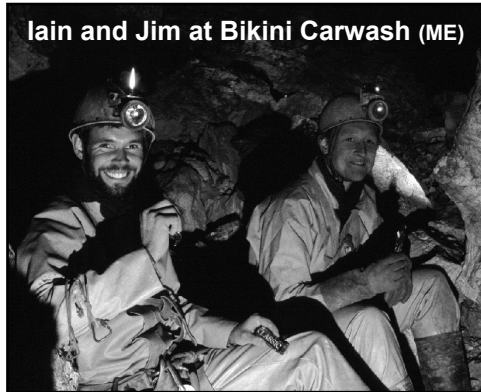


1997

Migovec Goes Deep



At the end of the 1996 expedition, the survey was left with question marks at every level. One of the promising leads, at the end of Exhibition Road, was Bikini Carwash, found by chance during a photography trip. This obscure rift, which quickly breaks out at the head of a pitch, was shown to Dejan Ristič. Over the following winter, Dejan and other Slovenian cavers, descended this 50 metre pitch, named XXX after the extra strong mints ("Are you tough enough to handle them?"). Below this they found Sajeta, a huge 90m shaft and, after further, small pitches, Pawoden, a 50m deep pot.

From the bottom of Pawoden, a gorgeous, active streamway cascades down a number of small pitches (Warriors for Mig) linked by beautiful meanders. Eventually they found a dry, sandy oxbow suitable for a camp. They didn't survey their finds, however, so the 1997 expedition started with great excitement, a rough hand-drawn sketch and a tale that Dejan's altimeter watch had indicated that the system was now about 600m deep.

The Slovenians, used to pushing deep caves at the weekend, favour a 40 hours, no sleep, (no problem!) approach. IC³ cavers, on the other hand, with a far greater range of ability and six weeks to spend on the mountain, arrived prepared for an underground camp. With knowledge of undescended shafts at -600m, we were keen to get down to business at the deep end of the cave. For the first few days of the expedition, dreams of awaiting discoveries were never far from our minds as we slogged up to the plateau with heavy rucksacks. While stopping to catch our breath, the faint roar of water resurging in the Tolminka valley could be heard a mile below. How deep was the cave? How much more was there left to find? Before long, tents were pitched, the bivvy was set up, carbide lamps were fettled... Another campaign was ready to begin....

Another objective in 1997 was to build further upon our good relations with JSPDT and to foster greater links with the local community. A well-received slide show was given by Mark and Andrej in Tolmin and we were interviewed on Slovenian national radio, discussing the latest developments under Migovec.

James Hooper and Jim Evans

Dear Jim,

Thank you very much for the copy of your expedition report. You seem to have had a good time. When are you going to start running out of caves?

*All the best,
Yours sincerely,*

**Letter from Sir Ronald Oxburgh
KBE FRS
(Rector of Imperial College)
4th October 1996**

We're in deep: Rigging down to -500m

The boys are back



My first trip of 1997 started off with Jan. Our intention was to rig the entrance series with 11mm rope (as it would be seeing a lot of traffic). With a 200m coil of brand new Marlow, in two tackle bags, we got tangled up at first until we started to lose some of it. Down the first two pitches, we found Mick heading up. He was in a party with Tetley and Oliver who were planning to start surveying the new pitches that the Slovenians had found (but not surveyed). They were not sure of their way because a dodgy traverse in the entrance series had not been rigged so they decided to wait for us to rig it before they carried on. Our rope made it to the bottom of Brezno Strahov and we used a bit of tat for the connection into Hotline. At this point, Tetley, Jan and I carried on to the bottom of Exhibition Road to dump gear and give Jan a chance to familiarise himself with the cave system.

Jim Evans

A first trip down M16

A group of us met up at Gladiator's traverse, taking a bloody long time to reach the other side. This was my first trip in the Migovec system and my first time with a 'borrowed' carbide helmet. Jim, Tetley and I (in blissful unawareness) decided to continue down to Bikini Carwash with bags of rope.

"So what's the rest like?"

Jim looks at Tetley who is grinning...

"Oh it's easy really! Only a few tricky bits here and there, nothing really."

So swinging out over a 70m abyss and trying to prussik with 200m of rope on your back is pretty standard. Titanic, well that's nothing. As for Spirit of Elvis...



Jan on the first pitch in M16 (Jackie Evans)

"Ah, this is fun," Tetley informs me giggling slightly.

Hmm Tetley, you worry me sometimes. It's all worth it when you reach the other side, take your harness off and head down, down, down Exhibition Road, the most amazing passage with caravan-sized boulders. XXX was checked out and then we headed out leaving rope and bolts.

The return is slightly more enjoyable, fun even? M16 goes on and on seemingly. Finally we pop out at the top. It's 3 a.m. and Tetley passes me a cigar-type cigarette. Cheers Tetley you star. Two new records... My deepest cave and longest trip to date.

Jan Evetts (logbook entry 25th July 1997)

Logbook Extracts 1997

"Pre-exp curry at 12L. Eight of us got out of it with 60ft hedgehog."

"Alva is a Troll."

"Catapult excitement while packing the van (this was only just poss.).... Pants goes wrong way down motorway in Germany.... Much patriotic singing, saluting and some flashing by Alva."

"My first camp trip, I was a little worried! The last camping trip in NCB was horrendous and I failed to get any sleep. By comparison the Hotel is 5..... once the music is on you almost forget that you are at -605m." - Mark*

XXX and the pitches beyond (Are you tough enough to handle them?)

Early one morning I had to get up to relieve a full bladder. Unfortunately Tetley heard me and stuck his head out of the door of his tent. With a stupid, really, really sick grin on his face he asked if I was ready to go back down the cave. Swear words, long and profound! It was only 6am. "At least let me have a crap first," which I did before struggling into my cold damp furry suit which still smelt sickly of sweat.

By 6:30am we were in the bivvy heating up some water for tea and preparing heavy bags of rope to carry down the cave with us. Just then a fuzzy blonde mop of hair popped over the edge of the bivvy followed by a huge backpack. It was Sarah. She had flown into Ljubljana the day before and got as far as the Shepherd's Huts. No-one else was up yet so we suggested she come caving with us. It wasn't hard to twist her arm.

So down we went, not exactly bombing down as we were pretty weighed down by heavy bags again, but faster than Tetley and I had been the day before at any rate. When we got to the top of Sajeta, we set the camp stereo going as Tetley and I were going to survey on our way down and that was going to take some time. Just below the top, the crack I was abseiling in opened into a huge chamber with a waterfall going down one side. It had a fantastic echo and was utterly huge. In all there were five rebelays, which took a while to re-rig (replacing dodgy 'homemade' Slovenian hangers) and survey. Eventually I touched the bottom. My legs racked of pins and needles from sitting in the harness so long. Still, it was fun with Tetley hanging above me, joking and offering good advice, and the music blaring a long, long way overhead.

Across the chamber was a narrow crack in the floor, the way on. This pitch was also rigged off one bolt so Sarah stayed behind to tidy up the rigging. Tetley and I continued on surveying and carrying multiple bags, now including the two we had brought down the day before. The cave was now in a completely new phase: we were in an active streamway, fortunately not too big. The rock was brighter and cleaner than higher in the cave and the passage was newer. After more re-rigging - cutting the rope at one point to get off and replacing dodgy bits of 'tat' with new rope - we found ourselves at the top of a 30m drop. You had to abseil down at a ridiculous angle to a bolt placed far out on the wall. A real beauty of a drop...

A fair way along we arrived at the 45m pitch named Pawoden, with a real difficult start-off. It was a free-hanging pitch for most of its way, a bit wet and not that nice. (Later, Tetley put a bolt in from a bit of rock sticking out on the far wall. This kept you drier, but involved some fun aerobatics to get to and from. I don't know how he was ever able to swing out that far to put it in, most impressive!).

By this time we had been on the go for about 12 hours, and had done a lot of surveying. We had a chocolate bar (our only meal of the day), left our bags and slowly made our way out. We had been down to about -500m, again a very productive trip, but a long 17 hours on the go. The next day I did not go caving.

Michael Playford



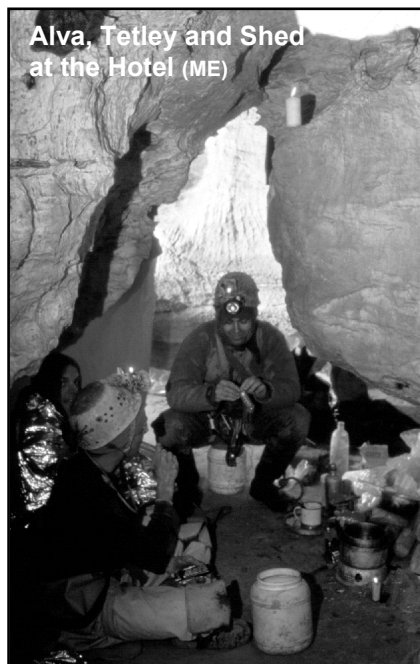
Michael Playford
in M16

"I forgot how much I missed this place - the squalor etc. but welcome the lack of mirrors and crass conversations... Bread and burgers for brekkie, I'm now building up to a toilet visit after one year of porcelain." - Iain McKenna

The first Imperial Camp at Hotel Tolminka

Oliver and I were on the first camping trip in 1997. Our plan was to re-rig and survey some of the streamway and set up the camp. At the bottom of Sajeta, a short series of rifts and pitches led us on to the head of Pawoden, a 45m metre shaft with a very nasty take off. Landing at the bottom of the pitch, I could see the names of Rok and Dejan scribed on the wall with carbide, the two Slovenians who got there the previous winter. Here, I met up with Alva and Tetley, who were waiting for us in an alcove by the pitch, with all the bags that had been dumped on the surveying trips. After fettling carbides and eating some food, Oliver arrived and we all headed down the rift with tacklebags to find the camping spot. It seemed a long time in coming and we kept debating on whether a few very unlikely spots were in fact the camp. None of them looked particularly pleasant though, so we carried on in the hope of finding something better. While we were negotiating this rift, we tried to think of a name for the camp, something that gave an impression of somewhere to hang out. We already had Club Mig up in NCB passage. Daren boasts a Café and a Restaurant.....so what to call this? Then suddenly Alva came up with it: "I Know.....Hotel Tolminka."

We were just beginning to wonder whether in fact one of the rock chambers we had dismissed half an hour back was in fact the camp when we arrived at a short wet pitch. Descending this, a traverse line took us round the side of a large wet pitch into a flat sandy alcove. In the centre of the alcove was an unopened can of Zlatarog beer (Dejan's favourite) - this was it then, we had arrived at Hotel Tolminka.



The next day Tetley and Alva set off to survey the 'Warriors for Mig' series (between Pawoden and the Hotel) while Oliver and I went to the fifty metre pitch beyond the camp to check out the rigging. It turned out that the pitch needed several extra bolts to avoid the spray. Oliver volunteered to do this, so I returned to pass the time at camp. As I waited, alone, I was suddenly overcome with the sense of isolation of the place. I switched on the tape recorder, it was a Beethoven tape I recognised from a previous camp and suddenly I felt far more at home. I had a chance to absorb the atmosphere of the Hotel. The passage was a narrow oxbow with a flat sandy floor and a roof that narrowed to a point. There were candles perched on any available ledge in order to try and give an overall lighting to the area; it had the effect of giving a kind of medieval atmosphere. Piles of bedding and dry furies lay strewn around the sandy floor in every corner and survival blankets were guyed up to try and reduce the draught. The constant noise of the waterfall going down Porcelain Pitch was almost soothing - although I'm sure it was playing havoc with my bladder control.

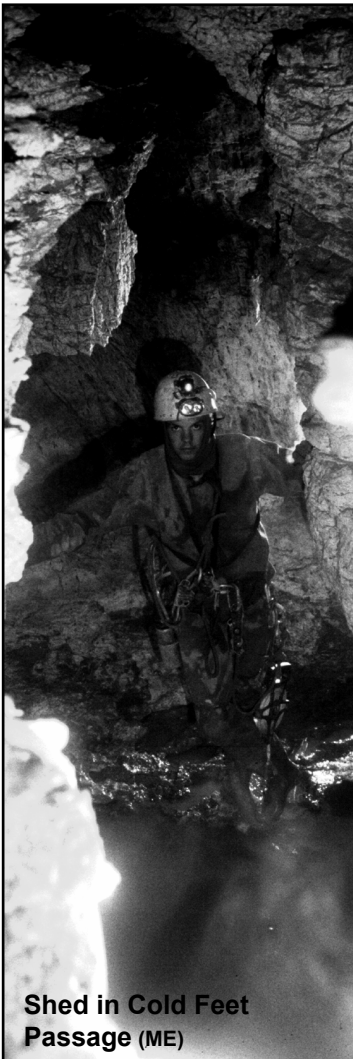
Alva had acquired a picture of a semi-clad German girl which was hanging from the ceiling - suitably entitled 'Regina' as it was next to a Union Flag that Mark had brought out in case we got to the K. Daren drums and bags of food were messily scattered around the meths stove. Another corner had a pile of ropes and hangers and a BDH full of carbide. Starting to shiver, I quickly put on a space blanket and lit the stove for a brew.

Oliver came back fretting that he had had some problem getting the bolt in because it was at such an angle. It had been well worth the effort, however, as it kept the pitch more or less dry. We then continued up stream, putting extra bolts in as we went, and caught up with Alva and Tetley just as they were finishing off their mammoth surveying trip. We headed out, putting one more bolt in at XXX and stopping for a brew at Bikini Carwash before exiting the cave.

Cold Feet Passage

It was soon my turn to go back in with Sarah and Goaty (a.k.a. Michael Rogerson). Down to the Slovenian limit and beyond. Goatee had never been deeper than about -150m and though apprehensive, he was willing to give it a go. Beyond Pawoden, there were eight pitches and lots of great caving before we got to the Hotel.

The Hotel was the perfect underground camp - dry with no breeze, small and intimate. The sleeping bags were laid around the walls on sheets of plastic and covered with space blankets. A cooking stove and bags of food were sitting in a central location. Around the corner, out of sight and smell, was the toilet, composed of plastic bags to crap into and twist tops. (Unfortunately they had brought the wrong sized bags down. Have you ever tried crapping into a sandwich bag?)



**Shed in Cold Feet
Passage (ME)**

After a late lunch of instant mash potatoes and a cup of tea, we set off to see what we could find. This was where it got strange. This offshoot passage led around the corner, past the dunny, to another streamway, running completely separately from the first. The 30m pitch before the camp remains undescended and could well be the way down to a kilometre depth, as could another dry passage branching off two pitches further up. (This passage, Wonderstuff, was later pushed by Oliver and Andrej for over 100m but then derigged to provide ropes for the bottom of the cave. Later it was pushed by the Slovenians to -937m).

Anyway, by going past the toilet and following the windy passage along, you get to the top of another 50 odd metre drop. The cave then enters a small, low passage angling down at a constant 30 degrees to the bedding plane. It's mostly tight, very wet and distinctly unpleasant. I was getting very bad vibes that it wasn't going to be worth following - it was just too awful. After a while, the passage became a belly crawl in the water (2° Celsius) and we decided that was enough for one day. We sent Sarah back to the big pitch below the camp to re-rig whilst Goatee and I surveyed back up. This took over an hour and was the worst surveying I have ever had to do. Moving slowly in those conditions, lying in the stream to get a compass bearing, is a guaranteed way to freeze, it was just awful.

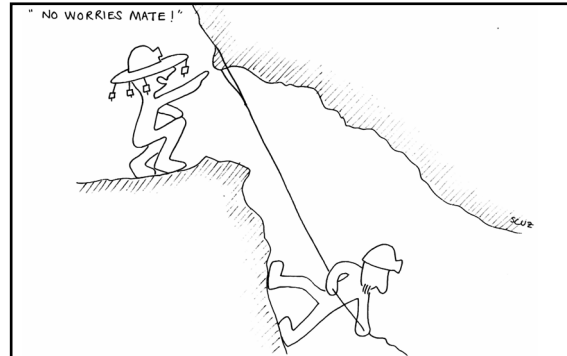
By the time we made it back to the big pitch, we had had enough. We met up with Sarah there, just as she spied an interesting hole. By clambering up to a ledge on the far side of the waterfall, we found ourselves in an old stream passage. The reason the passage we had just been surveying was so small and wet was because it was so new. If this was an old abandoned passage then it promised to be roomier, and more importantly....dry.

But we left it for the next day. As it was, it was about one o'clock in the morning by the time we got back to the camp. We stripped out of our wet caving gear, put on a layer of dry thermals and then sat in a circle around the stove making hot drinks and a meal of sorts. We had the tape player blaring to cheer us up, to drown out the waterfall behind us, and make us forget we were a very, very long way from the sun and safety. We also had a chocolate bar and a swig of vodka to try and send us to sleep. We were all exhausted, very cold and soon got into the sacks to sleep. Unfortunately, we had not worked out how best to wrap ourselves in the space blankets; the plastic sheets and sleeping bags on their own were not enough. As a result none of us slept very well, just lying there, cold, trying to recover as best we could.

In the end it was the person with the fullest bladder that had to get up first, and that happened to be me. So, after 10 hours in the sack, I started organising another meal for us, lumpy porridge with lots of sugar. Only when it was ready did the other two reluctantly get up. It took about 2 hours from when I first got up until we were all ready to go. It is very difficult to get yourself motivated under the circumstances and every job from crapping in a tiny plastic bag, to cleaning out and refilling your carbide lamp takes forever. Still it beats prussiking all the way to the surface to sleep and than having to turn around and come back in.

Eventually we were on our way with a fair haul of ropes and rigging gear to explore our dry way on – named Cold Feet Passage. It was everything we had hoped for. We sent Goatee on to the first pitch to try his hand at bolting (he had never done it before). Sarah and I stayed behind to tie in the survey from the previous day.

We linked up with Goatee just as he was finishing up, and a nice bolt it was too! (His next couple of bolts were not so crash hot, but as a wise old man once said to me “a bolt hanger will hide a multitude of sins”). Four or five more drops, a dodgy climb down and the cave levelled out a bit into a narrow serpentine shape which wound on for quite a way. Finally around a corner and through a hole was a short pitch, followed by a short pitch, followed by?....!



The cave had struck a fault line in the mountain and was now following it down at about 70° to the horizontal in a series of short drops. After a few of these we ran out of rope but could see the cave disappearing down the rift as far as our lights could shine. We were ecstatic, if only we had brought more rope down from the underground camp, we would have just kept at it until we dropped. We still had a lot of surveying to do, linking in our new bit of cave with the rest and that took ages. We did about 12 hours actual caving that day and again got back to the sleeping bags about midnight. It was a similar routine to the night before only we drank lots more vodka to try and help us sleep, sorted the bags out better, and were so much more exhausted that we all slept like logs.

The third day was the long haul out. Not something you look forward to enormously but something which has to be done just the same. You can't get a helicopter to pull you out from the bottom of a cave. Surprisingly, that day turned out to be one of the best caving days of my life. Just before leaving the camp, we played a song by The Stranglers called “Always the Sun”. It had just the right rhythm and was so optimistic that it played in my head the whole way up. It was one of those golden days where everything goes right, and you are relaxed and confident that everything is alright, where every movement is a sort of poetry, all in rhythm to your feelings and thought. My senses were heightened and I was just so enjoying myself despite the hard work and concentration, and the music in my head just sums up everything that is good in life.

We only had to take out one bag between us, which Sarah and I shared, containing our waste carbide and crap all securely wrapped up in a plastic drum. We were slow and steady; it took us about 6 hours to make it back to the sun. After seeing only darkness and grey colours for 3 days (it was a 57 hour trip) the contrast on emerging to the top of the mountain to see a beautiful sunset over Krn was just great.



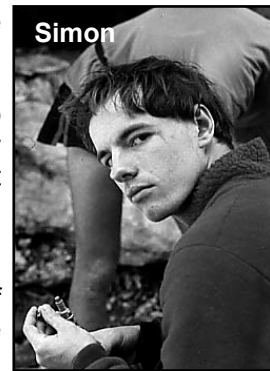
A 'colourful' Sunset over Krn

Michael Playford

Good not Grand and Glory Boys



Meanwhile, on the surface, we were unaware of the exciting progress down below. Four Slovenians, Andrej, Dejan, Milan and Simon, turned up in the evening intending to push the cave the next day. Milan was a new face to us; Simon told that he was the best caver in Slovenia. He spoke no English and his Slovenian had a more Russian hint to it. This, combined with his crew cut, large build and harsh feature made us all a bit wary of him. In fact we had no reason to be as he turned out to be very friendly.



The following morning, Andrej, Dejan, Milan and Oliver set off down the cave. Armed to the teeth with drills and explosives, they were intending to push the wet way below the Hotel and enlarge it with chemical persuasion (not knowing that the previous group had already found the Cold Feet bypass). Tetley and Simon slept during that day intending to go down in the evening. Colm and I planned to follow the next day.

On meeting the previous party in the cave, the plans of the Slovenians changed. Dejan and Milan, on a mammoth trip, pushed down Cold feet passage until they ran out of rope at around -850m. Meanwhile, Andrej and Oliver pushed the Wonderstuff pitch series above the camp. Using 9mm rope, they eventually reached the top of a pitch with the tantalising sound of water in the distance. Returning to the Hotel, they had to wait some time for the other group. Not caring about the availability of sleeping bags, Tetley and Simon had also turned up having heard the stories of Cold feet passage from Scuzzer et. al.

When Dejan and Milan returned to the Hotel, they grabbed a couple of hours sleep before heading out of the cave with Andrej. The remaining three, Oliver, Tetley and Simon were left with two possibilities. To carry on rigging down Wonderstuff or to push the deep end and possibly get to -1000m. Ever since I've known Simon, he has always been obsessed with the idea of a kilometre of depth. Indeed, we used to joke that the majority of his conversations with us consisted of the following spiel:

"Yes, of course.....
of course.....really.....really.....
.....to minus one thousand."

So I can imagine that at this point there was little option in his head of what to do. Wonderstuff was derigged (but not, unfortunately, surveyed) and the two hundred metres of 9mm rope was taken to push the end. A note was left in the camp:

"We have taken the rope and gone down to -1000m. We will need beds when we get back!"

Putting off the Shits



(To the tune of Putting on the Ritz)

When we're underground and we've eaten
One too many very hot bean stews
And we can't face taking off our kit

Uhgg - Putting off the shits

Now I'm really hungry but if I eat now
I may have a disaster
There's a pot of porridge that's calling

Uhgg - Putting off the shits

If I think about it I may drop one
Which dick put this Cat's Steven's song on?

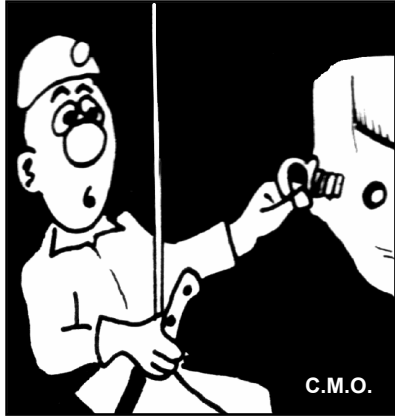
(Sing line of Cat Steven's -
I can't keep it in, got to let it out...)

We have developed a new technique
Juxtaposing the farts and the turds
Or to put in other words

Uhgg - Putting off the shits

(Composed at Hotel Tolminka 1997)

According to Oliver, Simon was like a man possessed as they headed down the steep sloping rift. Simon bolted madly while Tetley and Oliver followed on behind surveying. The cave was shooting down quickly. Excitement levels rose fast. Then suddenly, at -958m, the rift stopped. It was immediately apparent that there was no obvious way on here. Simon quickly became disappointed and pissed off and just wanted to head out of the cave. Solemnly, quietly, keeping their thoughts to themselves, they started to derig.



Meanwhile Colm and I had arrived at camp and found the note. We were excited at the prospect of the cave going deep, but at the same time we were a bit annoyed that there seemed to be a bid for glory seeking from the lads (and probably a bit disappointed that we were going to miss out on it). As we were ready to push at this point, we decided to head off and find them. There seemed to be a lot of short pitches and nice rift passageway. It wasn't difficult to see where the British rigging stopped and the Slovenian started because of the sudden economy of bolts! Also they use a kind of rawl bolt which is really quick with an electric drill (as the depth is not critical). The occasional piece of 8mm rope didn't escape our attention; we re-rigged this on our way up.

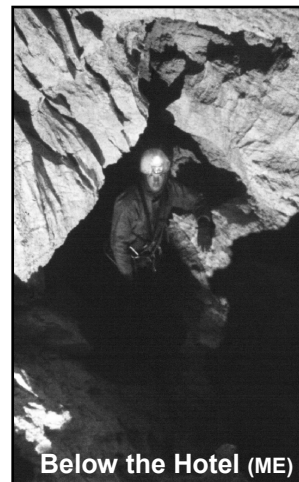
Below a few dry pitches, we could hear the distant rumbling of a stream. Soon the water joined us in a chamber area but quickly disappeared down a separate rift. After a further 100m of abseiling, we found the others derigging and listened as they related their tale of discovery and frustration. Simon was keen to call the area Good not Great, but back in England, Martin M^cGowan pointed out that Good not Grand was a more appropriate name. Tetley, Oliver and Simon headed back to the camp while Colm and I derigged the rest of the 200m length and took it up to the next obvious lead, the wet way, 100m further up the cave.

There was quite a bit of spray going down this rift, and the place was cold and draughty so we tried to avoid the water with careful rigging. At the same time, however, while one person was bolting, the other was getting cold under a space blanket. We negotiated the first pitch with some swinging and then placed the bolts for the next pitch. The lead looked promising, but it was by far the wettest thing I'd seen in the system and we had no idea how the area would respond in a violent thunderstorm on the surface, a major concern for future trips. We left the area at an undescended pitch and headed back to the Hotel. There, we found the other three sleeping soundly but using all the bedding. We woke them up and shared the gear around, unfortunately although there were five sleeping bags there were only four Karimats - so Simon and I ended up sharing one. A few hours later, Tetley and Simon prepared to leave the cave, but Oliver decided to sleep for an extra few hours. With hindsight this wasn't sensible, as he ended up exiting the cave alone and had bad nightmares about it the next night (no one else in his tent got any sleep).

After some sleep, Dave and Huggy arrived at the Hotel just as Colm and I were fettling our carbides back into action, while brewing a final cup of tea to the sound of music. Once we'd cheerfully exchanged news and filled the others in, we made a plan for the other two to push down the wet way while we surveyed the end of Cold Feet passage (it hadn't been surveyed properly) and caught them up. We named the bit we surveyed 'Glory boys' as a bit of a joke on the previous days exploits.

Once the surveying was finished, we headed back to camp and, as we felt reasonably fresh, we had a quick break and headed out of the cave. By the time we got to the entrance pitches we were completely knackered and moving slowly.

Jim Evans



The Bar of Bad Reputation



Nobody, it seems, really knows when or where the impromptu gatherings of all the young free souls at the River Soča will occur until just before they take place. We are lucky in that our Slovenian underworld contact - Simon - seems to have his finger on the pulse. At least once in every expedition we find ourselves at one of these clandestine sessions at an obscure location next to the River Soča, courtesy of his subtle directions.

Typically, we drop down from the bivvy to have a fortnightly wash in the stream near Ravne. Occasionally, if we are lucky and need some necessary urgent supplies from Tolmin, we take the bus down the twenty-six hairpin bends to the town and head straight for the pizza place. Necessary supplies can wait: pizza and beer come first.

"Hi Simon" we say, as he passes us in the pizza place, and then with hushed tones, "Is the Bar of Bad Reputation happening tonight?"

He furrows his brow, and looks shiftily from side to side. There is no one to overhear.

"Yea probly" he says.

Then again, he says "Yea probly" in response to almost every question we ask him.

"Turned up in Tolmin and joined the merry group (very merry in the bar of ill repute on Friday night). Spent Saturday at the Soča playing silly buggers..."

Hugh Penney

That's settled it then. We shall meet later when Simon has more of the details. We shall not be returning to the top of the mountain tonight, because we are going to be part of the Bar of Bad Reputation. We have learned through time, that this is a vital mid expedition event, to prove that we are relatively sane after all, compared to all the other revellers. Necessary urgent supplies will have to wait until tomorrow.

After being given the directions in return for a "Veliko Pivo", Simon either sculks off, or occasionally settles down in the back of the bus to accompany us to the secret location. We can always tell when we are approaching the Bar of Bad Reputation. There are lots of cars abandoned in strange places, and those that are seeking a place to be abandoned are usually being driven rather erratically.

It is only when we step out of the bus into the warm evening air that we can start to hear the beat of the distant music, and smell the aroma of the air. A dark walk through trees ensues, bumping into the occasional person or couple in the blackness, and then we are there. The silvery Soča river slips silently by - past bonfires on the pebble shore, whilst the beat gets stronger still. Hundreds of people are there, swinging from trees, or huddled in groups. Numerous huts sell bottled beer and we can tell that, with a combination of relief at surviving the caving and excitement at finding this place, it is going to be a messy night.



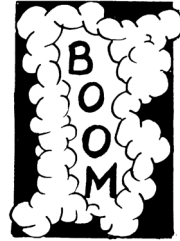
Nobody usually remembers much about what happens next. In the wee small hours, as we retrieve our sleeping bags, Tetley usually falls in the river. When we wake, the light reflecting off the river is blinding, and the location just a dry and dusty wood next to a loop in the river with picnic tables dotted around. Some people in Kayaks drift downstream and stare at the line of slumbering slug like shapes that are the bodies of those still in sleeping bags, despite the heat of the new day. It is time to go and shake off the shackles of alcohol consumption, because there are some necessary urgent supplies to buy, and much more caving to do.

Iain M^cKenna

A long way from a place of safety: The Rigging of FA999

We were travelling light, taking only one bag of rigging equipment down to the frontier of exploration. That makes for an enjoyable trip, Clewin's first ever below 200m. The cave was a dream: a series of clean fossil passages, pitches and dry rifts leading into a series of slanting pitches, rigged dry above a succession of clear gushing waterfalls in the deep active part of the Migovec system. Just magic. The rigging was neat and descent blissfully easy.

I was in the lead with Clewin and Mick following closely behind. Approaching the current end of the pitch sequence, I came across a stash of carbide and a bolting kit left on a ledge by the previous group. Opening the BDH container to check the contents I peered inside. There was a deafening bang and a ball of fire whizzed past my ears. This made me jump backwards and my companions a little concerned. However, as it was my eyebrows were unstirred and, after a round of jokes, we continued on down with the water. This junction was later named Kaboom!



It remained a thoroughly enjoyable bit of caving until we got to FA999. Beyond the last of the pitches we had been splashing merrily downwards in a winding stream passage for some distance. Suddenly the stream fell over a lip in the floor and went thundering into the darkness. This was the point where the previous group, (Dave and Huggy), had beat a retreat for the Hotel. There was already a badly placed bolt low down at the narrowest part of the pitch head and Mick and I had some disagreement as to whether we should rebolt it. I now concede, knowing that it was Huggy's first ever bolt, that rebolting was a concept worthy of some credit. However, it seemed to me, Dear Boy, a crumb extravagant at the time. Mick begrudgingly rigged it on our 9mm exploration rope and went down to drive in another bolt or two below, as best as possible out of the spray.

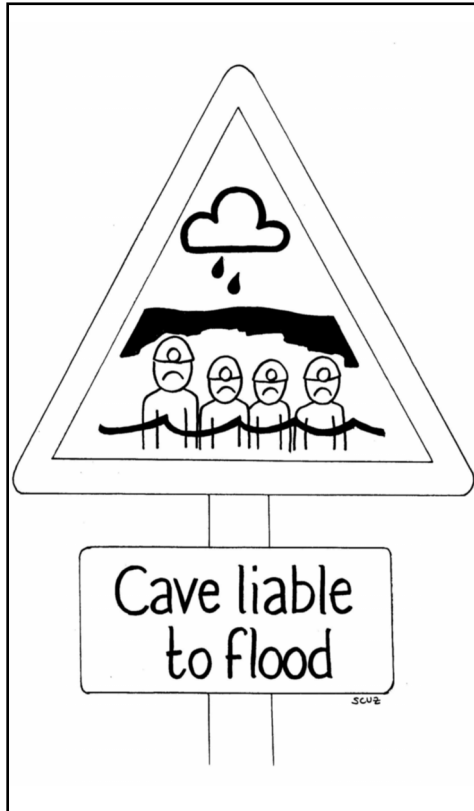
Clewin and I waited, and waited and got chilly, and waited and got grievously cold until I was sure that one or even two bolts just couldn't take that long to place, and then we waited an age more. There was nowhere comfortable to rest so we stood freezing in that draughty wet passage with the stream gushing over our Wellingtons trying to shiver as little as possible. Numbly impatient now, I periodically shouted down the pitch to try to get Mick to come back up but I couldn't understand through the din of the waterfall Mick's monosyllable replies. At least an hour later, I thought that I heard a "Rope Free!" Well, hurrah for that! Immediately Clewin went down, with me in hot pursuit.

Mick had put in three new bolts which took us down maybe 20 metres into the spray filled shaft of approximately 10 metres diameter. My ailing carbide was soon too drenched from spray to relight so I went onto my inferior electric backup. It was already too late when I realised that below, shivering, balanced in a tiny wet recess high in the shaft wall were Mick and Clewin, not best pleased for me to join them! The three of us huddled intimately in the niche for a few moments perilously attached to the same metre of 9mm rope all too aware of our plight. We needed a plan and we needed it quickly. Given that we were now around 920m below the cave entrance, it was far too serious a place for Clewin to practice his bolting skills. Instead, I passed the other two and descended below them. I hurriedly rigged a natural on a flake some distance across the pitch, (tricky without pulling the others off the ledge), and passed it so that they could now start to ascend to the pitch head. To rig the pitch as dry as possible I had to traverse again. Fortunately there were a number of prominent flakes at that height and, by traversing on my hands, I had soon rigged another sharp flake on the wall which positioned me most of the way across the shaft. Below this, right across on the furthest side of the pitch, I then awkwardly drove in a spit whilst partly dangling from my hooked up foot-loop to prevent me swinging away.



Shed heading down to FA999 (ME)

I was still cold and it was slow going. Mick was calling now but I couldn't make out his words. Finally, I rigged the bolt, descended a few metres to where another bolt was necessary to prevent rope wear and then started to climb. We weren't going to bottom this pitch today. I was already finding the first natural a little tricky to pass when my electric light suddenly dimmed and abruptly went out. This was not the time or the place for chronic light failure. The spray was raining down heavily and, with numb hands, I would have got hypothermia before I could have fumbled for my spare battery in my pocket and successfully changed it.



“Help!” I yelled as I tried to get my weight off my chest jammer. “I’ve got no light!”

There was a long pause before I got a reply from Mick. It sounded a bit like, “Scuz!...are...you... alright?”

“Heeelp!” I screamed again, “I’ve...got...no...light...and...I’m...about...to...die!”

Another pause. “Are...you...O.K.?”

This is an emergency, I thought, starting to freak. I’ve got to get out of here NOW. With an injection of adrenalin my chest jammer came free and I groped about for the next rope, clumsily passed the flake and anxiously tried to feel my way across the traverse, falling once or twice as my hands lost their grip and my feet slid away from below me. The next flake rebelay was also a trial of dexterity in the darkness and I passed this with a similar lack of speed, proficiency or style. But, once passed, I motored up that rope like there were rockets in my wellies, no turning back! I stopped briefly in the niche and managed to nurture a pathetic carbide flame before ascending to the top of the pitch.

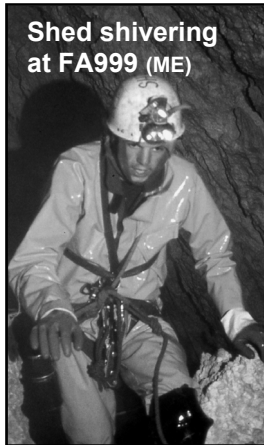
Although it kept going out, the glow from Mick’s carbide was soon sufficient to see the rebelay. The cold, cheesed-off Mick lent a helping hand as I struggled to get off the rope at the head of the pitch. We rejoined a shivery Clewin huddled up in a space blanket some distance above the crisis zone and, after fettling carbides, wasted no time in heading back to the Hotel. As we had all been chilled to the bone it took an age to warm through. Morale was desperately low and enthusiasm in total ruin.

Sarah Wingrove

“By the time I had hammered in the third bolt, I was exhausted. I had been hanging in my harness for well over an hour, my legs were a blazing pain of pins and needles from lack of circulation, my hands cramping from holding the bolt driver and hammering away with the hammer. I was soaking wet and freezing cold from the waterfall I shared the shaft with. The joys of expedition caving at -900m.”

Michael Playford.

Cold to the bone: The bottom of FA999



Shed and I went down to continue rigging FA999. The name and Mick's warning were foolishly disregarded in our initial hopes for extensions at depth. The top of the pitch seemed fine though a lot of water cascaded down beneath our feet. Ten metres below everything changed as I passed under the flow of the water. My carbide light kept going out. I lost my breath due to the cold. Spray filled the pitch, circulating in the strong draught. "Shed, Shed," I kept shouting, "Are you O.K.?" I think this was more for my own sake - I didn't want to be left alone. I could barely hear his reply over the roar of the torrent and the chatter of my teeth. At the bottom I could hardly strike a hammer. To continue we'd need a bolt before passing under the full flow of the water and down a short drop. We were already soaked to the bone. Somehow, with shaking hands, Shed managed to light a cigarette. We both smoked half, in one drag each.

Eventually, after an eternity, I dashed under the water, getting caught up in my S.R.T. gear while doing so, and put a bolt one third of the way in before going down. Shed followed. Christ it was cold. The water roared down a small tube. I didn't care. I was hypothermic. Shed was too. In fact Shed was blue with cold. This was serious. I knew this was how people died. "O.K. Let's get out of here." Make sure you keep thinking about what you're doing. Forget the survey. Forget to derig. We must get out. We left slowly, shouting to each other to be careful. Fucking awful call 999.

[Note: the following day Mark and Shed took photos while Alva and I found and surveyed most of Rameses. Then Alva heroically derigged FA999. The following winter (when there is far less water as the surface is frozen), the Slovenians returned to Z112 (Slovene for FA999) and pushed down another 100m to Water Hope, a sump at -970m].

James Hooper

Hugh's Guide to Basic Slovenian (for Caving Expeditions)

Pronunciation:

'c' is always pronounced 'ts'

'j' is always pronounced 'y'

But č= ch, š= sh and ž=zh (like French 'je' or 'Dr Živago')

Useful phrases:

Could I have? - Ali bi lahko

('Ali' introduces question, 'bi' would, 'lahko' can (easily))

Hello - dober dan

Good evening - dober večer

Good morning - dobro jutro

Please - Prosim

I like your goat - Imam rad vašo kozo

Help! Shed has farted! - Pomač! Šed je prdel!

How much for the little girl?

- Koliko za malo punco?

Trust me! I'm a caver! - Verjemi! Sem jamar!

He's crazy! - Je lor! (pronounced yeah lor)

This is a hold-up! Give me all your cats!

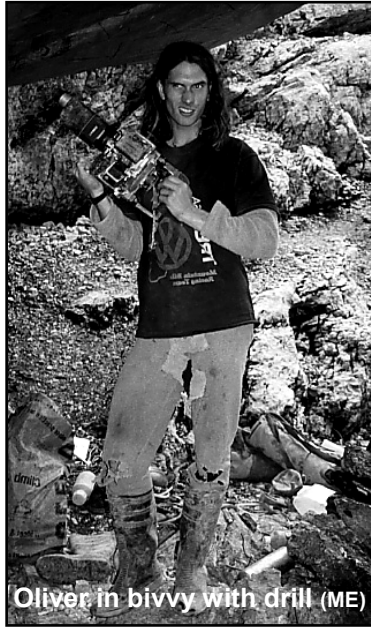
- To je rob! Dej mi vsi vašr mačke.



Hugh Penney (from logbook)

Rameses and Limestone Cowboys

On the FA999 de-rig trip, Alva and Tetley also discovered Rameses, a small crawl leading off higher up in Cold Feet passage. A small tight rift off to the side led to an aven with water coming in and a wet passage to the head of a pitch, this way looked promising and they surveyed their way back to the main cave.



Set to continue this work, the next camp was Goaty, me, Oliver and Clewin. Goaty and I set off first and headed down to the top of FA999 to haul the rope up to Rameses to enable pushing of this area. The plan was for Oliver and Clewin to push down the pitch at Rameses while Goaty and I explored upstream of the source of the river going down to FA999. Our trip was not helped by the fact that Goaty had a bit of a bowel problem and we had to stop on a number of occasions while he frantically removed his kit to fill a small plastic bag. We followed up stream which, after an initial boulder choke, quickly developed into a wide, steeply descending rift. Climbing upwards, we continued, surveying as we went, until eventually we were unable to climb further without the use of bolts. We called this area Teotihuacán which is the Mayan for 'The Place where Gods are Born'.

Meanwhile Oliver and Clewin had been pushing down two pitches and had ran out of rope. We met Clewin at the Rameses junction returning to retrieve some rope to carry on rigging down, he sounded very excited...

"Looks like we've found a 40m pitch it's really opening up."

We followed him down to take a look. After two pitches we got to the rift junction.

"Oliver is just down there, there are pitches going down everywhere but we have chosen the best one."

"Ok," I Said, "looks interesting, have you looked up in the other direction from the rift?"

"No we haven't had time - we're going down."

"Ok, we'll have a look at that while you are then," I responded.

After walking through a waterfall on the other side of the passage, the way on continued as a stooping sandy passage with pitches going down. It carried on for quite a long way and had a howling draught. We were getting quite excited at this discovery. It seemed strange to find such a long horizontal passage at this level. At the end we got to a short pitch - but the cave seemed to continue beyond. We decided to survey what we'd found as time was now getting on.

"This has to be called Paradox passage," said Goaty. I agreed. By the time we had finished, the other two had bolted down their pitch and we decided to join them. A spacious 40m drop led to another 'awkward to rig' pitch. The noise of thundering water could be heard beyond. We gave the surveying kit to the other two so they could survey 'Oliver and Clewin's stonker' (later renamed 'Limestone Cowboys'). Goaty and I weren't back at camp for more than an hour when the others turned up. They had had a light failure and decided to leave the surveying to another day (and another party as it turned out!).

On the final camp, a large group of us finished off the surveying and derigged. Four of us camped (Goaty, Alva, Clewin and me) and two people came down for a day trip (Mark and Oliver). As the camp was being dismantled, we kept the tape recorder running and listened, once again to the 'Last night of the Proms tape.' It was quite a surreal experience to be preparing to leave the damp and cold cave while having our spirits raised by 'Rule Britannia'.

Jim Evans

Higher Level Leads

In parallel with the exploration based at Hotel Tolminka, there was also a considerable amount of higher level activity (in the cave I mean, not just Alva's talk of philosophy). Over the last two years we had slowly become aware that we had to understand the cave in terms of a complex system rather than as a single stream/fault controlled pothole. With this in mind, an early priority was to rig Ta Mokr and survey the huge, important, Galactica chamber.

Titanic Pitch in Level 2 was named for the obvious reason that it was "going down." Ironically, it took a year before Clewin, Oliver and Colm descended this fine 30m pitch through the passing drips. This led immediately to a second 30m drop and then to a spectacular 80m free-hanging shaft, named Britannic. An excited Colm threw rock after rock down into the blackness.

After returning with more rope and descending this beast, an awkward rift led to a further 30m pitch. Surveying their way out, Clewin and Oliver once again had light failure (this pair were jinxed!) and limped their way to the surface to find a rescue party on their way in. Still, the White Star series (named after the company that built the fated ships) was surely a promising new lead for the following year.

On two trips with Tetley, Mick and Hugh, I returned to the area in M16 below Brezno Strahov which I looked at with Malcolm and Frank in 1994. In 1996, while looking for the connection between M16 and M18, Tetley and Andy 'Trousers' had also visited this area and found one or two passages leading off. As it seemed to be heading in the wrong direction they left it and it wasn't until a year later that we finally got round to revisiting the area. Andy had described the area as having lots of bat shit in it, so it was always referred to as 'Bat Shit Passage'.

On the first trip with Tetley, we surveyed our way to a large boulder choke chamber and explored leads off this. One of these was a climb up in the roof leading to a large passageway which looked like it was going on. When we arrived here, we shook hands, grinning, thinking we'd made a big discovery. Round the corner however, the passage ended almost immediately in a climb up, a little bit disappointing. We called this area 'Ridum Lawnmower' after a book we'd all been reading. Later Mark climbed this pitch and found another more difficult climb almost immediately.

A few days later with Hugh and Mick, we followed up one of the inlet rifts. Climbing up some tight pitches, we passed a flat-out squeeze to a pitch which seemed to drop into the rift. Hugh pushed this for a while; it seemed to be going back into the known cave although we never pushed it to the end - I think we ended up calling this Onion Bhaji inlet as we were barfing them up all day. There are no obvious ways on in this area and no bat shit has yet been found.

Elsewhere off Hotline, Alva and Clewin investigated the Goodybag lead that Mark and I had found the previous year. They descended the first pitch, which was about 25m to a second smaller pitch (Baddy bag) this ended in a flat floor and a very horrible looking crawl at the bottom (Body Bag).

The Pits

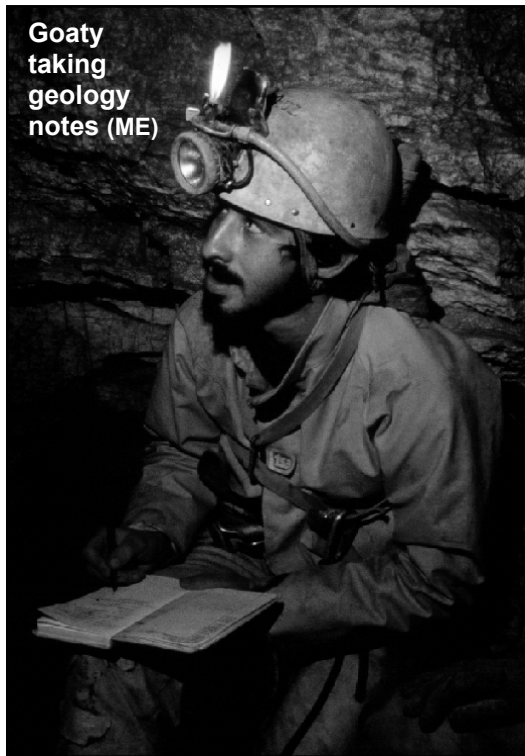
Once jammed in the crawl
We found no naturals at all
So with drill in hand
And easy bolting as planned
We began rigging Goody Bag "the
small"

But things were not easy
The drill bit too weeny
And out on the pitch
Where the rocks were shit
Rigging became rather scary

From the bottom the way on
Was a meander going down
And we rigged from a rock
Which when gently struck
Resounded like a bell - with a
dong

The two pitches from here
Were circular I swear
But what looked good from the top
From the bottom of the drop
Simply ended without flair.

Clewin Griffith and Alva Gossan
(logbook 02-08-1997)



Shed and Clewin dropped some of the large shafts off Exhibition Road. Gladiators traverse turned out to be part of the Mig Country pitch. Challenger turned out to be blind, although a passage half way down led to an alternative way into Exhibition Road.

My last trip in 1997 was with Alva, derigging and carrying out from Bikini Carwash. We decided to have a good look at Exhibition road on our way down. We got quite enthusiastic, trying all the various ways and soon managed to lose track of time. It was worth it however, as one of the last things we found was a small passage leading to a pitch, and a 2m stalagmite - a rare find on Migovec. At the bottom of the pitch, a passage was clearly visible, leading off away from the main direction of Exhibition road. This seemed to be another sound lead for 1998 to add to the collection. On exiting the cave we found the others had been a bit worried, as there was now no more caving kit on the mountain for them to come and look for us with!

The last four years have been a great adventure for everyone involved - and there are more leads now than ever – when Andrej said to me a few years ago ‘this mountain is hollow’ it seems he was right...

Jim Evans

Further Logbook Extracts 1997

*“Went down shaft near the connection, following the draught. Two pitches lead back in to M16. Named WOFT (waste of F***ing Time).” - Jim*



19,970 B.C.

“This story goes back to the 3rd century after the ‘Great Alliance.’ The three millennia of feuding between the Goat nations and the Trolls (referred to in the old folk story ‘The three Billy goats gruff’) precedes this era by c600 years during which the trolls climbed out of the river and re-established... The original feuding is still present but has been masked by Post-Modern Capitalist Mass Culture.” - Alva



1997 A.D.

“You find a blowing hole. Do you (a) pretend you saw nothing and go to the Soča? (go to 2), or (b) push (go to 3)” - Alva (the beginning of a ‘choose your own caving story’ entitled ‘Shag or be Shagged’).

“Tetley is a strange boy. He has done a lot of camping underground in his time but has a philosophy never to crap in a plastic bag. To see him emerge from underground after a multi-day trip, face contorted in agony, tearing off his gear in a desperate urge to relieve his bowels is really quite amusing.” - Michael Playford

The Lost World

Hotline was normally trooped through on the way down to the deep pushing front. It does have several interesting features, though, and bears many similarities to NCB passage in M18. They are both of similar size and of similar rock, covered in some kind of black deposit (the current theory is that it is some kind of soot). Hotline and NCB are roughly in the same line. They are both full of a very cold draft and are often foggy.

At the top end of Hotline, the passage seemed to continue on the other side of a large pitch (which dropped back into M16). As we'd discovered that in System Mig it was often best to traverse rather than go down – this seemed to be a good place to look for leads. Only one problem though – getting across 'The Trap'. The major technical problem was the quality of rock and the lack of belay points. The only possibility – resort to psychological belays – if you believe in them they don't fail (and if you don't believe in them cling on for dear life).

Facing the pitch, a narrow ledge was followed about halfway round on the left. The rope was 'attached' to several boulders on the floor of Hotline in order to get a 'reasonable' belay. I managed to convince Alva that this was the case anyway. From this point in, it was decidedly dodgy. Alva rigged some kind of knot onto some kind of spike and kept going. The ledge became almost non-existent before ascending a steep and slippery slope. Finally on the other side, Alva stopped and I worked my way around – trying not to use my cows-tails at all.

The passage was similar on the far side, although it climbs up at a steeper angle. We decided we would explore first, and survey out. The passage can be followed up gradually reducing in height to a series of low chambers. Several rifts joined the passage at various points, many of them ascended quite steeply. It was clear that we were not so far below the surface. Most of these passages when followed became too tight or were full of rock – they had collapsed. There was still quite a draft – but nothing like that present in Hotline.

We were about to turn back, when Alva discovered a crawl from the bottom of a small pit in the corner of the chamber. I had dejectedly started preparing the notepad for the survey out when all of a sudden, Alva re-appeared excitedly. I followed and we crawled for about 5 minutes. We could not believe our luck - it started to open up into a sizable passage. At this point we were so pleased we just ran along it shrieking with joy. We paid just enough attention to notice a large hole in the floor, and not fall down it. It had a rope round it on the right hand side! Back down to earth with a bump but we could not help but see the funny side – we had rejoined the original passage. Having exhausted all the leads we surveyed what we had found and headed out for dinner.

Since Alva rigged in I got to derig – which was nice! When I was safely back on the other side of the horrific climb I contemplated the sad fact that no one would ever go there again. It would be stupid to cross such a traverse knowing there was nothing on the other side.

We left the cave for tea and cakes – and found Tetley and Mark huddled in the bivvy alone. It was freezing cold and very dark. Apparently there had been a bad storm and that lightning had struck metres from the entrance to the bivvy. There was somewhere more dodgy than that traverse after all! It was time to consider a 'doss' trip to Tolmin.

Tim Wright (AKA Shed)

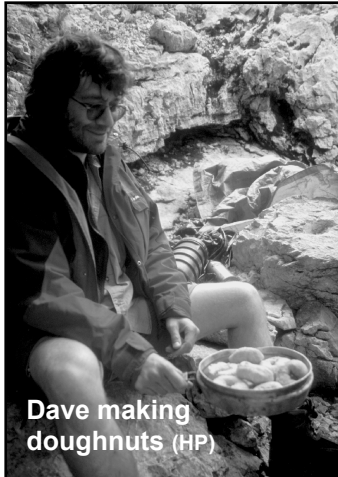


Relaxing outside, Andrej's building in the former barracks in Tolmin (DW)

Onion Bhajis and Deep-fried Mars Bars

Having finished surveying Bat's hit, Mike, Jim and I went to look at Ride-on Lawnmower, deciding not to climb it because we thought we'd like to give someone else the excitement. And if you believe that you'll believe anything.

We returned to the chamber and, after some furling, headed off over a rift, traversing a couple of areas of loose rock. After 40m or so the rift ended but there was a way on through a flat-out bedding crawl that dropped 3m into a small streamway. We got down (funky!) and wriggled off along an attractive meandering stream for miles, into galleries decorated with beautiful crystals. Sorry, just my imagination running away with me: it ended at a 3m drop after about 30m.



The name "Onion Bhaji inlet" comes from the food that fuelled the exploration. We had lived almost exclusively off bhajis for two days. The expedition diet seemed to vary wildly from the relatively healthy to the frankly, deadly. Before I got there they had been deep-frying Mars bars!!! I think the Evans boys must have been behind this as it's a renowned Scottish delicacy. We also made a lot of doughnuts. (It must be understood that you really crave fat when doing lots of exercise, this was not greed!). The only trouble was that the doughnut dough kept growing until it started to look like the scene in Woody Allen's *Sleeper*, where he uses too much pudding mix. The first night we ate some, but by the next morning the dough had just filled the wok again, we were only just able to keep pace with it. In the end we managed to eat it all before the dough took over the whole camp, but it was a close run thing.

In all seriousness, appetising food and a good camp are of vital importance to the success of any expedition. It might sound frivolous to be deep-frying things up a mountain, and it involves some effort in carting the gear up there, but it is actually well worth the effort in terms of morale and, well, happiness!

A comfortable camp is also a pre-requisite to a successful long expedition. Obviously on a short recce you can't carry so much up the hill, but on a six week trip you can afford to make yourself comfortable. The effect of this is that when you are on your way back to camp after a hard trip, you are actually on your way home.

Frivolous activities are also a good way to pass the time (Can a sweepstake on the number of flies to get stuck on the flypaper be called frivolous?? By the way, if no-one wins the sweepstake there's a roll-over jackpot the next day). Other activities included "hunt the dormouse" as these endearing creatures were interpreting the rules of property rather too liberally vis-à-vis the food. Animal impressions are always a good standby when trapped up a mountain for weeks on end with unusual people - Alva and Shed both got quite good at doing marmot impersonations:



Despite this foolery, I was sometimes amazed to hear the conversation round the camp go off into deep philosophical discussions about this or that, though it always lapsed back into the lowbrow pretty soon.

Perhaps we'll deep-fry the dormice next year....

Hugh Penney

System Migovec Survey 1997

