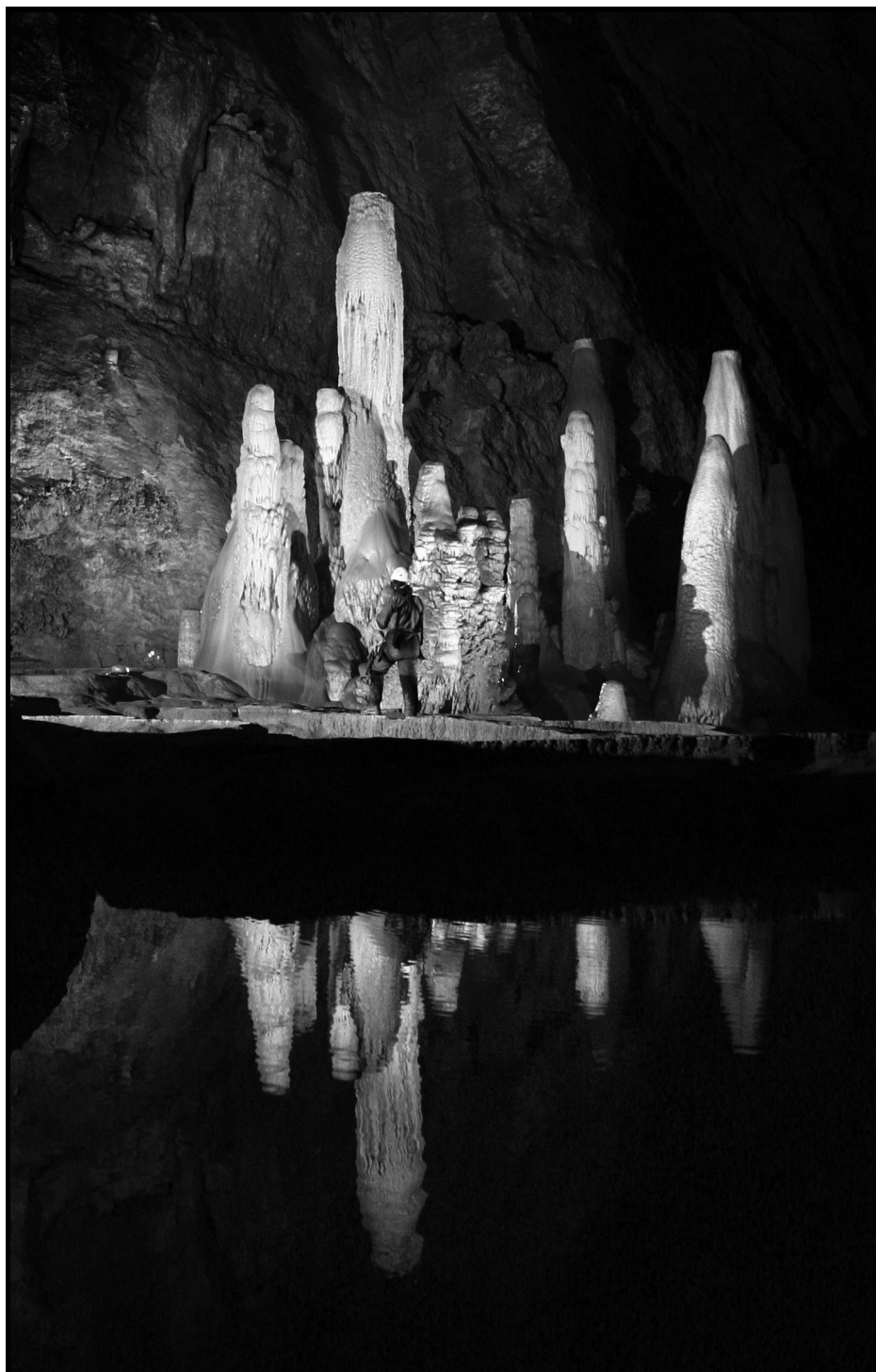
François for arranging for us to attend the rescue exercise in the Vercors – Thierry, Yannick and Enzo for slipping us onto the whiteboard – Pascal and Tartine for a Berger, a Bruno and almost a Bunny – Paul Mackrill for a blowing hole, a wet wade and a long shortcut – Robi, Xavier, Zuli and David for the Salle aux Pets – the gendarmes for a boat and its crew.

Quotes from "One Thousand Metres Down: True Adventures Beneath the Earth" by Jean Cadoux et al, AS Barnes & Co, 1957

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## PHOTO GALLERY

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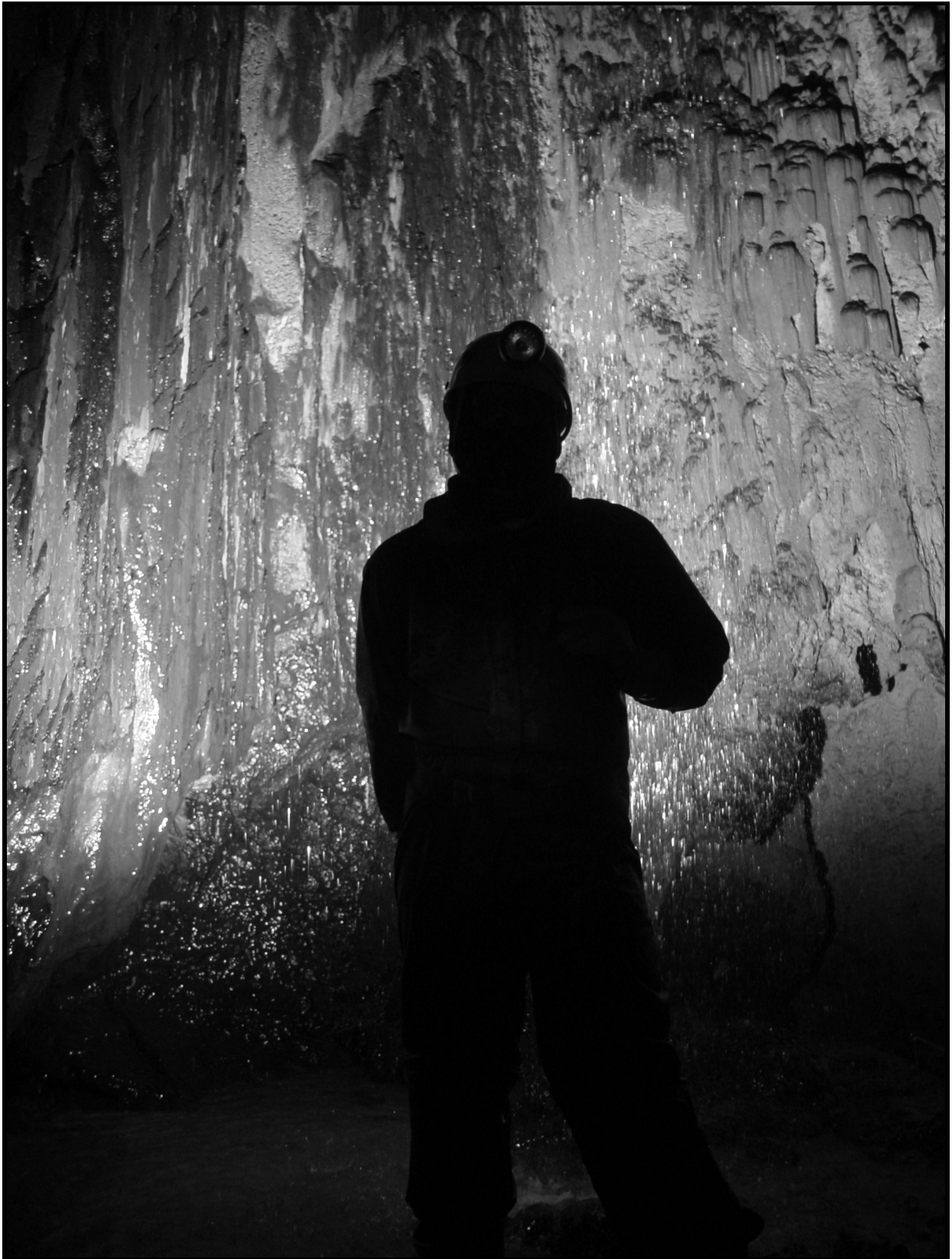
*Megan Pryke whiles away the time conversing with the stals in the Salle des Treize, Gouffre Berger*

*Photo Alan Pryke*

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## PHOTO GALLERY

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*Steve Contos gets cold in Chain of Ponds, Tasmania*

*Photo Annalisa Contos*



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## PHOTO GALLERY

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*Megan contemplates the advantages of tourist tracks, Gunns Plains, Tasmania*

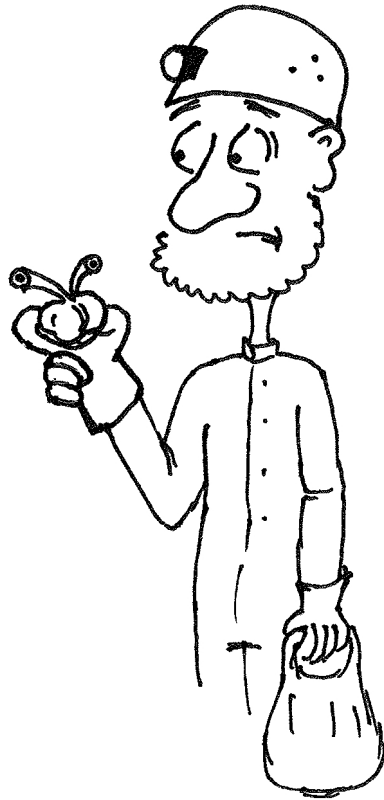
*Photo Alan Pryke*



*Martin Pfeil plunges into Kanangra*

*Photo Michael Fraser*

AND REMEMBER...



DANS COCHON, TOUT C'EST BON

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## TRIP LIST: JULY 2005

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SUSS General Meetings are held on the first Thursday of the month at 7:00pm (for a 7.30pm start) in the Common Room of the Holme Building at the University of Sydney. The Holme Building is close to the Parramatta Rd footbridge on the northern side of campus. The Common room is on the first floor (enter from Science Rd).

For updates to this list, check out the SUSS Website: <http://ee.usyd.edu.au/suss>. Detailed information on each caving area (plus other useful information such as what you will need to bring) can be found in the *Beginner's Handbook* section of the Website.

Please Note: it is YOUR responsibility to inform the trip supervisor of any relevant medical conditions which may in any way affect your fitness, such as asthma, diabetes and the like.

### July

**9–15 Jenolan Mid year trip.** A whole week to knock off the Mammoth survey, map the Mammoth-Spider connection and concrete the Spider-Jubilee pathway, creating a new 'adventure' cave between Mammoth Flat and the Grand Arch. Contact Annalisa Contos [annalisa.contos@commerce.nsw.gov.au](mailto:annalisa.contos@commerce.nsw.gov.au) or 9488 7742 (home).

**16–17 Tuglow.** Why go home yet? Contact Phil Maynard [Philip.Maynard@uts.edu.au](mailto:Philip.Maynard@uts.edu.au)

**23–24 X-Country Skiing – Gungahron Range.** Snow pending. Contact Brett Davis [bdavis@ssc.nsw.gov.au](mailto:bdavis@ssc.nsw.gov.au) or 9747 4818 (home).

**30–31 Bungonia.** The perfect chance to use those SRT skills. Contact Phil Maynard [Philip.Maynard@uts.edu.au](mailto:Philip.Maynard@uts.edu.au) or (home) 9908 2272.

### August

**4 General Meeting.** 7:00 pm Holme Common room. Koonalda diving video – see what all the fuss is about.

**6–7 Kalang – Learn to abseil.** Come along and learn to abseil one day and use your new skills the next day in the spectacular Kalang Canyon. Contact Mark Lowson [marklowson@yahoo.com](mailto:marklowson@yahoo.com) or 0415 338 601.

**13–14 X-Country Skiing.** More Alpine antics, this time run by Kevin Moore. Contact him. [kevin.moore@cisra.canon.com.au](mailto:kevin.moore@cisra.canon.com.au)

**13 Gear Audit.** Ever wondered exactly what equipment SUSS has stashed away for its members' use? So do we. Come along and help out at the gear audit and you'll find out. Contact Mark Lowson [marklowson@yahoo.com](mailto:marklowson@yahoo.com) or 0415 338 601.

**20–21 Jenolan.** Extensive caves, luxurious accommodation, no mobile reception.... what more could you want? Contact Michael Fraser, [michaelfraser172@hotmail.com](mailto:michaelfraser172@hotmail.com) or 0419 236 576.

**27–28 Timor/Isis River.** Head on up to the Hunter Valley for a trip away from the regular SUSS haunts. Contact Mark Lowson [marklowson@yahoo.com](mailto:marklowson@yahoo.com) or 0415 338 601.

### September

**1 General Meeting.** 7:00 pm Holme Common room. Spectacular footage of new caves being dived in the Kimberley.

**3–4 Fordham Canyon.** Get a head start on canyoning season on the Saturday and then get your subterranean fix with some caving on the Sunday. Contact Michael Fraser, [michaelfraser172@hotmail.com](mailto:michaelfraser172@hotmail.com) 0419 236 576.

**10–11 Jenolan.** Extensive caves, luxurious accommodation, no mobile reception.what more could you want? Contact Phil Maynard 9908 2272 (home). [Philip.Maynard@uts.edu.au](mailto:Philip.Maynard@uts.edu.au)

**17–18 Wyanbene.** A great stream cave down in southern NSW.

**24–25 Tuglow.** Another beautiful stream cave in a bush/rural setting.

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