

2004

“Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a Heaven for?”

Robert Browning, *Andrea del Sarto*.

Throughout the year, as ICCC bounced around the country on weekend trips, there had been a constant murmur in the back of the van. No matter how deep or large or scary or otherwise impressive to my fresher eyes, whatever we did in the UK paled in comparison to the mythical Slovenia. Single pitches the depth of whole Yorkshire caves, wire traverses over gaping black holes, free hanging pitches still not bottomed after every spare bit of rope was chained together... As the Old Lags of the club approached their terminal pints at our Tuesday pub meets, their eyes became glassy as ridiculous names tumbled out. Gardeners’ World; Gladiator’s Traverse; Concorde; Bats Hit. An absolute right of passage for members of the club; most cavers that went on expedition had stayed with the club - even the Evans brothers, who had started the exploration a decade previously, were still around. While other London University caving clubs had gently disintegrated in the new Millennium, ICCC was going strong, cemented together by friendships formed pushing at the deep end.

With a good lead in open passageway deep in Gardeners’ World, a strong team, including Chris Rogers and Pippa Crosby (with several years of OUCC caving experience in the Picos), had been assembled with a plan to camp below Big Rock Candy Mountain. The talk was not about whether we’d find any cave, but rather how much would be discovered beneath the plateau.

But enough lofty thoughts of trampling along virgin passageway; I had struggled my way across Europe with a backpack weighed down with photo gear, slept overnight in St Mark’s square, Venice, and then somehow, after much confuddlement, managed to make it to Tolmin. The heat was oppressive, I stumbled from the comfort of the air-conditioned bus into the café adjacent to the station - I recognised one thing on the menu - Cappuccino, and so sat sipping in the scorching shade. My mobile didn’t seem to like Slovenia - I had no real idea where I was - and absolutely no grasp of the language. The most helpful thing relayed on the mailing list in the months before was how to say, “My hovercraft is full of eels”. Increasingly nervous, I wondered how on earth I would find the cavers, and whether I was even in the right ‘Tolmin’. My fistful of Tolars would not last many days.

Then across the shimmering tarmac came a familiar clown-haired figure, bumbling along with a girl and a mischievous glint in his eye.

“Rik! You’re the first person I’ve spoken to in days!”

“Heya Jarv, comin’ up the hill then?”

Jarvist Frost



A Non-Caver's Musings on Bivvy Life

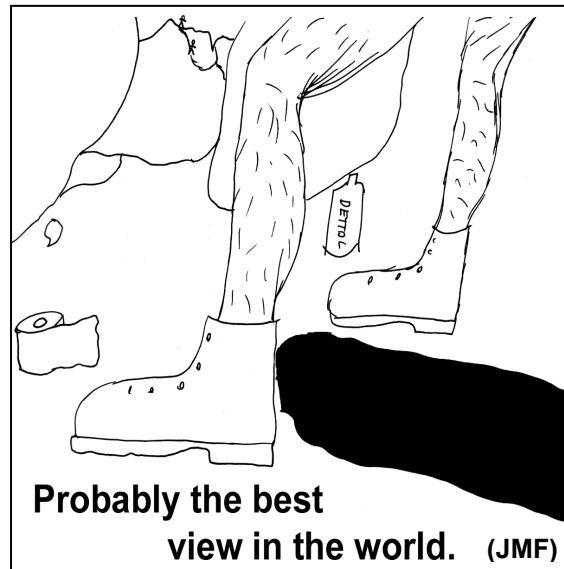
Nothing quite prepares you as a non-caver for going on 'holiday' and being thrust back into the stone age. I say 'non-caver' but Bivvy life is about caving – living in one – or at least eating in it. For a Forty-something there are some particular features that are likely to test your limits...

The water barrels that are running low because it hasn't rained on top of the mountain for a week, and the only option is to go on a snow-hole patrol, where the trick is to scrape the dirty black scum off the top and collect the grey snow underneath. Suffice it to say that the result is not Evian. Washing up becomes out of the question, which leads to the next test... eating with a dirty Billy-can and cutlery etc. An obsession with using your own implements rapidly kicks in... unless you're the average Twenty-something Imperial student and don't care, it's all part of the 'fun' of the, err, 'sharing experience'. (This of course increases the obsession.)

Then there's what you're eating. Textured Vegetable Protein is dog food. It's official. Never before have I been so grateful to eat Smash or dried pasta or anything else. TVP is tasteless cack and leads to the sort of gratuitous uber-flatulence that puts baked bean consumption in the shade. This leads inexorably to one of the biggest tests of all - A VISIT TO THE SHIT PIT.

What image does this conjure in your mind? Not nice, huh? A tad gross perchance? Not a little unsavoury perhaps? Well, you'd be right. There are certain dos and don'ts with shit pit etiquette.

- Do wait until you really need to go because you won't want to hang around.
- Don't go after dark, even with a torch.
- Don't go when it's raining.
- Don't go after drinking alcohol or when under the influence.
- Do wait until you're fully awake and alert.
- Don't allow yourself to be distracted by low-flying paragliders or mountain walkers who mistake the path to the shit pit for an ordinary path.
- Don't worry about the swarm of blue-bottles in and around the pit... they don't bite.
- Do make sure that you take up a comfortable and balanced squatting position astride the pit.



All of the above are important because failure to adhere to them can result in the worst happening... falling in the pit. The consequences are not nice and could prove problematic in the context of a water shortage.

There is the good side to Bivvy life – the camaraderie, the singsongs round the fire, the passing round of double-strength rum-ski, the, err, camaraderie. But best of all is the plentiful supply of COMF material, which is particularly important for the ageing posteriors and creaking limbs of the old lag.

All in all Bivvy life is AN EXPERIENCE, but whether it's one you'll want to repeat is open to question. (The shock to the system can end relationships, so think twice before going with a partner.) What isn't open to question, however, is that there really is only one way to find out...

Gary McGhee

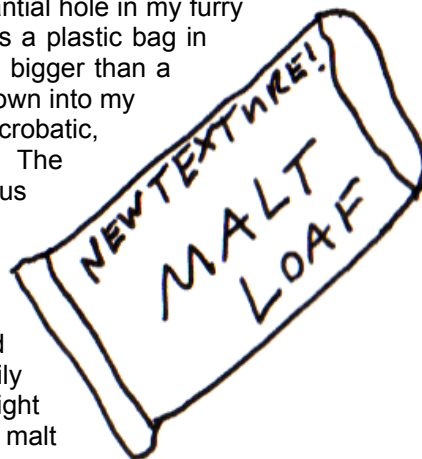
Can't keep it in, gotta get it out: A rigging trip with a difference

My first trip of the expedition, after the arduous week of carries, was with Andy Jurd. Our mission was simple – a simple tackle-bag payload was to be deposited at around -350m before the inevitable return to daylight, with some pitch-rigging if our wills permitted. It was my first caving trip in several months and whilst neither SRT nor squeezing presented any major obstacles to progress through the cave, after reaching the deepest rigged point and passing Clewin and Tom (at least I think it was those two), it became painfully apparent that I had forgotten a crucial aspect of standard expedition caving practice – that essential pre-cave dump!

As Andy, my original caving mentor from my first year Princes' Garden rope training, asked if I wanted to try rigging the next pitch, a groaning in my stomach and a hefty guff signalled that a monster turd was on its way. I almost felt like that chubby boy at the back of the class as he demands 'Siiiiir.... I need the toilet'. But this would be no stern telling off. Now six years older and with the smiling face of Mr Smith the Geography master replaced by the lean sneer of a Jurd, I didn't even have to ask. I knew that the only way out for this evidently enormous shit was up that rope.

I started to prussik, and to poor Andy's misfortune, "juxtaposed" as hard as I possibly could the whole way up each pitch. The unusual prussik action has a knack of pulling open the buttocks of the caver then clenching them back together. I knew that a slip at the wrong moment could lead to disaster in my then snowy-white thermals. All was well until Tessellator pitch head. For those not well acquainted with Gardeners' World, this involves some contortion. A treacherous rock nodule pressed into my stomach, pushing the turtle's ugly head out to leer threateningly at my undergarments. I quickly re-clenched but by the bottom of Pico, covered in sweat and almost exploding, I realised that I simply couldn't make it out of the cave in time.

There was no pause for thought as the shits of my life flashed before my eyes. The situation was already so urgent that I was compelled to tear off my SRT kit and oversuit as fast as I could and rip the already substantial hole in my furry past the top of my arse crack. Luckily for me there was a plastic bag in the breast pocket of my oversuit, even if it wasn't much bigger than a crisp packet. I shuffled the thermal long-johns as far down into my furry as I could and finally performed a Houdini-esque, acrobatic, blind, standing delivery with no margin for error. The collateral damage was minimal, and were it that one of us had brought some toilet roll, the problems would have stopped there. As I regarded the look of horror on Andy's face as he emerged from the blackness to confront my squatting torso desperately clutching the plastic bag like my father's ashes, I realised that I had breached my mentor's trust the very moment I greedily helped myself to that second helping of TVP the night before. All that he could offer me was his empty plastic malt loaf wrapper. I promptly spread the doppelgangers all over my arse cheeks with the shiny wipe, pulled up my thermals over the mess, sighed and wearily put on my oversuit and SRT harness to exit the cave.



An hour later I trudged back behind Andy with my heavy head hunched over my bruised heart, with the stinking object of my self disgust pointed vacantly out behind me. He stopped at the top of the bivvy with the air of a man too weary to take the belt to his dog and injured me more with his words than with a thousand blows. 'Not down here,' he hissed. I loped off to the shit-pit to cover my thermals in Dettol and sponge my arse clean with toilet roll and more disinfectant.

Richard Venn

So much for Friendship: Rigging the Camp

Dave Wilson: I shot ahead to rig Zimmer, intending to add an extra bolt below the pitch-head. Opening the bag stashed there last year, I expected to find the start of the traverse line, but instead found myself with just the Y-hang. No matter, I thought, the rift is tight enough that there's no real risk of falling, so I'll get started on the bolting, then add the traverse line later when the others arrive with more rope.

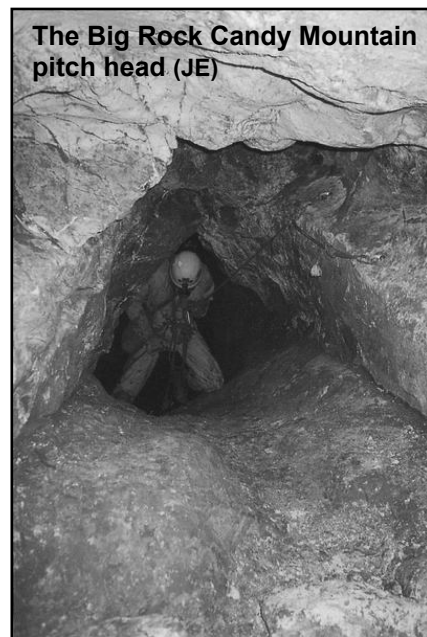
Sitting safely on the good ledge on the left side of the rift, with my feet on the other side, I made the mistake of bending forwards to have a quick look down the rift. This year I was using my first production-model Mig134, and had the spot beam set on full power. From the brief glance I took, I'm not sure whether it was the pitch bottom I could see, or just the rebelay ledge 30m down, but whatever it was, it was certainly very well-lit, and a very long way down. Suddenly with the fear of God weighing down on me I sat back upright and froze for a few seconds with thumping heartbeat, before accepting my fate and starting the hammering.

Chris Rogers: After the excitement of an afternoon spent wrestling with the delightful Hailey (a rather fat and unhelpful tackle-sack), it was a relief when we got to Friendship Gallery. This was the site of last year's camp, so there was sure to be a bit of munch and a chance to sit down. I didn't expect the camp to bite back though – I tapped the roof with my helmet, dislodging a chunk of rock onto my hand. A stream of blood and curses followed. Still able to move my fingers, albeit with pain and difficulty, we pressed on.

Dave: I wasn't really feeling in the mood for more rigging, so it was decided that Pip would rig Big Rock Candy Mountain, and the rest of us would ferry the bags along Friendship Gallery. Once in the last horizontal section before our planned campsite everyone was tiring - it seemed to take an age to get the first few bags to the phreatic oxbow. Finally arriving at Cactus Junction, we set up the 4-bed camp and were in bed within an hour, Tetley & Rik soon passing by on their Night-Train trip.

The fridge thermometer we had taken down showed a nice steady air temperature of one degree centigrade above freezing. Lovely.

Chris: After the Night-Train passed through, the others quickly fell asleep again. For me, it was strange to go back to absolute darkness after such a short period of electric day. I couldn't quite tell if I was asleep or awake. I thought my eyes were shut but I didn't really know. And so it went for hour after hour.



The Big Rock Candy Mountain pitch head (JE)

Dave: The next day, Chris's hand injury ruled him out of caving, so Pip, Tom and I set off for the end of No More Potatoes. A pleasant trip through the sandy passages led us to Tetley's final note from 2003: "Good luck team 2004."

Almost immediately afterwards the passage changed to boulders, the results of an enormous roof-fall. The destroyed nature of the passage, coupled with thoughts of our general underground diet, led us to christen the passage 'Smash'. With many routes along the sloping rift, it was useful to have three people, leaving one to recce the route on while the others surveyed. A reasonable trip back to camp followed, though the lack of accessible water anywhere on the route did mean we arrived back extremely thirsty. A whole day was set aside for the ascent, breaking out just before sunset.

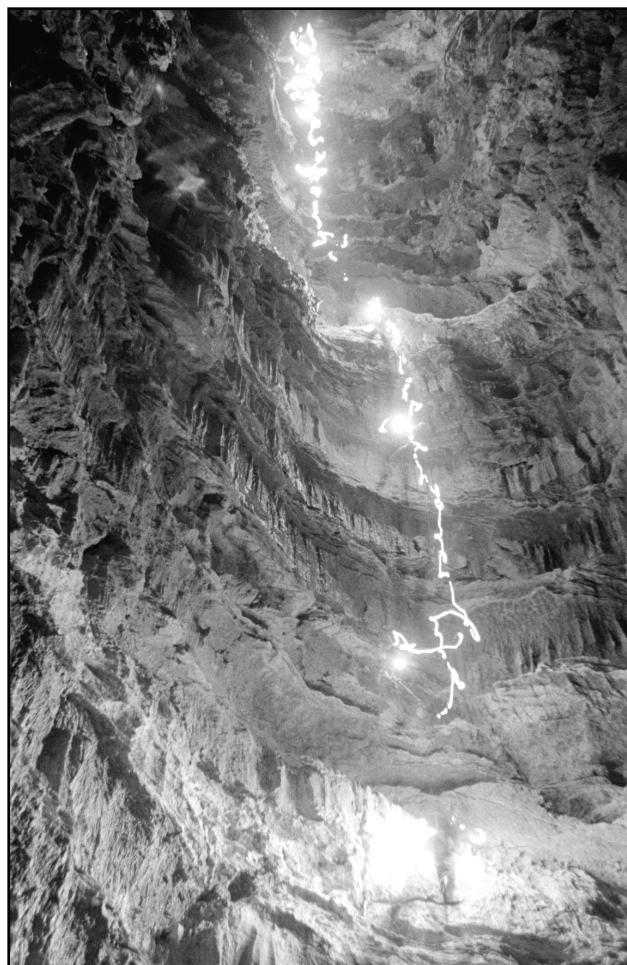
All in all, an excellent trip, though the journey to set up camp had been a bit of an epic - a little over 2 hours to Zimmer, but another 10 to get to 'The Fridge', as the new camp was christened.

A Day in the Life of a Fresher on Mig: Photographing Concorde

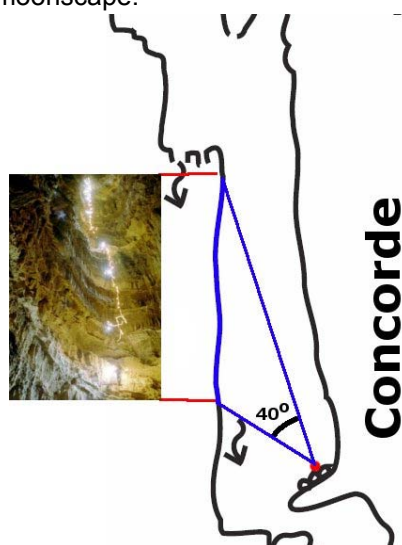
Nine months after I first went underground with ICCC, I unclipped from the rope at the bottom of Concorde pitch in Gardeners' World. The white of the floor was breathtaking, polished smooth by the annual flow of snow melt. I was perhaps the twentieth person to stand here and see the colours, the shapes and the sheer scale of this enormous stone cathedral, every last facet of it formed by water and gravity.

Connecting me to the world above, and leading ever deeper, were hundreds of lengths of rope secured by literally hammering into the rock face, years of effort by students from ICCC and the Slovenians of JSPDT.

I could just see the faint orange light of my caving buddy 70m above me; I built a cairn of rocks as a substitute for a tripod, and balanced my old Soviet camera at an angle I hoped would cover the whole pitch. Dousing my light & opening the shutter, I shouted 'Rope Free!', replied from a long way above by a blurred echo of 'OK!'.



I sat absolutely still (so as not to nudge the camera) in the perfect darkness for 15 minutes and watched the impossibly small orange dot above me float down as gently as a feather, with the lightning blue flash burning an image into my retina every minute or two. I don't think I've ever felt quite so peaceful; quietly biding my time sitting a shelf of rock surrounded by moonscape.



After packing the camera, and eating some chocolate; we readied for the ascent – 400m of rope to climb, nearly five times the height of the Queens Tower. Over eight hours of solid climbing later, I finally flopped out of the cave and sniffed at the strange Ozone smell of the vegetation, gazing up at the star-framed silhouettes of the mountains across the valley.

Clewin, who had been diligently waiting at the bottom of pitches as I climbed in case I struck difficulty (not once grumbling as he read 120 pages of his paperback sitting in the cold), joined me after a few short minutes. We stumbled back to the Bivvy following the string as it snaked around the many hazards on the plateau. I was so utterly exhausted that I had to be helped out of my caving kit, but was soon warmed by the fire and refreshed with mugs of hot chocolate and plates of chilli.

Strap on the Nitro: Aven Climbing at -800m

Hollywood tells us that in a position of great stress and/or danger an individual will find superhuman strength and courage, discover an inner self, becoming a through-and-through action hero. **This is, of course, utter bollocks.** The reality is that most people will fill their pants and freeze up. This is not a tale of heroism, but one of bad judgement leading to a tight spot up Nitro Aven with a twenty metre bounce to the hard stuff below and nothing but mud to hug for comfort.

From the 'ground', the prospect seemed simple enough. During the course of a fairly typical GW camping trip, Tetley and I had sighted a large and interesting aven that could be gained via a scramble up an incline. Said slope was at about 45 degrees to the horizontal, with the first part being clean rock with a couple of twatty but passable ridges. I had eyeballed a route starting midway along the base of the slope and curving round to where it joined the right-hand cave wall. From that point, it looked to be simple work to edge up a muddy bit in the corner to a position from where I could penetrate the aven with a spotlight.

After a customary exchange of '**Strap on the Nitro**' with Tetley (a line, you may recall, from that classic Hollywood climbing movie 'Vertical Limit'), I began the ascent. Going up was easy enough, and I followed the route I had planned until I had covered the bare rock, made it onto the mud, and had only a final section to climb to make it to my vantage point. However, this last section was a little more committing than I like to do without rope and my position started to feel a touch on the high side. I opted to head down but as I shifted position I realised that going down could be more difficult than anticipated.

The fear came, in a purity reserved for Really Bad Moments that have an air of finality about them. Logic and reason - good friends in times of danger - abandoned me, all remaining thoughts tending towards imminent death. I edged towards something more solid to grasp and wait while the adrenalin subsided. As I sat, hardly breathing lest it trigger a slide, and using all my energy to stay absolutely still, my situation suddenly seemed very bleak. I was some distance up this slope: the first 5 or 10 metres below me was a smooth mud face, perfect for allowing me to gather some speed before dropping off a ledge, rolling a little way more, dropping off another, and then bouncing to a rest against a pile of uncomfortable-looking boulders. It wouldn't be pretty: at best, I could hope to break a limb; at worst, I needn't have to worry about the prussik out.

Tetley had followed me some of the way up, and at this point was having a crisis of his own reversing one of the climbs lower down.

'Tetley... I'm not happy'. The words had passed in the other direction a few years earlier during an episode in M18. 'Nah, me neither,' came the reply.

We needed a plan. As it stood, we were each in positions that felt dangerous to be in and yet unsafe to leave. Being wiser than I, Tetley had brought a length of rope up with him. At a point between us, above him and below me, was a nodule of rock; the only thing that came close to a belay on this featureless incline. We settled on this as our salvation, and edged towards it.

The rope was heaved up to me, and very gingerly (I was still by no means feeling secure in my position) I made it fast to the prominence. As I clipped into the loop I had just made, I relaxed a little more. Tetley began to descend while I glared at the less than bomb-proof belay. **The nodule proved to be multi-purpose: before I left the Aven of Death, we surveyed a leg from the scariest PSS in Mig to the floor below (17m).**

Once safely back down to earth, a few liquorice roll-ups were consumed as a general sense of euphoria (or perhaps just intense relief?) at not being dead or maimed began to replace the fear inside me. Not wishing to be selfish, we decided to leave the rope in place so that someone else could explore the untold caverns above Nitro Aven at a future date. I don't think it will be either one of us.

Tom Ayles

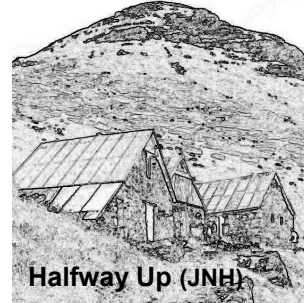
The Migovec March



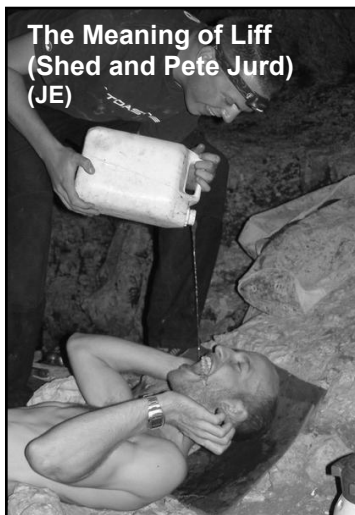
A young boy works all day and night to help his mother's farm,
but his heart was filled with want to leave and go afar,
now a lonely traveller, he packs his spotted handkerchief,
with bread and jam, his warmest clothes, some tasty salted beef,
he leaves his crying mother, and as he starts,
to put one foot down then the next, it breaks her precious heart...

*and it's up, up, up, up, up the hill he goes,
he's on his way to Migovec, it's arduous and slow,
but it's left foot, right foot, up the hill he goes,
searching for the meaning, of life is all he knows.*

He passed by a barn dance, all frivolous and gay,
and as he strutted through the door a girl lay down upon the hay,
said come with me my new friend, and lie a little while,
I'm sure you'll find it pleasant, t'will surely make you smile,
he said alas I cannot, I must complete my quest,
some other time I'll experience love, and then he left,



then it's up up up...



He walked maybe ten miles or more, was passing by a ditch,
and from that dyke did come the sound of gurgling and sick,
he pushed his head right over, inside there was a bum,
who sucked upon a bottle, of finest Cuban rum,
he said d'you have the meaning, of life that I so seek?
the hobo said come drink my friend, I start to feel quite weak,
the traveller said I do not think, therein lies higher truth,
and with those words he left the tramp to finish off his booze,

and it's up, up, up...

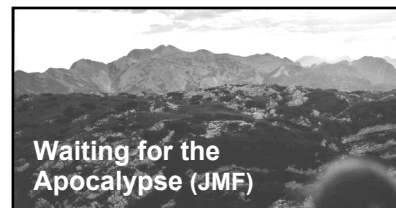
Half way up he came upon a wandering holy priest,
who called him over, said d'you know what really lies beneath?
For if you want to truly know, just read my little book,
the traveller he sat right down and gave it a quick look,
but he cried I think that I have found a crucial failing,
surely I must take your word for this amazing tale,
the priest said yes, of course my boy, you must have rock hard faith,
the traveller said I can't believe and quickened up his pace.

and it's up, up, up, up...

As he neared the top he smelt a fruity, smoky smell,
three hippies they were skinning up, they called him over with a yell,
said look we've found the meaning, of life that you so seek,
come and sit beside us, and smoke for just one week,
he said I can't, I have no week, but give me three hard hits,
he felt nothing but sleepy, and dazed and rather sick,
he cried you lie! I find nothing, in this your pungent weed
and with those words he wandered off they called him back he paid no heed,

and it's up, up, up...

When he finally reached the top, of that mighty mountain,
all there was, was a great rift, a hole to which he jumped right in,
and in the cave's black darkness, a rumbling voice did call,
I'm God and I did hear your spirited and eager call,
and the meaning that you sought so hard, was lying in the hay,
was drunk or stoned or faithful, and take your pick you may,
so the traveller he sat down there, to think hard in the gloom,
he thought of what he wanted, decided to go back home.



*and it's down, down, down, down, down the hill he goes,
to reap and toil at honest soil, at long last happy with his home...*

Miles Underground: More horizontal extensions at depth

Pippa:

In an incredible feat of underground efficiency, Clewin and I actually managed to get to the pushing front in 'Smash' by lunchtime. Clew poked his nose up the dodgy climb and confirmed what Tom, Dave and myself had suspected - it was well dodgy, and would have to wait until we found a fresher to throw at it. We also noticed a rock the size of a large wardrobe that appeared to be held onto the ceiling by a thin, book-sized, layer of mud. Clew offered to jump on it for me, but I declined on the basis that it might fall on top of the pitch and so kill the lead. And me.

Having ruled out the climb, we started rigging the other lead, a small pitch. The pitch-head turned out to be a little tighter than I thought so I stuck my stop on my short cows tail and slid through, hoping and praying that the rocks on the other side were stable. Too excited to worry about rigging properly, I dropped down onto the sloping floor strewn with boulders and rubble. The way on wasn't instantly obvious, but the draught was so strong that it had to go... I potted gingerly down to the bottom of the slope and stuck my head round the biggest boulder. The way on!! A short climb led down into another rubble filled chamber.

'Clew-in! It goes! Come on down!'

No response. After a few minutes, I decided I should really keep exploring, just to keep warm. Down another little climb, the cave opened out into a flatter, more stable-looking, rift. Still no sound from Clewin except for something that sounded like faint, muffled, grunting. Should I turn back or go on? I went on. About thirty metres later my sense of guilt kicked in and I headed back to the pitch.

'Clew-in! Are you OK?'

'Yes. Can you come up?'

Hmm. I didn't really want to go back up the pitch as my rigging was shocking and I didn't fancy going back through the squeeze. Still, I could see his point. Better to find out how easy it was to get out of sooner rather than later.

Clewin Continues:

Once Pip had disappeared from sight, all I had to do was slide through the pitch head and hammer in a bolt on the other side. I didn't get very far. Although I was sure I could squeeze through the gap somehow, getting back might have been more of an issue. Being stuck at the top of a pitch with no one above me didn't seem like a particularly good idea. So I waited for Pip to come back through the squeeze, which she did with ease. After some words of encouragement, I took off most of my SRT metalwork and slid through the gap with my suicide-rig descender attached to my short cows-tail. "Come on," said Pippa, "it goes." And go it did.... The passage became larger, and we followed the draught for about two hundred metres until stopped by a small pitch. We were a long way from safety and Miles Underground was decided upon as an appropriate name for our finds, especially as we'd both enjoyed Miles Davis' jazz tape back at underground camp.

Pippa Crosby & Clewin Griffith

On the surface, a lonesome fresher braves a Thunderstorm...

Bivvi Logbook 2nd August 2004 9pm:

Jim, Mark and Dave have left for a night-train camping trip down Gardeners' World, leaving me utterly alone on the plateau. The lightning has not yet struck, but the thunder is already booming off Kuk. If I get struck down, or engulfed by the Coleman's, I leave all my worldly possessions to the bivvy mice and my spiritual ones to the ghost of Brezno Strahov.

Jarvist Frost

A Long Weekend Underground: Extracts from the Fridge Logbook

30.07.2004 (Tom Ayles)

We departed for -700m at some ungodly hour of the day, it must have been before midday. This was not my idea; our Slovene comrades needed to bounce to the Fridge and return before the eve is out. Our descent was rapid, bobbins clearly outperforming Petzl stops (or to put it another way, a triumph of experience over, er, me). The mysteriously named Slovenian 'Z' left us at Pico while we continued to the Fridge to disturb the slumbering giants (Rik and Andy), although we made up for this by plying them with smash and cheese (no soup or fish or noodles this time). Andrej politely declined this manna from heaven and departed.

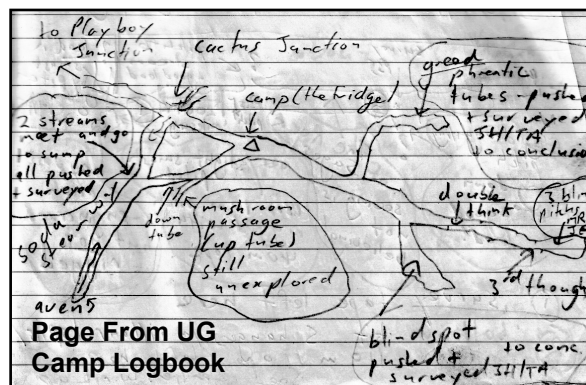
Tetley and I went to push the passage beyond camp, determined to succeed where others had failed. Our first attempt ended with an eyeful of grit. I was forced to retreat to camp to treat myself with an eyebath improvised from a tea-light. Once the boulder had been removed from my eye, we returned to continue our quest to find the destination of the draught. Following the previously explored way on led to an area full of mud, grit and breakdown. There is some kind of potential below a pitch, which we may return to drop later. Before returning to camp, we opted to push a lead I had sighted earlier on the way in - apparently where the old stream cuts down to the right through a moderately sized eyehole. Intrepid, I continued to squeeze along a narrow 45 degree inclined bedding plane rift thing, dropping down a few feet to gain larger passage. We bashed along this exciting lead [named Blind Spot] until we were halted by a pitch too long to climb. Vowing to return the following day with more gear, we surveyed back in time for tea and medals.

31.07.2004 19:45 (Tetley)

Our exciting lead died. We both suddenly hit a serious energy low so returned to camp for smashy, cheesy, fishy slop. Now we face the opposite problem. Our stomachs are so full they hurt, we can't even move. The camp is quiet as Rik and Andy are slumbering in the pits. There's only the sound of the stream.

01.08.2004 02:00 - Greed (Tom)

Having killed our lead, we thought we'd kill another. Once the killing starts, it's hard to stop... After eating a near-fatal dose of fishy cheesy smash, we embarked to push "Greed", a dry cascade on the left beyond camp. The passage continues upwards and shrinks to a constriction. I hate squeezes. Beyond this, some smallish tube like stuff leading to the base of a pitch. A rift enters this aven, while beneath very small and twatty passage 'continues'. Surveyed out, 120m.



03.08.2004 00:05? (Tom) Time has taken on an abstract quality - I believe its time to leave...

03.08.2004 00:25 (Tetley)

Well its now (apparently) Tuesday and we left the surface on Friday (I think!). A hell of a weekend - does the sun still exist? Its been a great trip so far but daylight (and 2 cans of Laško at the surface) are definitely calling. The tape player is playing up - my tape died on 'The boys are back in town.'* - but in good ol' British we managed to save this tape! **
Later Footnotes by Tom:

* 00:48 The tape player has gone postal - it just ate "Last night of the Proms"

** Until the player killed it good n proper.

Camping with Dave and Mark and getting raw feet....

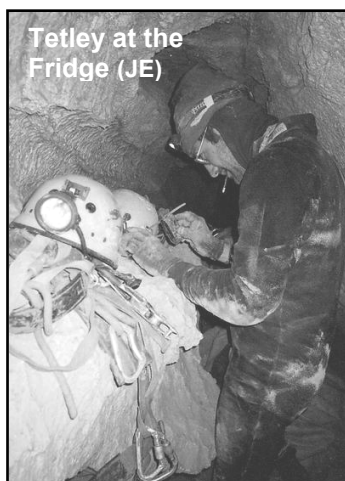
After arriving in Tolmin and going straight to Andrej's place, we chatted to his wife, Mercedes. Andrej was not back yet from a caving trip on Migovec. When he returned, we had the obligatory sampling of his home made spirits while he updated us on what had been happening underground. We slept that night in Andrej's old house above his old shop where we had first met with Andrej, Dejan and Simon in an all too formal meeting 10 years before.

The next morning we headed straight for the pizzeria where we planned to have a lazy morning and wait for Jan and Goaty who were due to turn up that day. The view of Migovec from Tolmin looked very inviting and we were both keen to be there. By about midday we were seriously pizza'ed out and starting to wonder where the hell the lads were. We could be festering for hours or days waiting for them. Jan may have completely forgotten about the expedition altogether, Goaty could have been delayed by some spectacular act of incompetence. We decided that our best option was to take all our gear and walk up to the bivvy that afternoon.

Of course its not possible to pass through Ravne without spending some time chatting with the farmers. Luckily Nada was there so we could communicate more effectively than the rudimentary level that our very limited Slovenian allowed. Their last unmarried daughter had been married in the last year and they showed us some photographs of the ceremonies, one of the traditional ceremonies seemed to involve the brother of the bride dressing up as a woman and trying to solicit the affection of the future groom, I'm not sure how widespread this tradition is but they had obviously had much fun.

Once on top of the mountain, we spent a few days chatting and playing chess - acclimatising and getting ready for a underground camping trip - it sounded like the trail for the connection to System Mig had gone impassibly wet.

Before long it was our turn to head on down to camp. After an impressive journey through Gardeners' World, Dave, Mark and I arrived at the 'Fridge' to find ourselves faced with a full house. Goaty and Jan had just returned and were about to bed down, Tetley and Tom were having breakfast in bed as preparation for leaving the cave. With no bed space immediately available for us, we decided to push a few possible leads around camp. Pushing along a section of Mushroom Passage, we found an awkward route down to the already explored 'Soda Stream' (discovered by Rik and Tetley a week earlier).

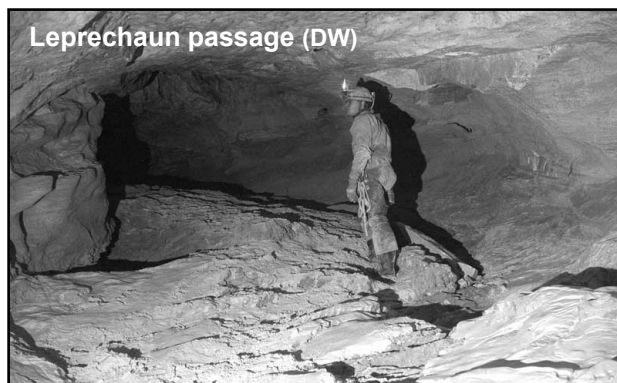


Back at camp, Goaty and Jan were fast asleep and the others long gone. We had a quick brew and soup before executing our next plan - to attack the inlet between cactus and playboy junction. It looked almost climbable and with the aid of combined tactics we soon had Dave up the short pitch, and, after he rigged a rope that we threw him, we followed him up. Just beyond the head of the pitch, a pool of water in the passageway had an odd looking pile of strange black stones which looked a bit like the remains of a pile of burnt rice. After a few meters of passageway there was a further short pitch up. We soon climbed up and rigged this and it led up to a chamber with the way on a further pitch up going back on the original passageway. After some time we concluded that it was not possible without aid climbing or a ladder. We left a bit of tat on the first pitch in case anyone wanted to revisit the area.

Finally that night we looked at a small passage off Leprechaun passage which Andy had found. After some crawling passage and passing the bag through one section, we arrived at a spacious rift dropping into a pitch of about 15m with a stream below. We eagerly unpacked the spits but had difficulty getting anything in so Dave did a temporary rig around a few naturals and descended the pitch. We waited eagerly for news of what he had found...

'Looks good... hold on a minute... Shit... I've found a surveying station placed yesterday by Tetley and Tom..... What the hell were they doing here?'

We had connected to an area Tetley and Tom had called 'Greed' the day before, which didn't make sense to Dave as he didn't think they had been in this area. Dave left a surveying station called 'Envy' next to it and we surveyed our way out from the pitch.



Once we returned to camp, I concentrated on working out why my feet were so sore. Stripping my wellies and socks off, I saw that the tops of my feet were red raw. I had worn a set of borrowed wet socks for the trip and now realised the mistake I'd made – all the sweat and grit had irritated the top of my feet. I had completely forgotten that walking socks are much better for Migovec. I poured water over my feet to sooth them. Luckily for me Dave had a spare pair of walking socks and after dressing my feet from the first aid kit, I put on his socks and we all got into the warm camp gear ready for bed.



We made a dinner out of a mixture of all the different items that were present at camp: smash; soup; tuna; cheese. We then topped it off with Jellies and chocolate bars. After hours of dozing in and out of consciousness we heard the sound of Jan and Goaty returning as we prepared our breakfast of homogenous slop. They had been to the far end of the cave, beyond Miles Underground, and reported that they'd found what was possibly a terminal sump. This they christened 'Colarado,' after the beetle which had caused the Irish potato famine. It was our mission to try and find a way on.

The trip to the far end involved some classic 'Welsh' caving - large walking passages, flat out sandy squeezes, climbs and big phreatic tubes. I was impressed by the cave itself, and by the good pushing that had been done to find all this passage, it just kept going and going. Once we'd squeezed our way through the pitch in Smash, the cave opened up yet again, into large walking passage with a bouldery floor and a good draught. After the short drop where Clewin and Pippa turned round, 200m of horizontal passage then ended at a high aven named 'To Infinity and Beyond'. A slope down to the left, however, led to a very different passage with a more rounded cross section and a clean washed floor containing very small streams of water. After about 30 metres of this, there was a beautiful, deep and very terminal looking sump. While Dave and Mark took some photos, I took my wellies and socks off and soothed my feet in the pools. We looked around for the possible sump bypass to know avail. To Infinity and Beyond, would need serious bolting and no obvious lead could be seen. The draught just seemed to disappear. We spent some time investigating other possibilities with no success and so turned round, disappointed and headed back to camp. After a short kip to refresh, we headed for the surface.

Jim Evans

Surface Work

Hare Cave - Observations on Exploring a Passage that's Just too Small

By GPS: **N 46°15'06" E 013°45'36"** (WGS84) Altitude: **1824m** 207m 277° True from M10

Spotted during the 2003 expedition, the shakehole was an almost perfectly semi-spherical bowl. No features of Postcard cave (entered by an adjacent shakehole to the East) were visible, but a large horizontal bedding plane could be obviously seen on the south side. It was guarded by a large hare (quite possibly with big sharp pointy teeth). I made a decision not to disturb the animal and did nothing more than casually glance into the slot during 2003. Situated above a possible joining point for Primadona, Gardeners' World and System Migovec, this had to be worth another look!

The entrance slot led down a thin scree slope into a more roomy chamber. A hole in the roof let light in and various small bore phreatic tubes wriggled across the ceiling. A few thin rifts also led into impenetrable muddy uninviting places. At floor level, boulders seemed to be choking the top of a possible rift, so a desperate dig option there. Ahead, a narrow rift could be ducked under into another 2m high and 2m round chamber. A significant draught issued from the floor, but in true Migovec style this was through a pile of rock. In the roof, the winding phreatic tubes caught my eye; it was unusual to see such features so near the surface.

One of the 'larger' ones led off away from the entrance and a low passage led underneath it. Although a mere 20cm diameter, I could see that it increased in size beyond the first couple of meters, and may even be passable. There was no way to hammer through the first section, but a passage beneath did connect via a very narrow rift. So the plan formed, hammer a route up from below and into the passage above. Caverns measureless to man (unless equipped with a micrometer) no doubt lay beyond. Also a strangely masochistic mantra of mine stuck in my head 'if you have to work at it, you will be rewarded'.

A few hours of hammering by myself and Jarvist later, it still appeared very tight, but looked passable and led on to an intriguing right-angled corner. Head first was out of the question as that simply led back to the too tight tube and there was definitely nowhere to turn around. So feet first it was. Starting with a hand stand, I slotted my feet into the rift about one metre above my head and into the tube above. With Jarvist guiding my feet down the too tight section, I slowly pushed up with my arms and eventually passed into the passage above. I hoped it would be easier in return. Anyway, the obstacle was passed, the rush of exploration was there, off I went or more accurately off I thrutched. Wiggle, wiggle, push etc.

About five metres of phreatic tube lay ahead and it was a pretty snug fit, to put it mildly. A very narrow rift that was only a few centimetres wide dropped down below. I got to the corner that I had seen in the distance. The tube turned through ninety degrees to the right, I could not, however, get around the corner due to obscuring rock ribs. I had been halted. I could see the passage continue for another meter before another right angle turned the passage to the original direction. A good draught was obvious.



Although halted by time and rock, hammering would do the trick and I couldn't help thinking that it looked just a little bit too much like Oh-so-fag-arse, the squeeze that led to all the discoveries in Gardeners' World, to be left alone.....

Ben Ogborne

Storm Cave

I suggested that we go look at a cave that Brian Cullen and I had discovered last year when racing up the hill from Razor to escape an incoming storm. This fit in with other bivvy faffer's idea of a stroll around the plateau, so off we set - dumping kit at the entrance to GW on the way. Storm cave is located on the disused path in the valley between Tolminski Migovec and Vrh Nad Škrbino. Altitude around 1650m.

Pip went in as we had carried the kit down, the entrance is a rift which widens out into a shaft, which is then blocked by snow. On the other side of the little valley is a depression with snow in it, with a draughting hole in the snow plug. (Bit unstable though.... - Pip) So get shovels and shades and start digging, as there is plenty of potential in this area. Last year there was no snow in the valley, so maybe next year we'll come back to an open cave!

Martin McGowan



My Little Cave [Janet's] N 46°15'18.8" E 013°45'44.3" (WGS84)

Small airy passage in side of shake hole near path to Kuk, approx. same altitude as bivvy. Another entrance to Gardeners' World?

This time we got to the entrance and headed down the tube. I was in t-shirt and shorts; so after finding an awkward looking squeeze I asked Mark to have a go. After ten minutes of hammering there was a bit of progress, so I ambled off to get my kit from Gardeners' World.

When back Mark was through the squeeze. I tugged on my kit and followed him down. Below the squeeze was a good size chamber, choked at the bottom. A low crawl led off back towards the main shakehole, into another large chamber. A climb down in the floor didn't go, and we thought maybe the cave was dead.

We paused to find the draught. There was a choked rocky floor in the first chamber which we thought might take the draught. Climbing up above the hole, a small tube was seen to drop into another chamber, looking bigger than the first, and sucking a cold draught. The tube was totally friable, and after ten minutes of bashing we were through! But our SRT kits were still on the surface and the drop on the far side looked sketchy. We decided to leave it for another day.

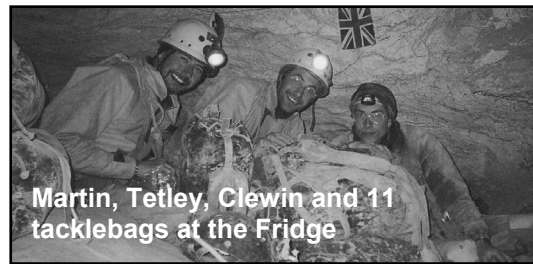
Location is a hundred metres or so North-East of the M19 shakehole, on the south-side of the big GW valley. Entrance is in the NE of the shakehole, a big overhanging entrance a couple of metres high with a climb down. A small triangular tube is visible in one corner.

Drop through the rift at the end of the entrance rift. The way on is at the far right end of the rift. We found it easiest looking towards Kuk [out the cave]. This lead is Very Good!

Janet Cotter

The Derig to end all Derigs

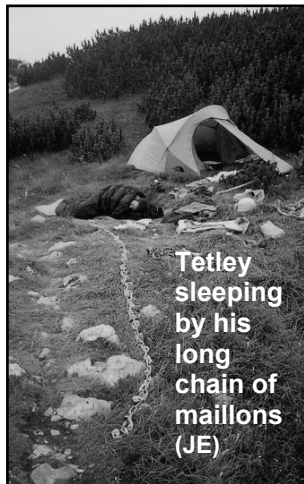
Martin McGowan: The basic plan was for Clewin and Tetley to sleep overnight, then be joined by two others to derig the camp. The other lucky cavers would only have to go down to Friendship Gallery, pick up a bag or two then zoom off for the surface. Meanwhile Janet and Jarvist would man the Bivvy and greet returning cavers with tea and fresh nosh.



Martin, Tetley, Clewin and 11 tacklebags at the Fridge

Well - best laid plans! Clewin and Tetley woke up very late and soon discovered there was more at camp than hoped for - 11 bags between the initial four cavers. So now each of us were encumbered by two large tackle bags, making all the small climbs, squeezes and rift a major obstacle. The worst bit was that your arm strength to lift the bags was drained away from you, despite regular eating the cold slowly infused into your body. By the time I reached Pico I had made the decision that it either the bags or me that were getting out. I was so slow prussiking out that Clewin was letting me get up 4 or 5 rebelays before starting on the rope, yet he was still catching me up. Every step had to be thought out and a mental count kept of how to prussic, slowly double check every action as this is the time that tired people make fatal mistakes. Eventually I reached the top of Piston and the twatty Urinal series, I dumped the bags knowing I could manage myself out of the tight awkward pitch head of the series, but not the bags. Mentally and physically a great weight had been lifted off my shoulders, and I was free. Once I got out I staggered back to the bivvy with Jan, here we met with a culinary delight of real food, not any of that dehydrated TVP muck, and wine! It must be said that I was so tired that anything would have been great and finally the sweet comfort of your sleeping bag.

Jarvist Frost: After slaving away over all afternoon over a hot stove (a fresher's work is never done!) the cavers slowly appeared in dribs and drabs. They looked pretty damn shagged, struggling out of their oversuits to sit down and gobble the rather extravagant feast. I didn't even try to wait up for Tetley; last reports said he was singing merrily to himself as he wielded a spanner at minus 600m, expected back at dawn.

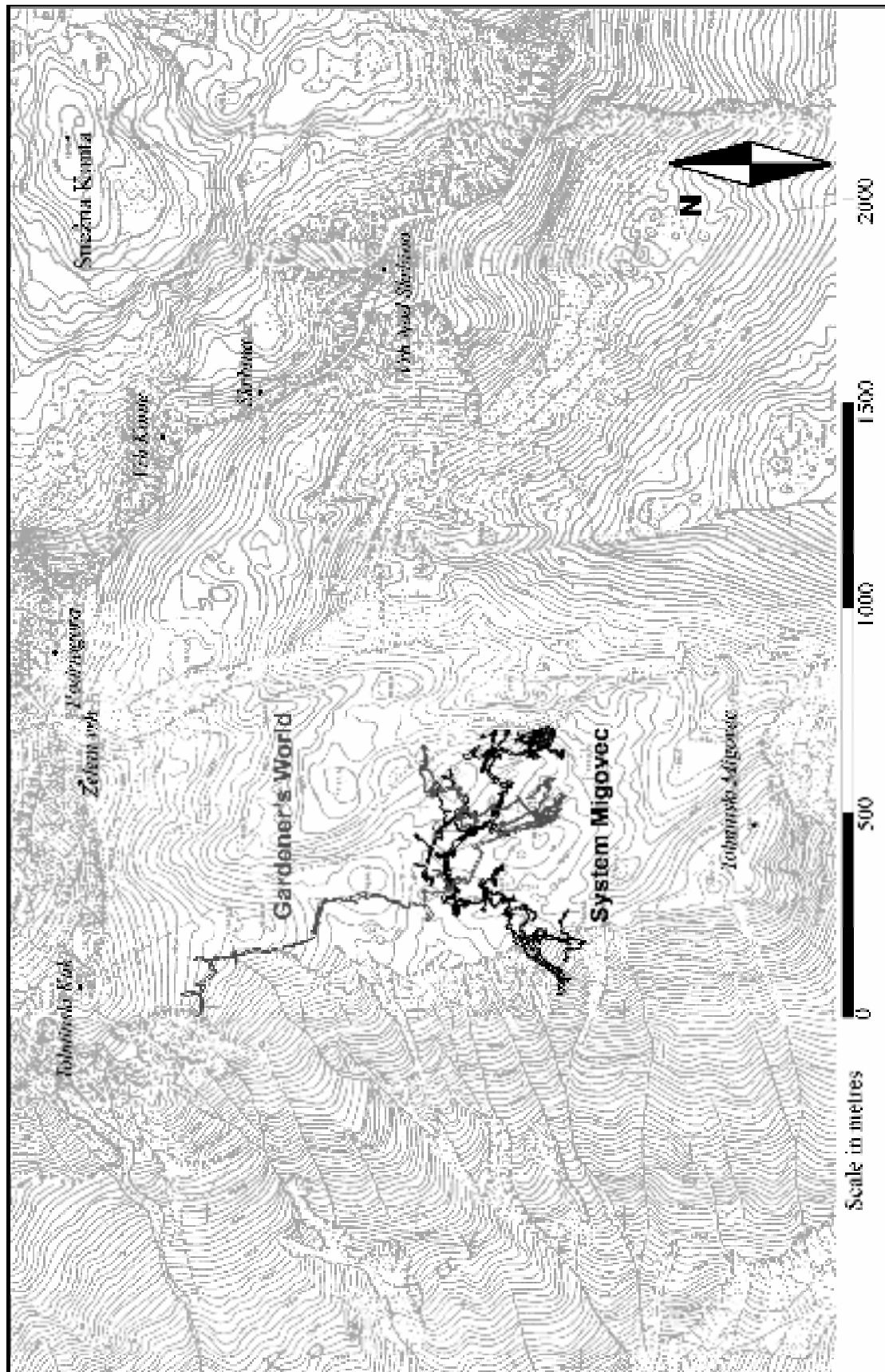


Tetley sleeping by his long chain of maillons (JE)

I was woken by an all too familiar Irish voice "Grrr, grrr grrr, Derig, grrr grrr grrr with Hugh." Martin clearly had other plans for my lie-in time. Crawling uncooperatively out of my beautifully snug sleeping bag, I stumbled past the corpse-like legs of Tetley projecting from his tent, alongside a chain of about 100 maillons. The derig was incomplete; it looked as if it was up to Hugh and myself to finally put the cave to bed. Equipped with Vaseline and a pencil (to protect the Spits from rusting), Hugh and I flung ourselves down the entrance pitches and soon found ourselves standing at the head of Piston. Dragging an abandoned tacklebag, we steadily derigged, metalwork attached to belts, Spits smeared with Vaseline and the ropes left coiled above the pitch-heads. In no time at all, we were at the surface. Six months ago, bouncing to -120 and dragging kilos of metal back up with me would have been a serious endeavour, now it was merely a pleasant stroll between breakfast and lunch.

Getting changed at the entrance - it was far too hot an afternoon to walk across the plateau in caving gear - I looked back at the nonchalant entrance to Gardeners' World. An inconspicuous hole, under a little rock bridge like many others in the valley; yet uncountable hours have been volunteered to unravel its mysteries. There's no way you could pay people to do what we do. We endure the lightning strikes, atrocious dried food, the soul-curdling horror of the shit pit - and that's before we get underground and tackle the dangers of exploration caving, the remoteness, the depth and the sometimes horrifying instability of the cave itself. Yet this is what we enjoy - to have a life so far removed from our regular nine to five work, to leave the first ever footprints in a new cavern. Roll on Migovec 2005.

2004 Extent of Gardeners' World & System Migovec on a map of the area



2004 Gardeners' World Survey

