

# The Blowing Holes Recce - Easter 95

## The reason why... (Jim)

In 1994, whenever we saw Andrej, we would quiz him about the location of known caves and ask about the best places to look for new ones. I remember asking him about the plateau beyond the ridge in the North.

"There are no caves there."

"How do you know that for sure?" I inquired.

"Because when you look at the area from the ridge in winter, there are no holes blowing through the snow."

I became very interested in these 'Blowing Holes'. Apparently the Migovec plateau is covered by them in winter and that's why Andrej was so convinced of the cave potential. A plan was thus born to mount a winter reconnaissance to the area in February 1995, to find these blowing holes and log their position with a GPS or paint. We could then relocate them in the summer...

## The reason why...(Iain)

The choice of accommodation at this time of year should have been simple: ten days in a chalet in one of the best ski areas in Europe. A complication arose, however, following a phone call from Jim one miserable January evening. His alternative accommodation was to return to the happy hunting ground of the previous summer's expedition to Slovenia "to look for blowing holes." Now, before this call I was of the understanding that only water-based mammals possessed blowing holes, but no, apparently limestone regions when blanketed with snow have them too. The feeling of duty which makes ICCC members great (and binds them together like hairs in a plughole) was overpowering. I could do little other than agree to a week of abject misery...

## The Recce

We (Jim, Iain, Chard and Jos Visconti (a Frenchman)) arrived in Venice with one of the heaviest hand luggage payloads ever. The Fiat we hired was remarkable in that it swallowed all our kit *and still did 170kph*. We thus arrived in Tolmin pretty late, but still in time for a few generous measures of Žganje (Schnapps) at Andrej's house. As we caught up on the news, he told us about the considerable risk of avalanches in the area and the best route to get to the top of the mountain.



Iain, in full mountaineering gear, heading up Migovec

As the weather was poor, we first spent a day in Mala Boka, a resurgence cave being explored (by bolting up shafts) by the JSPDT. This cave has been dye connected to Skalaria cave (-911m) on the Kanin plateau - there is still a long way to go to connect them, but a connection would give a 2000m deep system. We only had a short trip in to the first sump as our caving gear was limited to a helmet and zoom but it was our first chance to have a look in the cave as the entrance is completely sumped in the summer due to the volume of snow melt coming off the mountain. We then tried, unsuccessfully, to obtain telemark or mountaineering skis to make the journey to the plateau easier.

Our only option was to go for it in mountaineering gear - Andrej seemed to think that it would be hard but possible. We drove up to Tolminske Ravne in the evening. As we went, we saw no evidence of snow until we actually arrived in Ravne. Here, there were only a few shallow patches of snow.

We spent the night in Slowko's barn (out of spite for the rough treatment we'd received the previous summer) and arose early the next morning to make our way up the hill. As we walked up the snow began to get deeper. At first a few inches, then a foot and then knee height. Moving was becoming difficult and we were getting tired. A bit further and the snow was chest height, for a section we had to crawl to prevent ourselves falling through (we really needed skis or snowshoes). As we gained in altitude the temperature also started to drop. This in fact saved us. The snow began to get harder and despite the fact that it was very deep, above 1300m we no longer sank.



**Jim, heading up...**

We arrived at the shepherd's huts after a six-hour slog (this takes about an hour in the summer) and we were pretty tired. The weather was turning bad so we decided to stay there for the night and head to the plateau early in the morning. Iain and Jim made a snow hole to sleep in, which turned out to be warmer than the huts. That evening, working out what we were going to eat, we realised that we had badly underestimated how much food we would need for the next two days. Food had to be rationed and we spent that day and the next somewhat cold and hungry.



**Jim in a snow hole**



**The Plateau at last...**

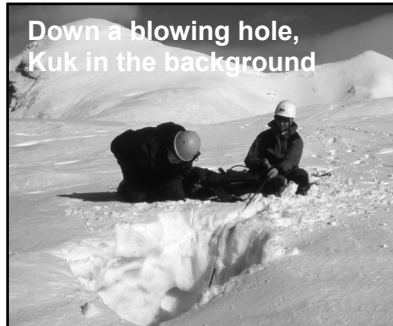
The following morning we got up at 4.00 am to try to get a full day's light. Everything was frozen including all our water and our boots so it took some time with a stove to prepare ourselves for the ascent. Fortunately, going up to the plateau was merely just a slog although there were one or two occasions where the ice axes and crampons were necessary. Once at the top we had half a mars bar each and set off to look for blowing holes. The plateau was beautiful with its snow covering. Very soon we came across a number of blowing holes which we were able to climb down and log. The GPS didn't seem to be working, though, so we ended up using just paint and compass triangulation to mark these entrances. We spent a good few hours up there that day and then decided that the best thing to do would be go down to the town, stock up with food, sort out the GPS and return the following day. Getting down from the top to Ravne was very easy - sliding on our bums it took us about an hour and a half.



**Jim, Iain and Simon in the Shepherd's Hut**

Once down in Tolmin, the first place on the agenda was the pizza bar. The following day, Jos spent some time calibrating the GPS and made sure it was working while we stocked up with plenty of food in preparation for the trip to the shepherd's huts that evening. This time the walk up to the huts was much easier as we already had our previous tracks to follow and the temperature was also slightly lower.

In the morning we had white out conditions. It was completely unsuitable for going up to the plateau so we spent the day around the hut. The temperature plummeted to “absolutely chanking” (Jim); “jolly nippy” (Chard); “feurking etc.” (Jos). Iain’s brain was numb so he didn’t say much. However, we all joined in when the singing began and made a fire in the middle of the floor which soon filled the hut with dense smoke. Chard wore his ski goggles for the first time.



Down a blowing hole, Kuk in the background

The next day the skies were clear and we headed up early to the plateau to continue the work. In all 56 entrances were logged. Some of the draughts coming out of the holes were very strong and we were very hopeful for the summer. During one incident early on in the day we discovered the importance of roping together. “Feurking ‘ell” (the Frenchman’s English was progressing nicely) “we ‘ave lost Chard down a feurking great eaule.” Chard was, in fact, not lost as he had the GPS, but he was down a sizeable hole. Getting him out employed our rope for the first time.

A similar incident occurred when Jos and Jim were looking into M2 entrance. Suddenly, without warning, the snow collapsed and Jim would have fallen into the shaft if Jos hadn’t pulled him back suddenly. Returning to the Shepherd’s huts, Iain was becoming very quick at sliding down the hill, while the rest of us were cautious on the steeper sections, he slid down the whole lot, arriving at the shepherd’s hut from the top in six minutes.



Chard getting out of the Cessna

Our last day was spent enjoying ourselves. Jim, Chard and Jos went flying over the plateau in a Cessna and Iain went skiing on Kanin. The Cessna pilot wouldn’t fly low enough to see any blowing holes but enjoyed aerobatics. Iain wouldn’t fly high enough on his skis for aerobatics, but saw some blowing holes. That night we took a slow boat through Venice before settling down at the airport. Early next morning we were met at Gatwick by Kathryn who had the dubious pleasure of driving us home. Considering none of us has washed for ten days, it was a brave thing to do.



One of 56 logged blowing holes



The Bivvy in winter

**With so many holes blowing through the snow, there surely must be a deep system under Migovec. Now, we just had to find our way into it in the summer...**

Jim Evans and Iain M’Kenna

Winter Recce photos by Richard Anderson (Chard) and Jos Visconti