

2003

“Despite the gap of two years, bivvy life and the rules of ‘comf’ came flowing back, like a collective unconscious memory.” **Martin McGowan**

By the time the summer of 2003 came around, an expedition was eagerly anticipated. Jim and Mark were out early to set up the bivvy and collect water. A high-top hire van was stuffed with all the necessary gear and the guitar of the new fresher, Rik. Going out as an innocent first year, he was soon indoctrinated into the ways of the club and found himself at the -600m pushing front from the very beginning. The Bivvy had a new musical dimension with him present; songs and classical guitar around the campfire became the standard way to while away an evening.

The discovery of Friendship Gallery two years previously and the sheer scale of the cave necessitated camping once more. ‘Camp X-Ray,’ at the beginning of Friendship Gallery, was the chosen location, with a snug two-bed camp built upon the crumbly sand. So arid was this fossilised passage that a hung up furry would partially dry overnight. In general, the method used was a one-night camp, pushing on day one while still fresh from abseiling the epic pitch-series, leaving the second day for a slow and steady exit.

In 2001, the rope had been left in the cave, stowed above the pitches in dry locations, making the initial rigging to the pushing front very quick. This tied in with the new philosophy of four-week expeditions that Clewin had decided upon to avoid spreading the manpower too thin. The weather was also, by all accounts, fantastic. Though Clewin kept his new down jacket on hand (bought after the horrors of 2000), the sun shone on and on.

Jarvist Frost

Andy, Shed, Tetley and Martin relaxing at the ‘Sunset Spot’




“My original plan was this: Go surfing with a bloke called Liam for 3 weeks in Devon, get straight on the train back to London and then hop in the Migovec-bound van. Little did I know, innocent as I was then, what adventure, mystery and squalid-ness lay ahead...”

The start of “The Tale of Rik’s Voyage to Tolmin,” an unfinished 6 page logbook epic

The Zen of Mig 2003

Clewin Griffith (Expedition leader 2003) writes at the start of the expedition logbook:

Deep is better than shallow
Horizontal is better than vertical
Surveyed is better than pushed
Caving is better than carrying
Carrying is better than lounging around
Camping trips are better than epic trips
Union/Laško* is better than Laško/Union*
 *delete as appropriate



Deeper is better than shallow.....

A few bolts more: Rerigging Gardeners' World

I wanted to get caving as soon as possible, partly to get some momentum going, and partly to start collecting caving points which I could trade for days off later on. I headed for GW under the rumble of thunder and patter of rain that signalled the start of a veritable drenching. The thunder was still audible from Birth Canal pitch. I thought I might be kept relatively dry underground but it wasn't to be. Laurel, which is normally a bit drippy, turned into a shower of ice-cold water so I was glad to get down to the relative dryness of the Urinal series. To warm myself up, I decided to put in a bolt on the first pitch of the series. ERROR.

I hammered the rock first and it seemed pretty solid so I started tapping away. The bolt went in fairly slowly; I rigged the Y-hang and descended. Just as I was reaching the floor, there was a twang and a falling of rocks, one of which bounced off my shoulder blade. My presence was clearly not wanted by the cave god so I made a swift exit. The rock which had contained my new bolt was no longer there.

Clewin Griffith

Old Lagisms (A Lexicon of Bivvy Vernacular)

Powdered Cow	Dried milk powder
Vitaminski	Powdered vitamin sugary fizzy drink
TVP	Rank Soya meat substitute
Double Rumski	Double strength Slovenian rum flavoured alcohol (75% by volume)
Vodski	Vodka
Slop	(Cooked) Food
Shed	Dangerous wild beast found on Slovenian mountains, occasionally found looting nearby villages
Sunset	Cane up
2 nd Aid	Pills for hypochondriacs
Old Lag	Experienced member of ICCC aged 25+
Schonky	Blanket adjective used to describe anything dodgy, dangerous, loose or frightening, especially in caves
Twatty	Adjective used to describe sections of cave which are tight, annoying, unnecessarily awkward or unimpressive
Faff	To laze, to waste time or take part in pointless labour
Eyy-Oh	All purpose non-descript salutation
Blighty	Britain
Comf	Noun used to describe comfortable materials to sit or lie on, in particular, it describes chopped up bits of carrymat to sit on in the bivvy
Semtex	The cheapest cheese money can buy; on which the expedition lives
The Orb	The Sun
Clag	What clouds look like from the inside when enveloping the mountain
Blue cloud	Patch of blue sky on a day of unrelenting clag

Rik Venn

Only Five Bags Each: The setting up of Camp X-Ray



Everything went like clockwork as Colm and I made our way down to 'A Fistful of Tolars'. Then we saw the mountain of tacklebags waiting for us - merely five each. This wasn't a serious problem on the next few pitches as we rigged the rope and then zipped the bags down the line. The bags caused a major struggle through 'Pink' with its thin rifts and squeezes but eventually we made it down to Friendship Gallery. When I arrived, Colm was busy flattening a pile of rock and mud into a platform for us to sleep on and, in what seemed like no time, we were encased in fleece and buffalo bags. Dreams of unexplored passage helped ease the discomfort of our rocky perch.

At about 10am the following morning, we heard the jingling and jangling of the SRT kits of the two Slovenian cavers, Robert and Božo. They were impressed by the camp, even more so when we turned on the tunes (admirable selection by Tetley). Eventually we headed down to Falls Road at which point the Slovenians set off for the end of the gallery. There was an excellent bonhomie atmosphere as both teams wished each other success. Once down the Falls Road, we quickly reached the known end and extended it into a very tight rift. The Lower Falls Road is thus a No Go area controlled by the Inter Rift Army and needs lots of Semtex to progress.

Martin McGowan

Bring on the Drill

...suddenly the horizontal tunnel became a deep pitch - muddy and full of stones. Unpleasant indeed for anchoring the rope, we were very glad indeed that we had with us our old friend Mr. Bosch! In a short time we had rigged the upper part of the pitch. While I drilled the last traverse bolt I heard a familiar noise of 'bling fling kleng...' - my sky hook! Some English cavers later found it while surveying and christened the pitch in its honour. They brought it out and it still waits for me with Fratnik in Tolmin.

Finally rigged, I started my descent, arriving all too soon at the knotted end of the rope. Below I saw a canyon with an underground river flowing past. A cavers nightmare - if only I had more rope! A lot of strong words were heard on that pitch.

Bogomir 'Božo' Remškar

The Big Rock Candy Mountain

Camping underground ranks among the most unnerving experiences of my life. Surrounded by small candles and lulled to sleep by the Blackadder soundtrack on the camp stereo, we gradually drifted off. Without a watch it's impossible to know how much time passes underground so when Clewin and I awoke it could have just as easily been six hours later or sixteen. All I knew was that when I woke up and opened my eyes the surroundings went from black to pitch black. We switched on a light, had some breakfast and sugary tea and set off to reach the bottom of the Really Big Pitch that had been half descended by Robert and Božo.

The pitch, named 'Big Rock Candy Mountain' after the traditional American folk song on Tetley's compilation album, was later found to be around eighty metres deep and I can't describe the feeling as my feet touched the floor. We went on to discover around 200 metres of an underground stream, turning back only when running low on time. We finally made the surface at around five in the morning, starving and absolutely shattered.

Rik Venn

In at the deep end: An introduction to 'Camp X-ray'

The phrase "dropped in at the deep end" seemed particularly appropriate to me as Tetley and I kitted up at the bivvy. We were the third team to check-in to 'Camp X-ray' and I was fairly nervous. Earlier in the week I'd made a load-carrying 'bounce' trip down to Fistful of Tolars, my first trip into Gardeners' World and my first below 200m. This time it was getting even more serious....my first camping trip....my first pushing trip....my first trip below 450m. Still, this was the reason I'd jumped at the chance to come out to Slovenia - it was a brilliant opportunity for me to experience true alpine expedition caving. Before leaving the UK, I'd read a draft report on the current status of exploration in Gardeners' World and so the cave had already adopted a form of familiarity with me. This, I was to discover, is dangerous, as what the report can never actually convey is the utter enormity of the system. My previous trip had already forced me to think on a much grander scale than that which I was used to. The big pitches are awe-inspiring in size and truly a sphincter clenching experience to descend. Needless to say, I was a much more humble caver when preparing to commence this camping trip.

At about noon, Tetley and I bid our adieu to the sun and lowered ourselves into the entrance series. I had a few moments of rising panic on the first re-belays at the top of Pico, but the God-fearing hymns 'sung' by the Reverend Tetley from above helped me on my way down. After passing 'A Fistful of Tolars', I was now descending into new territory, the "Pink Series." I was struck, once again, by how isolated you are in a deep cave like this. There's only you, your partner and the surrounding rock to keep you company. Unlike mountain climbing, there is no easy escape and there is no method of communication with the outside world. Sometimes it was hard to keep these thoughts from praying on my mind.

Why Pink?

The pitches leading down through "Pink" are interesting from a geological viewpoint. The pink rock that lends the pitch series its name might well be a fault breccia. A fault breccia is formed by the grinding action of two rock masses against each other during a movement along a fault. The breccia in the Pink chamber consists of sharp angular pieces of white Triassic limestone embedded in an orangey-pink matrix. This was very much like the brecciated rock I found on the surface along the line of a thrust fault; leading me to speculate that this section of the cave was exploiting a similar fault.

James Roberts

We eventually descended Zimmer and followed the muddy gallery at the bottom to Camp X-ray. I was unsure what to expect, and was very pleasantly surprised. The sleeping area had been covered with blue tarpaulin to protect it from the draught, and a cooking area was set up next to it with a stereo directly behind. Apart from offering welcome 'creature comforts' such as a hot cup of tea and a bowl of warm soup, the camp was also a psychological haven that helped to drum out my growing sense of isolation. Tetley demonstrated the effect that the stereo has in raising morale by turning it off. As the silence encroached back into camp, so did the barely repressed fears that had been increasingly been nagging me since -400m. We quickly turned the tape player back on.



Eventually, we left the camp and headed off down Friendship Gallery in search of Clewin and Rik, the previous tenants of Camp X-ray. We passed the series of hand-lines they'd installed the previous day over particularly slippery areas of the passage and Tetley reflected on how not so very long ago it had been pristine and unscarred. We suspected that the others had descended a large pitch at the end of the gallery that been partially rigged by a couple of Slovenian cavers the previous night. Eventually we rounded a corner near the end of the passage and found a particularly knackered-looking Clewin sitting between some boulders waiting for Rik to come up the pitch.

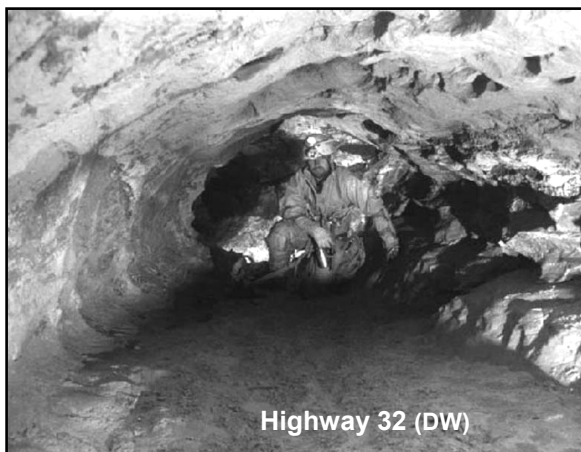
After the usual greetings, the more important discussions regarding what lay at the bottom of the pitch ensued. It turned out that the pitch was pretty hairy, and some of the earlier rigging could be improved. However, at the bottom there was at least 200m of storming streamway ending in a short pitch. Even more excitingly, it looked as if a continuation might be going off in the direction of M16.....therefore a possible link!! Our spirits were fairly high at this point, though mine was soon dampened by the news that Rik had accidentally left the tape measure behind....therefore no surveying had been done of this new-ground. It looked like our trip was thus to be a "surveying" trip. My spirits dropped further when Rik appeared over the pitch-head as white as a sheet with eyes out on stalks. It looked to me like that pitch might be very hairy indeed!

After bidding farewell to Clewin and Rik, Tetley began to descend the pitch. Soon the call "rope-free" was heard and I began to lower myself over the side. A very muddy start on 9mm rope over a large "mud-supported" slab of limestone soon got me sweating. Then Tetley bid me "go-back", as he wanted to re-bolt a rather frightening looking re-belay. Curled in a ball for warmth at the strongly draughting pitch-head passage, Tetley called out for me to start singing loudly, as he was about to do something scary. Obliging I started out with my best "Jerusalem" and continued with various other extracts extending from Neil Diamond to Monty Python. I thought he'd finished with the "scary-bit" and so was now singing purely for my own amusement. Suddenly there was a cry "Sing loudly....now's the scary bit!", followed by a sound that sounded distinctly like someone falling down a pitch and a cry of "Oh Fuuuuuuck!".

Silence.... More silence... followed by a flurry of equally unpleasant and alarming thoughts from me.

"Don't worry....I'm OK!"From the depths came Tetley's voice and an audible sigh of relief from me. It turned out he'd freed the dodgy Slovenian bolt by hanging on a ledge and falling/swinging out on the rope over an 80m drop. Rather him than me! After a further twenty minutes of faffing and bolting from Tetley, I was free to descend. My nerves were still jangling from thinking I'd heard Tetley's recent demise. Quite frankly, for me, it was a horrible pitch. Mud, loose boulders, precipitous drops, 9mm rope and free-hanging rebelays at -600m. I was very glad when my feet hit solid ground.

After a quick break at the bottom we headed off to investigate the streamway. Our first choice was to follow the active streamway, but this soon tightened up and became impassable. We realised there must have been something else that had got Clewin and Rik so excited, so wriggled back the way we'd come and found a fossil streamway above the active one. This one was much more like it, commodious by comparison, with a beautiful oxbow containing a smooth sandy floor which had been untouched for thousands of years. We reached the small pitch at the end of the streamway and a quick look down revealed a 15m drop with the passage continuing into what appeared to be a larger chamber. It was quite exciting to think that my light was only the third to have ever illuminated this place. We decided to survey back from here.



Initially it was quite good fun, and as a geologist I was used to taking compass and clino measurements. However the passage was long and sinuous....and therefore took ages to survey. It was getting later and later, and we were getting colder and colder. **Eventually, after thirty two survey legs, we found ourselves at the bottom of 'Big Rock Candy Mountain.'** It was now about 2.30am! With a strange set of emotions I began to ascend the pitch. I was knackered and relieved to be heading back to camp; but I was also pretty nervous....

Eventually, utterly traumatised, I crawled into Friendship Gallery. The pitch had scared the heck out of me....and I really wasn't sure if I wanted a repeat performance the next day. Back at camp, Tetley began to cook up some food. Blackadder was put on to the camp radio and, after a swig of Limoncello, my nerves began to stop jingle-jangling around. In temperatures barely above freezing we stripped off our clothes (oh the pain) and then donned layer after layer of dry clothing and wriggled into two sleeping bags (oh the pleasure). Even after all this, sleep eluded me for hours. I suspect it was due to the strangeness of trying to relax 550m below the surface, though having a loudly snoring Tetley beside me might have had something to do with it!

Even when camping on the surface, getting out of your sleeping bag is a painful procedure; getting out of the dry warmth and putting on freezing cold and wet caving outfits demands hours of mental preparation and hot tea! Fortunately Tetley had already rustled up an excellent sausage and smash breakfast, and a not so excellent tea/cheese/mud concoction to drink. Despite the fact that I'd strained my arm, and despite my fear of descending Big Rock Candy Mountain again, I'd just about convinced myself that I did want to return to the bottom when we heard a rumbling and banging down the passageway. It was Colm and Brian....the next party. I was, to coin a phrase, "as happy as a Frenchman who'd just invented self-removing trousers" as it meant that they could carry on exploring and we could begin the long ascent out.

We took it slowly but surely, stopping for Tetley to add in a few extra bolts while I swigged back some pain-killers for my arms. It's strange how your perception of "deep" changes the deeper you go. On my first trip I found that when I was at the top of Pico (as deep as a good-sized Yorkshire cave) I felt as though I was almost out. Now, it was at the top of Concorde that I felt that I was nearly there.

We exited the cave at around midnight, 7hrs after leaving for the surface. As usual it was a relief to be out into the open world again. However, on the trek back to the tents the wind was blowing a real gale and there was rain in the air. I couldn't help thinking it was probably more pleasant down at Camp X-ray.

James Roberts

Logbook Extracts 2003

"The cave is like a disco." - Robert Rehar

"The bivvy is like a restaurant." - Božo Remškar

"It swells up a bit when I get hot." - Pete Jurd

"Brian, Spread your legs." - Jan

"Played buckaroo with a passed out Tetley." - Everyone who hadn't passed out.

"My shit smells lovely," - Shed

"We were dissuaded from a 3am start." - Jan

"There are two views with respect to making popcorn - lid on and lid off."

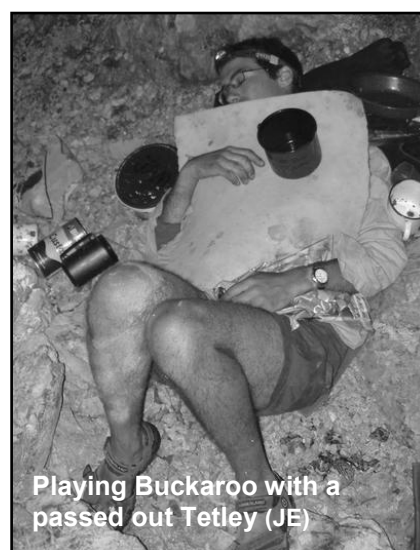
Rik: "How old are you?"

Rik: "And you're the same age as Goaty?"

Rik: "Jesus Christ, I thought he was like 40."

James: "26"

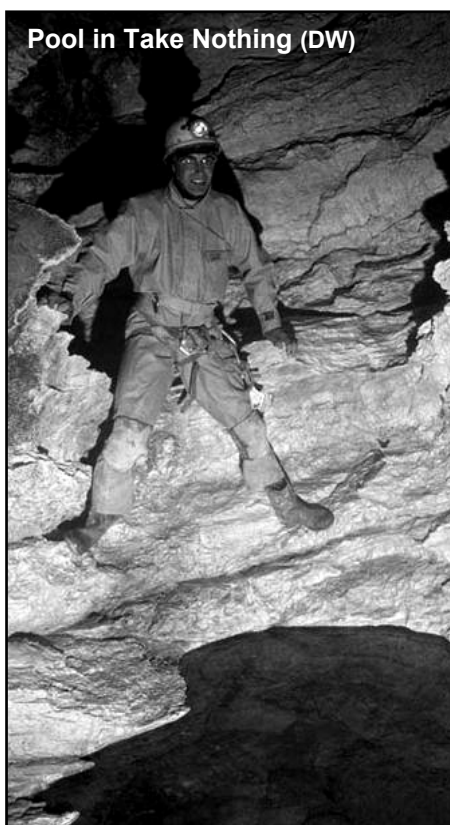
James: "Yeah"



The Luck of the Irish: The deep leads multiply

I got woken up at 6:30 am by Martin worrying about Clewin and Rik. I was sure they were just having lighting or fatigue problems, but nonetheless I dragged myself to the bivvy half asleep and prepared a sandwich. I was slowly getting my gear together when they arrived, knackered, after a ten hour exit, so I went back to bed.

Eventually, Brian and I headed underground at about midday and reached the camp at about three, just as Tetley and James were getting up. After a quick hot chocolate and exchange of news we said goodbye to the others and headed off to 'Big Rock'. I wallowed in mud at the top before reaching the vertical bit with a nasty free-hanging rebelay. At the bottom, we stayed high in the fossil rift, the stream gushing beneath us. At the end of the rift, the limit of exploration, we climbed down into a chamber, later named Playboy Junction, using a sling round a small spike for the last section of the climb.



Brian had already run off and I followed him, going straight on, to a pitch into a chamber. The chamber went down at a familiar angle - the same angle as at the bottom of Sys Mig! However, Brian found a slot that led to another pitch. We bolted this and entered a chamber. At the bottom, a standing-room phreatic tube led off, the start of the Leprechaun series. The passage soon forked, so Brian went right and I went left. Brian's route soon got a bit tight so he joined me via another tube and we pushed onwards, and entered a high canyon passage. This continued for about 70m before entering a chamber with an eight metre pitch. We left the lead and surveyed back.

At Playboy Junction, Brian disappeared down another passage and I followed him down a series of climbs, later named Take Nothing, along a stunning fossil passage with crystal clear pools. Soon we could hear the low rumble of a streamway. It sounded huge. Round a few more bends the stream arrived on the left and plunged down into a pool. A strong draught, a big stream, the expedition had a storming lead. Contented, we climbed up and headed back to camp, surveying Big Rock Candy Mountain on the way up.

Colm Carroll

Camp X-Ray Logbook Extracts 2003

"Cleanliness is next to Godliness."

"A poem: Enjoy your stay, at Camp X-Ray."

"Tetley's Top Tips:

- *Don't push leads and then leave others to survey - you'll only feel guilty!*
- *Don't do silly climbs and break a leg etc - you'll suffer if you do!*
- *Don't shit underground - it's a load of crap!*
- *As well as leaving PSSs all over the place - leave notes to explain what's where and what's been surveyed.*
- *Be paranoid about keeping dry clothes and pits completely dry!*
- *Make notes as to what's needed at camp and as to what gear is where."*

"Tetley's not so wise words: 'Wibble, Penguin, wibble, wibble, wibble...'"

Slovene Lessons: Time off in Tolmin

Two weeks had flown by. First the carries, then settling into bivvy life, and finally magnificent gallery passage being discovered by the furlong. We were in benevolent mood. The perfect excuse for a celebratory session in Tolmin.

We romped down the hill, seeming to float past the shepherds' huts all the way to Ravne. The van trundled down the zig-zags, a brief stop at the hydro to decontaminate ourselves, and on to the Odisej for some well earned fodder. What followed can only be described as carnage.

We ordered 'food.' Food arrived, loaded on a tray. The poor waiter never stood a chance. Ravenous cavers had staked out the kitchen door, ready to pounce. No sooner had the waiter appeared, than he was virtually mugged, his tray being emptied of goodies in mere milliseconds. Pizza, Shnitzel, Salata. Laško followed Union, and Union followed Laško. Andrej arrived, followed shortly by Simon, their eyes growing wide at the tales of our ever expanding system. Soon the sun gave way, and the moon rose. The gentle tinkle of music danced up from the river. Time to hit the Sotočje, the confluence of the Tolminka and Soča rivers.

The jovial atmosphere heightened as we drew near. The whole of young Tolmin was there, partying, laughing, soaking up another summer night. It was time to try our language skills on the locals – the only problem being that 'Veliko Pivo' doesn't get you very far with the fairer sex. Our strategy changed. We were to play the eager foreigners, looking for someone to teach us the language. A trio of local girls obliged, just returned home from university in Ljubljana for the summer. "Klitoris" – "Hello". Hmmm, not convinced we're going to get very far here.

The rest of the night drifted away in a cloud of Union, and we were soon magically transported back to the van, parked in the supermarket car-park. A warm night with clear skies, we all collapsed on the grass outside the van.

6AM... Tolmin's ever tolerant police moved us on. I found a spot in the van to continue my slumber – on top of the gear stick. Soon it was time to shake off hangovers, fill up on kava (coffee) and sladoled (ice cream) and reset the brain to 'bivvy' mode for another two weeks on the hill.

Colm Carroll

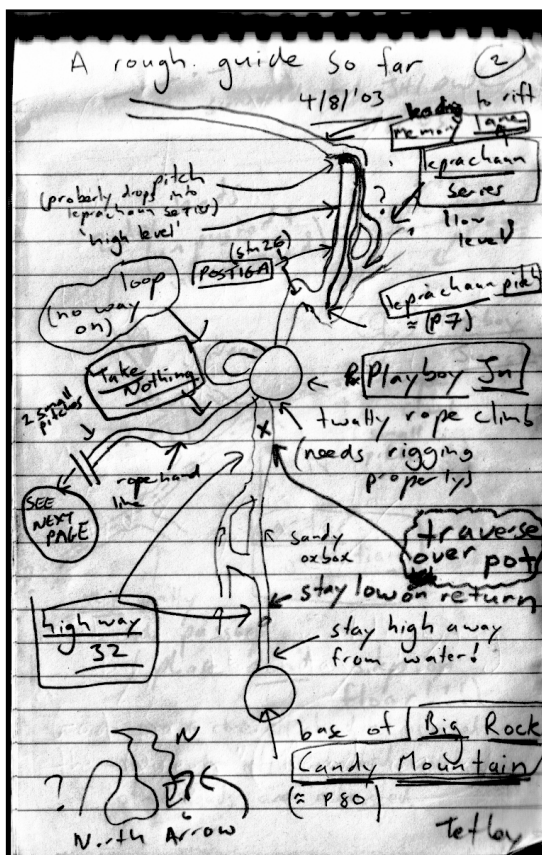


Sotočje by day (JE)

The smooth, steady all-electric crew

Inspired by the tales of gorgeous passageways at the bottom of the cave, some of which had even been surveyed(!), Tetley and I set off on a Sunday morning for a nicely paced trip down to Camp X-ray. A quick soup break was followed by a wander down Friendship Gallery to Big Rock. The descent down this creatively rigged 80m pitch on 9mm rope wasn't entirely helped by a stretched short cowstail, thanks to some serious boulder-dragging work in Yorkshire a fortnight before, but lower down it proved to be a rather pretty shaft. A wander along to the end Highway 32 followed, past an intriguing pool and classic phreatic oxbow in what is mainly a rift passage.

With an excited Tetley chatting away, we first set off to look at the recently found Leprechaun series, standing-room phreatic tubes followed by a rift section with tall avens. This tall passage exuded the stillness of a Victorian library - it didn't feel like anything had happened here for an awfully long time. However, even as the second pair of people to see this place, there was still rather a detached tourist feeling, and so once we'd reached the unrigged pitch we turned around.



Back at the junction, we headed off down the other dry passage that Colm and Brian had found, following their footprints in the thin layer of sand at the start of the passage, but rapidly losing their trail. At the first free-climb, the footprints stopped. A flat unmarked brown mud floor could be seen at the bottom of the climb. Unsure if they had gone some other way, I climbed down, jumping the last couple of feet and sinking ankle-deep into the white sand that underlay the millimetre-thick skin of brown. Feeling a little guilty, I kept to one side of the passage and tried not to make too much mess, but each step scattered piles of white dust across the once uniform brown floor. The story was the same at the next climb, where the footsteps of the previous two were reacquired - they had evidently traversed over the top of the climbs. Following the trail down, we came to a short drop. Peering down with our electric lights we could see a pool of water at the bottom - and no footprints or signs that the others had been there. At last, we thought, the limit of exploration. We quickly agreed that we should survey back to Highway 32 and then return for some pushing action.

At the gear dump, we sat down for a break, and realised we needed decent names. Even the time-honoured tactic of using cave features for names, (as in Pink) seemed to fail us. As a displacement activity, I climbed up to poke around in the short phreatic loop passage opposite the pitch, and found a flat piece of rock that to me resembled a hand giving a victory sign. I passed it to Tetley, who reckoned it looked more like a rabbit's head, so we propped it up in the sand next to the PSS, and agreed that we'd call the place Playboy Junction. Tetley suggested 'Take Nothing' for the cascades, inspired by the US caving conservation motto - 'take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints'. We were certainly doing both!

Refreshed, we set off for the unknown. We returned to rig the climbs, excited by the sound of water in the distance. At the bottom, beyond a lovely static pool, we soon arrived at an active stream passage that crossed the fossil route. Crossing over the water, the dry passage divided. Our joy quickly became disgruntlement. We saw footprints in the sandy floor.

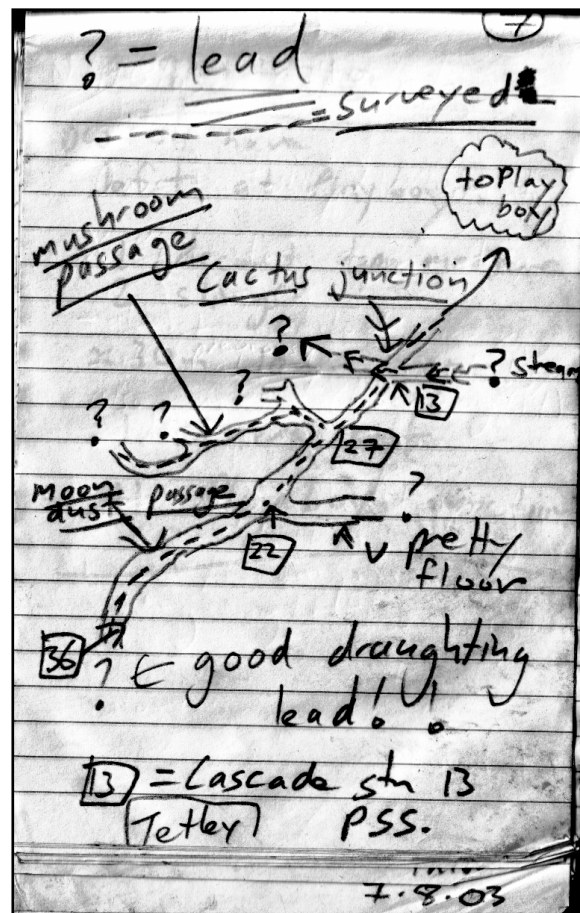
The thrill of original exploration, the highlight of any expedition, gave way to annoyance. With hindsight, I suppose, it brings home how much it really means to be the first person to shine light on a new part of the planet. Surveying for an earlier team is nothing like the same, even if we were only the third and fourth people to set foot on this part of the cave. As a small consolation prize, at least we, as the surveyors, could name the cave, so in a fit of originality, we named the spot 'Cactus Junction' after a piece of rock that we found which looked somewhat like a cactus plant. The main dry route (which we named Moondust passage) carried on, initially in a wide bedding plane with a deep-rippled white sand floor, becoming more rift like later on, with all horizontal surfaces dusted in white.

On our way back, we noticed yet another junction with a fossil inlet which turned out to be quite exquisite - a canyon cut into the dip of a sloping bedding passage, small cascades with pools of pure white sand, and seemingly even thicker white dusting on other surfaces than the main passageway. Delicately moving upwards, we reached a point where the flat sand floors gave way to something with a surface rather like popcorn covered in white sauce. Cautiously traversing to avoid any floor contact, we carried on a little further to where the passage narrowed and levelled out a little - still ongoing, but rather delicate. Carefully returning to the main passage we decided that this inlet should be left undisturbed if at all possible. (It remained untouched for only a year - in 2004 it was pushed and named Greed).

Both elated and somewhat subdued by the experience, we returned to Cactus Junction, surveyed the first part of Moondust, and took a few photographs. After midnight we returned to camp - cooked and brewed up to Blackadder. The air near camp was quite dry - my thermals were fine to sleep in after sitting around for a bit.

The next day we surveyed the side passage on the right at Cactus Junction (our first bit of exploration), taking the higher (left) branch at the first fork (called Mushroom Passage after some rock/mud formations). It is a varied small passage with mainly dry sand and mud floor, but occasional little pools, and what looks like a small oxbow at the start that actually turned out to be yet another lead, but after about 60m of cautious progress we turned around and surveyed out.

When we'd surveyed back to the first junction, we realised that the straight-on/down (right) branch would probably have been a better bet than Mushroom, but at that point we heard Brian and Martin in the main passage and went back to swap information.



When they'd gone off to continue pushing Leprechaun, we finished the Mushroom survey, then completed the rest of Moondust, even managing to get as far as a section that Colm and Brian hadn't waded through, and took more pictures - including Tetley's first cave photograph, though unfortunately he only had me as a subject! Back to camp for 8pm: Soup and Smash and then off for a nice steady trip out. Although the warming glow of carbide lights was missed, it was certainly less faff just caving on electric. We reached the surface at 2:30am feeling quite fresh to an extremely warm night and a welcome cold beer - thanks Tetley!

Dave Wilson

The Crock of Gold: Digging at Depth

My second trip into Gardeners' World was with Brian Cullen, and we planned to continue the pushing of the large horizontal passage that he had previously found with Colm. As I slithered down the mud slopes of Big Rock Candy Mountain, one could not help be impressed by the placement of the bolts. I imagined the Slovenians swinging like apes to be able to get the bolts in the roof and not the mud. After this humungous pitch, I was glad to be on solid ground instead of playing around on slimy muddy rope like a greased monkey. At the end of Leprechauns' Way there was a short drop, which was soon passed by an aerobic display of free climbing, holding the rope in between your teeth and trying to tie knots with the free hand. The passage continued with crystals twinkling in the walls like gaudy Christmas decorations, and false floors across the passage way for you to limbo under. The floor was crystalline sand that glittered until it was desecrated by the marauding boots of the cavers. Ah, so much for leaving only footprints.

We wandered down the passage going 'ooh' and 'ah' like a pair of moronic, awe struck tourists looking at the formations in a show cave. Thinking 'that flake looks like Iceland', 'that looks like...?' Reality soon intervened as we reached a pitch, so we ambled back to start the survey. When we reached the pitch for the second time we started to bolt it to overcome the insidious cold. After losing all the teeth on two spits we finally got a third spit into the rock. Now running low on spits and freezing cold, I looked for an alternative way down the pitch without placing another bolt. So a traverse was found over the semi-bolted pitch-head to an adjacent hole which allowed a rig around several flakes.

At this point exploration was reaching boiling point, I abseiled down the slope knocking off the odd bit of loose crud. It must go on I thought, despite the sign that we heading into a flat bottomed chamber with no obvious exit. Within seconds of getting off the rope I was standing at the end of the cave. It was a miserable slot about 75 cm wide and 5 cm high which the wind blasted out of - an old siphon full of deposit. Brian came down and also cursed and ranted at the gods. Then a moment of inspirational genius from Brian which lifted us from this morose gloom.



"Why don't we dig out the sand?"

I was a sceptical at first of achieving any success, probably after too many years of hearing people going on about how dig X, Y, or Z was going to break into the "Master System". Anyway, exploration fever soon gripped us both as we manically dug out the sand with our descenders. Soon there was a space big enough to squeeze my legs into the hole and then I pushed the sand to the sides with my feet. Squirming in on my front I dug more sand out, and had to be pulled out by Brian as I had partially covered the entrance hole with my spoil. Then came a moment of panic as we realised that we'd just buried our SRT kits in our haste to expand the hole. Once we had recovered our means of escape, we progressed at a steady pace until I just slipped through to the other side and then enlarged the exit for Brian. The passage started as a low crawl, but soon enlarged to walking size, but more importantly we reached a junction. This cave wasn't dead it was going and going, we had hit the crock of gold that was at the end of the rainbow pitch.

Now we did a bit of a naughty thing, I suppose we have a bit of a devil in us, but we ran up the new passage to see how it went, and it eventually reached a storming rift over 20m high. A little bit more surveying then back to camp and dreams of measuring yet more "caverns measureless to man".

The next day we set off down Friendship Gallery to finish our survey and continue pushing, but soon found that Brian's 'Petzl Stop' catch would not open. The only way to thread the rope through the Stop would have been to take the Stop off the karabiner and hold it unattached while you threaded it. The thoughts of dropping a descender down a pitch stopped us from going any further. The idea of down-prussiking down Big Rock was very unappealing.

So our little epic seemed all to be over and we headed out to thoughts of drinking vodka around the Bivvy fire and tell stories of gargantuan passages storming off into the blackness of the empty mountain. As I ambled up Zimmer pitch I heard Brian calling out. Something in his tone as the message echoed round the vastness of pitch made me sit up and listen - could it be?

'The rope is what?'

'Frayyyed through the sheath!' reverberated Brian's response.

Ever so gingerly I changed onto the frayed section of rope, singing loudly to block out all stupid death-obsessed thoughts, and continued to prussik, ensuring that I kept the rope well clear of the wall to prevent further damage. Near the very top of the pitch I finally came across the damaged section. The rope had half the sheath missing. I transferred my ascenders over the damage before whipping out my knife and cutting the rope. At the top, I pulled up the stump of rope and tied it off to prevent anyone plunging down the pitch. Well that had bugged the next team down.

The drama was over, the expedition continued finding passages. I, on the other hand, got a badly infected finger and had to have it cut open to release the pus and so I never got back underground.

Martin McGowan



Hanging by a thread

"The rope's frayed," came a muffled cry from above. "What?" I shouted back, not wishing to believe what I thought I'd heard. I stopped prussiking and looked up the thin line of rope towards the dim glow of Dave's light above. We were hanging on by a thread, in the small hours of the morning, three quarters of the way up Big Rock Candy Mountain. It was almost too horrific to contemplate, the fear of the rope, the thin line to safety, being severed. "But it never happens," I told myself. But I knew this wasn't true. It can, and does happen - just very rarely. The flood of thoughts was overpowering and there was nothing I could do. A week earlier James had had a similar experience when I'd derigged the badly rigged Slovenian rebelay. But then, at least, I knew I was alright. Did Dave? What was going on up there? Forty metres above the floor, swinging in near darkness, I started to lose faith and ponder the precariousness of our position.

"Rope Free," Dave cried from above. I continued on up, unsure of the situation. I was wary, but trusted that Dave wouldn't have said "Free" unless it was safe. I passed the next few rebelays and continued up the muddy rope to the top.

"What was that you shouted at that rebelay?" I asked, relieved to be standing on solid ground.

"Sorry, I thought the rope had frayed but it was just covered in mud," Dave replied.

Two days later, back on the surface, I asked Brian and Martin how they got on. It was then that I'd heard about Brian's experience on Zimmer. Ten metres from the top he looked up and saw that the rope was caught on some rock. As gently as possible he prussiked up to the top. Only when he was above the rub point did he examine the rope to find that it had rubbed through the sheath and had started at the core. Hearing this, I plunged into my own thoughts, and, although I'm not superstitious, I reached out and touched the nearest piece of wood I could find.

James 'Tetley' Hooper

Shed and Jan Take Nothing

I remember sitting outside GW, the cool air blowing out of the entrance, that bit of nervousness before a long trip underground and the realisation that the outside world is actually quite nice. We probably started in the afternoon confident we would make camp in good time and do some pushing. I'm not sure why we were confident of this, maybe because everyone said it was pretty easy. For the first few minutes I was uneasy, still getting used to the cave and still close enough to the surface to do a u-turn and be back at the bivvy by a warm fire and people. I was over cautious on the pitches; on Pico I let Shed go two or three rebelay ahead and then he had to wait at the bottom. This was his first time in this cave.

After a considerable time we were at the top of Fistful of Tolars, the limit of the exploration in 2000, and, I reminisced, a place that Bruce and I had discovered on my last trip in GW. Shouts now echoed up the pitch, Martin was trying to communicate something and we waited for him to come up to inform us of Brian's incident on Zimmer. I must admit, not being familiar with Zimmer I assumed a certain amount of exaggeration, perhaps to protect a stonking lead. At the time Brian seemed perfectly composed.

After an even more considerable time, and the joys of Pink, we reached a dark gash in the floor we assumed was Zimmer and one of the sights in all my caving experience that really made me shudder - a flick of the rope, a suitable notch in the rock and a nice big free-hang was an unhealthy combination. Fifty metres of bouncing by Brian on the end of the rope had done enough to completely remove the sheath and to start cutting through the core. What had gone through Brian's mind when he saw it, I can only guess.

Shed had been ahead of me and as we discussed, at length, our tactics for rigging a knot change, I made it clear that I'm a strong believer in first come first served. So he re-rigged the pitch head with 10m of rope we'd salvaged earlier and descended. I was impressed with the speed in which the job was done and it was an remarkably exposed bit of temporary rigging too, 3m from the nearest wall and 50m up. Touching down at the bottom of Zimmer for the first time I felt a real excitement. This is why I came caving to Slovenia, this clean washed shaft seemed to have sliced through the mountain leaving two muddy, disembodied, holes. We may have descended 500m but now it seemed we had come to the entrance of a new cave, just asking to be explored. So it was we made our way into Camp X-ray a record eight hours after entering GW.

The next day sparked to life in the light of a carbide flame. With the stereo on, we started the task of making tea and something resembling breakfast. Having studied Tetley's copious notes we chose to have a look at Take Nothing, leaving instructions for the next party so they could find us. Friendship Gallery and the top of Big Rock were muddy on a par with OFD in Wales. Making our way to Playboy Junction, we then turned left down the dry stream way of Take Nothing. Following a draught, this nice bit of cave crosses a stream and continues promisingly, following footprints we passed a PSS, then a hand written note informing us we were 10m from the final survey station, and finally...

'You have reached the final PSS, from here on is virgin passage. Yours to the Soča! Tetley.'

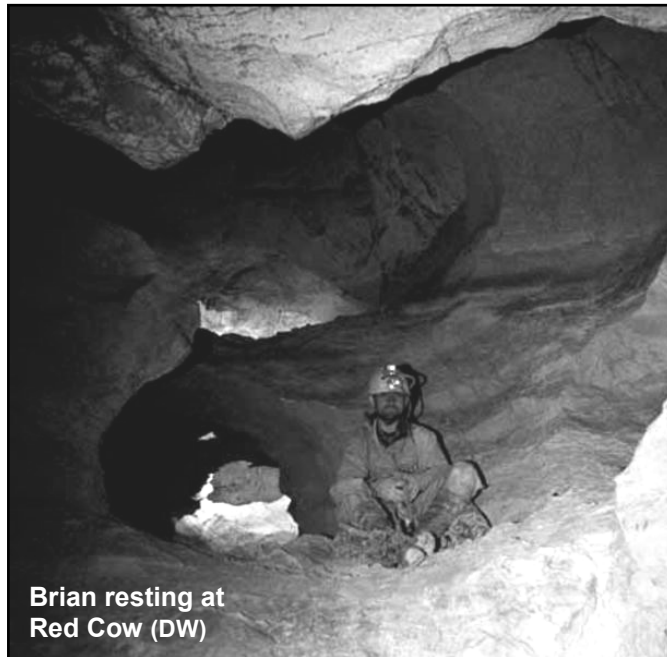
With little further need of encouragement we took our first steps of discovery, with the stunning finds in other parts of the system surely now it was our turn for glory. Abruptly our nice passage changed into an awkward bedding angled at 45 degrees; Double Think was our name for it. We climbed up and down still following the draught into a low passage and a short pitch and that was it. The place didn't feel promising and the next trip subsequently bottomed it and found a dead end. Presumably some digging might take it somewhere, but I remember being pretty disappointed. On our way out we met Rik and Pete Jurd, who had thankfully re-rigged Zimmer. Soon enough we were back in the outside world and to that fire and friendly faces.

Jan Evetts

Back for more

I really wanted another trip to the bottom to push and photograph. After a degree of persuasion, Brian agreed to join me and before long we were down at the working face at the end of Leprechaun. Beyond the point that I'd got to with Tetley, the passage definitely improved in both variety and cosmetics - larger phreatic tubes, more white sand on the floor, interesting climbs and short pitches.

Like in Take Nothing, the character of the cave here was completely different from both the tight entrance series and large chain of deep pitches found in 2000, and the more awkward rift/short pitch character of 2001. Additionally, it also seemed quite different to anything in the main Migovec system.



Brian resting at
Red Cow (DW)

The first pushing task was to rig down a small sloping pitch after the ascent up a long rift. Since the rock here was much too decayed for spits, the only secure belay was a very large boulder a short way back down the rift. The rope rubbed on several edges between belay and pitch, but even with 9mm rope, the rock was destroyed more than the rope. Just on from the pitch bottom, there was a dubious overhanging 4m climb down beyond a couple of small holes in the floor. The only useable natural belay was a large thread, too badly placed to be any use for the climb itself, but directly above a body-sized hole. After abseiling through this tight gap, the main passage could be regained via a short crawl.

A little distance further, the passage dropped about five metres and turned a right-angle into another phreatic tube, with the corner itself being swirled out and slightly overhanging in what seemed to be a common style for major changes of direction. Another natural belay, somewhat less solid than the previous two, was sufficient for a descent, with the route carrying on past a few more corners and climbs down to a junction at a shallow pit with a crawl off to the right and a climb up leftwards to the base of a sloping aven. The cave just continued, north into blank mountain. We were thrilled with our discoveries.

We returned to Brian and Martin's final PSS, and surveyed up to the junction at the pit, including a nice leg in the ascending rift that we had to split because the 30m tape wasn't long enough! After a short sleep at camp, we had a steady-paced trip out; a few pitch-head photos at the top of Space Odyssey and Tessellator temporarily blinded Brian in the process.

Dave Wilson

The First Law of Bivvy-Dynamics

All edible matter tends towards smash burgers.

All non-edible matter tends towards ash.

Jan Evetts

Footprints on the shores of the unknown

Pete Jurd and I are both men who like missions and the plan we'd formulated while sitting round the fire was certainly a mission, with a grand aim and a fixed time frame. We'd agreed to derig camp X-Ray, dragging all the bags through the Pink Series in time to meet a group of six cavers at the base of Fistful of Tolars at noon the following day. To derig in a day.... It was feasible, we thought, but only just. That was what we had to do. What we wanted to do, in addition to this, was find and survey lots of new cave, and leave a good lead for 2004....

I woke at 7 o'clock in the morning, rubbing my hands together. I was already wearing my furry and keen to get going, barely containing my excitement. I was soon out in the cold, fresh air, and woke up Pete who seemed as keen as I was. Down in the bivvy, with no-one to tell me off, I lighted the stove in my "I've no patience for warming this thing up gently" kind of way, got a two foot high flame going and made a quick brew and reheated some of the previous night's slop. We were on a mission. At 8:15 am, we left the bivvy, crossing the plateau as the rest of the cavers slumbered in their tents. By 9am we were underground. It was all going to plan.

We moved freely down the cave, knowing the tricks and tactics for each rebelay. Our only contact were the cries of "Rope Free", "OK". Every so often I'd break into song, or pause, briefly, to enjoy the illumination of Pete's light, three or four rebelays below me. I was expedition fit, fresh after a good night's sleep, abseiling down big pitches in a fantastic cave. There aren't many things better than this, I thought. I was so enjoying myself that I almost forgot one of the few things that is. Our mission, to find new passage. "Rope, free." "O.K." Time for a quick time check as I abseiled down Zimmer. "It's just gone noon. Time for a quick brew and chocolate stop before heading down Big Rock." We had 24 hours until our rendezvous with the rest of the derig party.



As we walked, slipped and slid along Friendship Gallery, Pete and I reflected on how the passing of cavers had altered forever a formerly pleasant and pristine passage. At least the sides of the passage had kept their clean mud floors. We were soon at the top of Big Rock, a large pitch down to -660m, that for me marks the psychological point at which, for this cave at least, I start to feel as though I'm a very long way from the surface. "Rope Free" "OK".

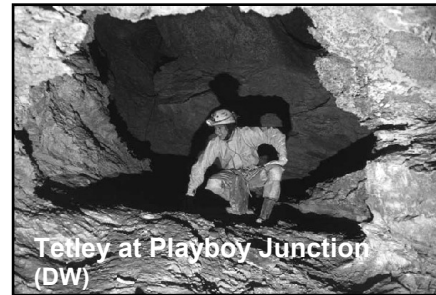
Half-way along Highway32, we stopped to drink as much of the icy cold water as we could. The stream disappears here, reappearing at Cactus junction. As we were heading down the Leprechaun series, however, this would be our last drink of water for hours, unless we made a detour to visit the stream at Red Cow. "Right, let's pace ourselves for the next section," I said. After the joys of pitch after pitch, the way on was now very much like caving in Wales - climbing, crawling, small drops, boulder hopping along dry passages. Beyond the false floors at Red Cow Roundabout, marked with a piece of survey paper that tells you where you are, the passage then headed up slope for 150 metres, before heading down again to the base of a climb. This aven, named Strap on the Nitro a year later, was to be a place where I'd spend a long time contemplating death.... However, I didn't know that then. "Look's like a good lead up there," I said to Pete, "and from Dave's description we must be near the pushing front..."

"Right, the footprints stop here, let's find the permanent survey station." Irritatingly, it took us a while to locate the PSS, necessary to tie in the survey. Quite a few words were muttered, once again, cursing the fact that yet again people (most of whom happened to be Irish) hadn't followed the simple, golden rules of exploration, namely "Survey what you find and leave lots of clearly marked PSSs." My ranting certainly helped my bolting as I hammered in two bolts in quick succession. "Right Pete, let's go..." After a short drop, we were standing, once again, on the shores of the unknown.

Each step, on virgin ground, is a pleasure to take, an experience that never loses its magic even after years of caving and thousands of metres of new cave. The roof was closing down quickly but the strong draught led us on. Pete was ahead of me, crawling now, round a corner. "It get's big again, come on, come on." We shook hands, knowing that our mission was going to plan. I'm sure the grin on Pete's face was similar to my own. Ahead of us the passage widened. A small climb up was needed, however. "After you Pete – be careful...."

Pete was soon up the climb and fixing a rope for me to use as a handline. The passage was a good eight metres wide and descending upwards at about thirty degrees. What about No More Potatoes?" said Pete. "What???" I replied.... My earlier suggestions for a name for our finds had been way too xenophobic. Pete's suggestion was excellent and quickly agreed upon.

Time was marching on. The camp was a long way away and we needed a good night's sleep before the derig. We stopped in the middle of the passage, and built a big PSS cairn before surveying back. We also left three notes. One saying, "Pushing front 100 metres ahead." Another saying, "Ten metres to go to the start of the unknown." On paper by the cairn I wrote, "It's up to you now... Good Luck team 2004." I wondered who would be the next people down to this deep place.



Once the survey was complete, we headed back to Big Rock, resting briefly at Playboy Junction to cool down and eat some more food. Pete then headed straight back to camp to cook dinner, while I took a while derigging the big pitch, making a mental note that we would have to replace the nine millimetre rope with reassuring 11mm rope in eleven months time. By midnight we were in bed, stuffed full of smash and fish. I was so knackered that I only heard about half of "Riders on a Storm" on the tape player before I was fast asleep.

I only really have two memories from the following day. The first was the struggle Pete and I had with seven tacklebags through the Pink series. The bags had taken ages to pack and we'd left what we could at camp. The sound and then sight of six cavers ready to take the damn things away must have been greatly welcomed. My second memory is of dawn the following day. Slowly, slowly, I'd made my way up the pitches, derigging the rope and greasing the bolts as I went, keeping my eye on the time - I hate getting out at 3am. The sight of the warm sun rising over Škribina, together with the sweet smell of the fresh air, made it all worth it as I thought to myself, "I love it when a plan comes together."

James Hooper



Gardeners' World Survey 2003

