

1998

International Relations and Crates of Beer



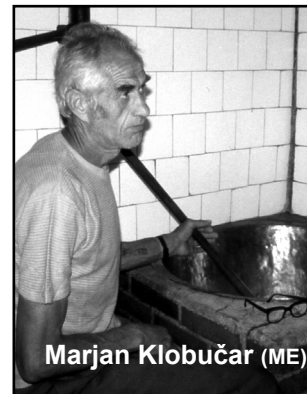
It still remains the case that foreign cavers are not allowed to explore in Slovenia, except as part of a joint team with Slovenian cavers. Camping without permission is also forbidden in the Triglav National park. By 1998, we were very friendly with JSPDT members and, through Andrej, we had gained official permission to camp and cave on Migovec. Exploration on Mig continues to be a close collaboration between JSPDT and ICCC - every year joint trips have taken place and survey data, leads and numerous pints of beer continue to be shared.

What the locals in Tolmin make of the annual influx of smelly English cavers, heaven only knows... At Ravne, however, relations have blossomed over the years with the Klobučar family. Jackie, in particular, has helped them collect in the harvest and make cheese. Hugh, who first joined the expedition in 1997 and speaks fluent Slovenian, fills them on the latest news.

Within a week, we were back within our fondly loved cave, replacing ropes and adding bolts to create the 'trade routes' through to the actively explored deep end. One major change to the rigging was the use of a wire rope to give an initially fear-inducing 13m tension line over Gladiators traverse, previously negotiated by a guided abseil and prussik. Another improvement in 1998 was the creative sewing of scrounged (sponsored) Polartec polyester fleece which we turned into extra warm clothes and sleeping bag liners for use at underground camp.

Teething problems with our electronics were finally sorted out this year. Two Solarex solar panels (designed to be mounted on the deck of yachts and thus fairly caver/storm proof) were used to charge a 12V car battery. This in turn (via a constant current circuit) provided the power for a Bosch drill, flat cells for the caving lights, the soldering iron and the laptop computer (donated by Compaq). As an added safety precaution in case of a rescue (and a useful way to order more bolts) it was found possible to use a mobile 'phone near the bivvy.

As the following articles relate, the 1998 expedition was very successful and ended with the start of a fine tradition - an end of expedition party at Ravne. A pig was roasted, Andrej caught a Soča trout, salad was made, sausages were barbequed, and crates of beer were bought. A group of girl scouts joined in as we tried to learn traditional Slovenian dances and songs to the sound of the farmer's accordion. The farmer and JSPDT and ICCC cavers slowly got ever more intoxicated....



Marjan Klobučar (ME)

Looking up at the stars over Migovec, we all reflected on the many discoveries of the previous six weeks...

James Hooper



Jan Shed

Jim Andrej

Milan Huggy

Ben Kathryn

Clive

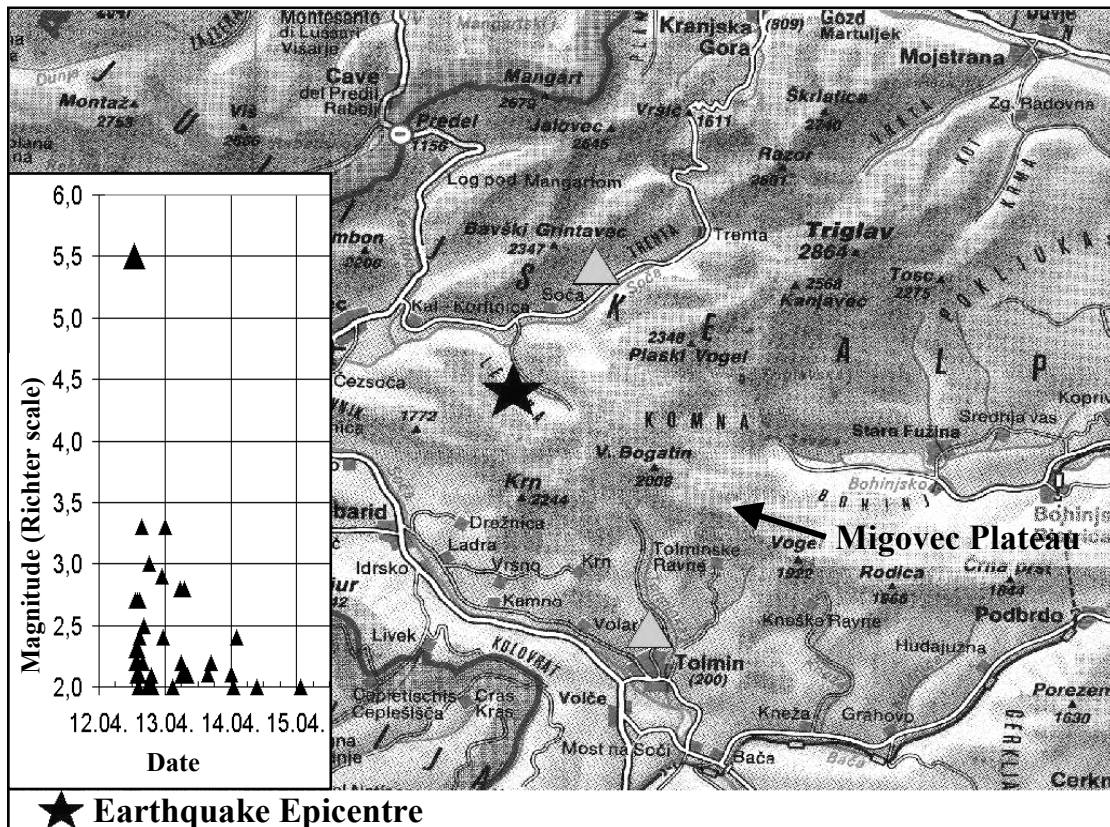
The Earthquake

On April 12th 1998 a major earthquake struck our part of Slovenia. The epicentre of the main shock (5.5 on the Richter scale) was only 11.5km North West of the plateau. Fortunately there were no fatalities or injuries but many buildings in the area were severely damaged or destroyed, especially in Bovec. Around the Tolminka valley a large chunk of Krn mountain sheared off and its shape was clearly different from a distance. In Tolminke Ravne, the ever friendly Klobučar family were forced to move out of their home and into a house nearby (that had been built by the electricity company when they constructed the hydroelectric plant). A local scout group spent the summer assisting the farmers and members of the 1997 expedition (especially Jackie) also helped out. The expedition benefited from the generosity and support of the Klobučars as we were allowed the use of their damaged house, complete with (smoking) wood stove, hot shower, flushing loo and seismometer, as our “base camp,” a luxury compared to the barn we were accustomed to.

Migovec itself saw a few landslides that were clearly visible from a distance. Tolmin cavers visited the nearby Pološka Jama. They found significant collapses and movements within the cave and the location of the major resurgence was found to have moved! We therefore couldn't make any definite plans before arriving in Slovenia, as we didn't know if or how our system had changed. Additionally we were anxious that minor after-tremors, still frequently occurring as we were setting off for the Julian Alps, might cause a safety risk underground.

Once trips into the system had begun, it became clear that the earthquake had had no visible effect on the cave. After-tremors, three of which were felt on the surface during the '98 expedition, were not noticed underground. One story from the locals kept us on our toes however: The last comparable earthquake in the area happened in the early '70s and was in fact two large earthquakes four months apart. Consequently many Slovenians were expecting major tectonic activity to recur during the full moon in early August (in the middle of the expedition). Fortunately this never happened and to date there has been no repeat of the large earthquake felt in April 1998.

Jim Evans and James Hooper



A Classic Start to an Expedition

I was chatting to Tetley before his talk at the BCRA conference in 1997, when he asked what I was doing the following summer. I must admit I hadn't really given it much thought, probably go back to Ireland, do some caving, laze around. He then told me about the ICCG expedition to Slovenia. I had seen their stand and it looked interesting. So off to the lecture, this really sold it to me. The next stage was to get a place on the expedition. After several drinking sessions in Southside and leading a trip down Dan Yr Ogof, I was signed up.

IC³ takes a very relaxed view to expedition planning; one evening I turned up to find that in my absence I had been nominated the Medical Person. No matter. Over the coming months the expedition slowly took shape. Until the final few weeks when all of a sudden there was a flurry of organisation. Get the food, book the van, the ferry, first aid, sort the gear, have you written to?, No?, Do it! A frantic rush in the final hours saw a minibus (minus a few seats) packed with all our gear.

Finally we'd packed, left London and broken down. In bloody Sidcup!! The RAC came out and asked if we were going far. A bit of a stupid question! The van was packed to the gills with gear and there were several hundred-kilogram barrels on the roof. He decided to inspect the engine, so he jacked it up with 6 sleeping people and all the gear still in it. While the jack gave off ominous creaks and groans, he solved the problem.

On down to Dover, a quick romp around the duty free, and across Europe following a thin black line in a road atlas. The next problem was the green card, which could only be bought in Slovenia. We had no card so were forced to return to Italy to bivvy for the night, getting drunk on duty free. The next day we arrive at the border and found the duty free shop had just run out of green cards. So we turned around again and headed to another crossing, parked the van and walked across the border to buy the card: cash only, Tolars or DM...

Finally we arrived in Slovenia. We now just had to drive over Triglav (only the highest mountain in Slovenia) with an over-laden bus. As we went down the tight hairpins, the smell of burning brakes became overpowering and nauseating. Eventually we reached Bovec and saw the first serious effects of the earthquake. Streets of houses were held up by props, roofs had collapsed inwards and there were massive cracks up the sides of the buildings. What could have happened to the cave? Fortunately Tolmin showed very little damage and we soon headed up to Tolminske Ravne. Here we found the farmer's house had been condemned, so we could stay in it. Inside the local geologist had installed a seismometer. What twenty cavers tramping around the house was going to do to the readings only time would tell. Personally I pitched my tent outside as the area was still being affected by aftershocks.



The next day I was woken by a low rumble, the tent was shaking violently; was this an earthquake I thought as I tried to rouse myself from a semi-conscious state? A series of stroboscopic flashes and the tent was turned into a disco; ah it's a storm...., that's a relief. I made it to the house just as the deluge started. My tent was quickly surrounded by two rivers, and the road became a swollen torrent. Eventually, we realised that the storm was not going to abate. So we resigned ourselves to this fact and set up the hill with our supplies, our rucksacks acting like absorbent sponges. I punted along the meadow with my walking sticks, got half way up and decided to shelter in the Shepherd's Huts while Jim, Mark and Jackie headed up to the bivvy, battling the gusting wind of the gale to set up the rain barrels (to avoid having to collect snow for water). The rain pelted against the tin roof. I headed down and returned with another load to the hut. This was surely the wettest and most miserable start to an expedition ever.

Martin M^cGowan

First Time Up: Carry on Carrying



It was my first time in Slov, and I was out for two weeks. I had also just shattered a few bones in my heel after a drunken incident involving scaffolding. This all conspired to make the journey to Migovec really unpleasant. Shed, Colm and I arrived in Venice to a very hot day. We trundled our way over to Gorizia on an old slow train trying to stay as cool as possible in the immense heat. Using a combination of ignorance and stupidity we then blagged our way onto a bus and got to the border for free. By now, it was very hot and so we decided to walk to Nova Gorica, and more importantly, we took a 'short cut' recommended to us by a local idiot. My rucksack weighed around 30kg, the temperature was around 30°C and there was no shade in sight.

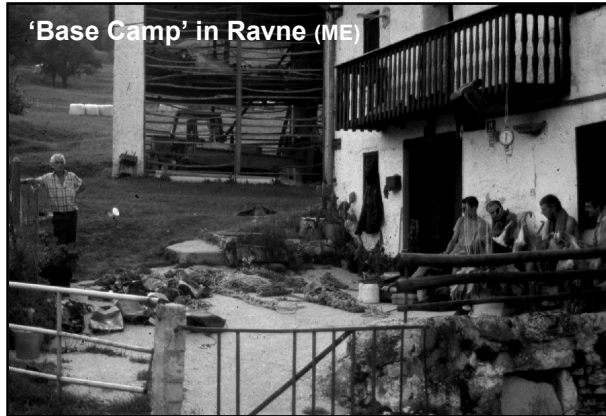
We set off up a winding road and soon I needed to stop and make a crutch from a nearby tree to help relieve the weight slightly off my foot. I slowly hobbled on. Obviously, due to careful planning, we had no water and an hour or so had passed since we set off. In the blazing sun, we were all starting to get headaches and feel the heat. We needed a drink Luckily, we spotted a fire hydrant by the side of the road - a man had just finished using it to wash his car. After some gentle tap turning, we drank and then continued to slog on to the delightful Nova Gorica. The town welcomed us warmly with its flashing enticing neon signs for delights such as casinos and "Live Girls".

An hour passed before the bus to Tolmin arrived. Shed was feeling rough and I couldn't walk (Colm was probably feeling comfortable somewhere, but I can't remember). We got on the bus, sitting at the back, and trundled off towards the relative security of Tolmin. Ten minutes passed and Shed piped up with "Does anyone have a bag, I'm going to be sick?" We began to search our luggage.... All of us had packed as light as possible and had no plastic bags near the top of our rucksacks. The searching got more frantic as Shed got whiter and whiter, he then began going green. Finally Colm found a bag - a previous home for his towel. Shed violently and suddenly wretched in the direction of the open bag top. His aim was good, right in the middle of the bag. Unfortunately, in our haste, the integrity of the bag had been overlooked. The half kilo of high velocity Shed vomit just skimmed the sides of the bag as it fell directly through the hole in the bottom of the bag onto the coach floor. It seemed like a lot of effort to produce a tube to aim the vomit. The rest of the journey was slow. The small number of locals on the bus were mostly sitting at the front. The stench of sick gradually increased as it slowly dribbled its way from the back to the front. We all anxiously monitored its progress down the aisle. Just as it reached the front, we arrived in Tolmin, and leapt out of the rear exit on the coach and ran (hobbled) away before we could be found out.



We soon arrived at Andrej's house in Tolmin and, before I knew it, a glass of the purest drink was thrust in front of me. Shed kindly refused, explaining his situation. This only resulted in a bottle of brown liquid with a root floating in it being brought out as a cure. This also contained something close to pure ethanol. Much to Shed's surprise, the drink seemed to actually help! After a quick tour around the garage (to see Andrej's hand grenade collection), we arrived at the factory in the barracks and collapsed until the morning.

By morning, the weather was hot and clear. Migovec was pointed out to me in the distance. Andrej very kindly gave us a lift to just over the Devil's Bridge, so we could walk from there. My foot by now was really hurting and walking on it was not a great idea. The only good point was that by walking uphill, the pain was less than going downhill - a slight advantage. Finally the path hit the main road up to Tolminske Ravne and the walking became a bit easier.



The slow, hot and painful slog continued until we finally reached Tolminske Ravne. We met up with the farmer and his wife and sat down in front of the incredibly shonky looking earthquake-condemned house. After some food, we visited the Zadlaščice, a nearby river. This was a lovely idyllic spot to have a beer and reduce the swelling of my foot in the ice cold water. We did, in fact, have a small competition as to who could keep their feet in the water the longest. Colm won with an impressive 13 seconds.

As the afternoon began, the inevitable walk up to Migovec got closer. In my state I was really not looking forward to it. With Mig towering about 1000m above us, we set off up into the woods. Apparently it was necessary to take the short cut - not sure if that was a good idea, but we did. The gradually thinning woods eventually broke out into a lovely meadow, a great relief to have a rest. Our progress was very slow - I was slowing the others down a lot - but we were in no rush as long as we arrived by the evening. The next rest and water stop was the shepherd's huts. Another very welcome and too short break quickly turned into the remaining thrash up the final few hundred meters. This was a particularly slow and painful section. Clouds were swirling around us. We were not too concerned about the weather, however, until a deep booming sound hit us. After a couple of seconds, we realised it was not thunder, but a large rock fall on Krn. After half a minute or so, the sound of individual boulder smashing down the mountain side could still be heard - this did not fill me with great confidence about the journey across the scree slope. Fortunately, this went without a hitch. Although the pain was beginning to get to me, the end was closing fast. After a final push up an impressively built-up section, we reached the ridge over to the plateau. My ideas about an easy walk over the plateau were then smashed into several thousand pieces. It's only flat if you round it down to the nearest 50m! As it turned out, this was one of the most painful sections. Progress was slower than I thought and sections of downhill were hurting my heel.

How to annoy a doctor:

- Get pissed.
- Climb 10ft up some scaffolding and jump off.
- Walk around for ten days on a buggered up foot.
- Visit a doctor.
- Get told not to walk for a week.
- Ignore doctor and travel to Slovenia.
- Climb up 6000ft mountain.

Ben Ogborne
(from Logbook)

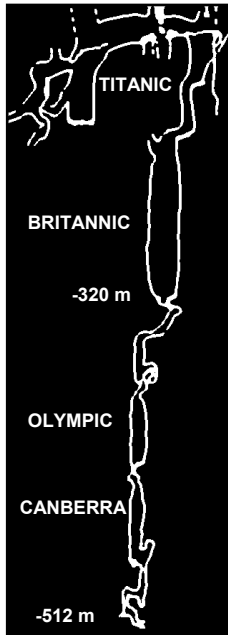
The final slope eventually yielded to the sight of tents and I seem to remember Jim sunning himself. That was my first trip up the mountain - it was also my worst ever. Shed and I set up the small two man tent and I settled down into two weeks of bivvy life.

Ben Ogborne



Plumbing the Depths: The White Star Series

Olympic and Canberra - they too went down



Beyond the tight rift at the bottom of Britannic (-320m), an exciting pitch series was left as an ongoing lead at the end of the '97 expedition. Near the start of the '98 trip, Phil and I returned, making a fast descent to the limit of exploration and bolting the next pitch 'Olympic' at somewhat less speed. Despite our belief that this pitch was near bottomless, it turned out to be a 40m freehang. Unfortunately the rift continuation was blocked at the bottom by two stubborn boulders so we had no choice but to turn round. Unable to keep up with Phil, I struggled out from Hotline alone, arriving at the bivvy at around midnight, totally shattered and dehydrated, unable to eat much food.

After a well-earned 'doss day,' Phil and I packed a heavy bag of digging kit (crowbar, hammers, chisels etc.) and set off before noon with big intentions to force a way on down. Arriving at the blocked vertical rift, and using the crow bar and chock stones, we eased one of the boulders over until it was tantalisingly balanced on one edge - leaving just enough room to squeeze through. I drove in a spit, rigged it and descended through slowly, descender on a cowstail. It was a goer! A decent pitch - bang, bang, splosh - followed almost immediately. With difficulty, I inched back through the squeeze and set about widening it with the hammer.

The next pitch 'Canberra' was 40m and took us close to the D-mark (-500m). We landed in a rocky chamber with yet more rifts continuing off. Alas we had no more rope so it was time to retreat, surveying as we went. Huggy had also joined us to 'geologise' and join in the short but hopeful discovery of a minor extension 'Winter Olympics' - three small chambers near the top of Olympic. Despite carrying a tacklebag, the way back was reasonably stress free and a good lead was left for the next team.

Sarah Wingrove

"Shed, Jan and I bomb down Britannic, take one look at the rift and got the hell out a.s.a.p. Jan bets me the most comfy spot in the tent that we'll be out by 9:45. Exit the cave at 10:05, making me the clear winner, though all the vodka ribena has disappeared by then. Very comfy night in tent."

Colm (of course....)

Logbook Extracts 1998

"First night at the bivvy notable for the five-minute bottle of Bailey's and a fine curry around the fire followed by a fine clear night under the stars."

"Rescue dump set up at Bikini Carwash with spare carbide, emergency food, batteries, first aid etc."

"A change in the weather but still no rain - desperately needed to replenish our water supplies. A team spent several hours yesterday rigging M10 and melting snow on tarpaulins."



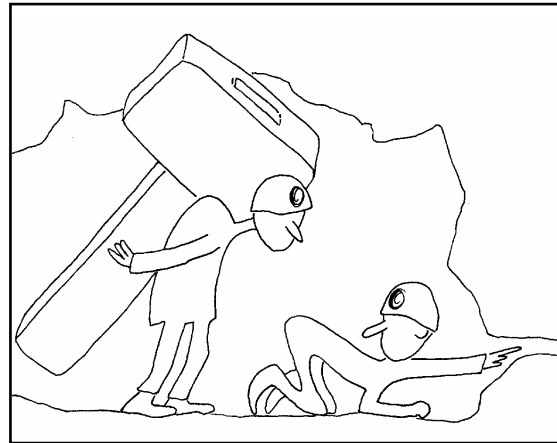
A desperate bid for greater depth



Depth in the afternoon was the plan. Clewin and I were armed with loads of rope, rigging kit, surveying kit and chapatti sandwiches - ready to push ever deeper into the hollow mountain. We were soon at the top of Titanic, ready for a big push down yet another of the system's pitch series. Britannic was awesome, the rift a pain and the squeeze before Canberra extremely frightening. "Rescue impossible from now on...."

More rift, memories of Torn-T, another hammered squeeze and a short drop brought us to a small 'two-person-sized chamber'. A six-inch wide crack was the only way on. We knew that if we could get past this and leave a possible lead, then we could exit without kit. If it was impassable, we would have to do the decent thing and start to derig. Clewin grabbed the hammer and chisel and started the attack.

Two hours later we were desperate. Arm strength was failing, midnight approaching, the crack remained impassable. We were both exhausted. "One last go, if I can just remove that nodule..." No avail. No way on... An epic derig began. Indeed, I'll never forget collapsing, knackered, in the rift below Britannic with an enormous, red tacklebag that seemed bigger than me at the time. We moved on up, slowly, carefully, surfacing shortly after sunrise. The White Star series was finally laid to rest.



James Hooper

Further Logbook Extracts 1998

"Tolmin session continued: shopping, pizza, ice-cream, Soča, last minute dash up the hill for an evening at the bivvy which turned out to be the best piss-up ever. The bivvy residents had been on top of Mig watching the sunset with a bottle, the Tolmin group arrived after having downed a litre and a half of very cheap red wine at the top of the mule track and I (Scuz) had been downing rum to try and catch up with the others. The result was an absolute riot without a sober head on the mountain. It was a fine prune curry too Martin!"

"Jackie, Cecile, Kathryn and I (Scuz) set off for a girl's trip down M17. We couldn't find any bolts so we rigged entirely on naturals (unless you count a tent-pole backup!). Tried to find a connection to NCB through the ice at the bottom but ended up cold and shivering so we beat a retreat. Out at sunset for a tasty chilli."

"Rescue team were kept awake 'til 3a.m. when Mark and Jim returned (safely) from a rigging/exploration trip in the Stal extensions (later renamed Poltergeist)"

"Another hot and sunny 'boil in the tent' morning which turned into another hot and sunny 'but who cares cos we're going caving' afternoon."



The Hotel reopens for business: Rigging down below -900m

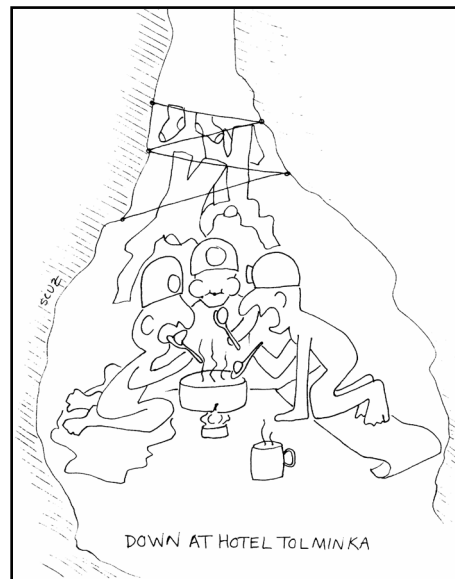


Huggy and I set off for the first camping trip of the year. Jim and Tetley, looking nowhere near ready, told us they would follow shortly. We took a while putting in a few extra bolts on the way down to make the pitch heads safer and easier (including Huggy's 2nd and 3rd bolts ever) and arrived at the Hotel early evening with carbides beginning to play up. There was no sign of the other pair and, as they were bringing the bedding and spare carbide, we sat around for a long wait.

The Hotel was mouldy, the Trangia was furry, the sand grey, the karrimats wet and there was a huge mountain of spare carbide and litter on the shelf; but it was good to be back nonetheless. Then it got cold and we seriously considered going out. About three hours later we heard Jim and Tetley coming through the passage above with five tacklebags. Thank goodness for that! Despite a host of excuses, I spanked them both for being slack and set about making up the four beds and brewing some more tea. After a period of faffing, three of us snuggled up in our warm dry sleeping bags listening to 'Blackadder Goes Forth' while Huggy went to Pawoden to do some trendy geology, returning three hours later. The home-made Polartec furies, Polartec sleeping bag liners, Buffalo Bags and bivvy bags made for a sound night's sleep. The close vicinity of the piss BDH meant that there was no incentive to venture far away from the safety of our pits until the container was full to the brim.



After the usual underground concoction of smash, soup and fish, the four of us got ready at about 2pm to go deep. Beyond a slightly awkward section of crawling to get to Rameses (go through the hole in the floor and then left), we rejoined water at the pitch into Paradox passage. From here, the Slovenians had rigged on down using 9mm over the last two months, so we followed their rope, sticking extra bolts in where necessary. (Limestone Cowboys, found in '97, is by far the biggest of the holes off Paradox, but is also the wettest and wasn't rigged). The next pitch was dry and led to another passage with a hole in the floor, this time rigged with 8mm shoelaces! Huggy and I continued down, rerigging as we went while Jim and Tetley followed on behind surveying. (Apparently the Slovenians had broken their only pencil while surveying out and so this section was totally unrecorded except for a grade one sketch made on the surface and Dejan's altimeter watch indicating a depth of minus 950m!)



There were several leads at all levels but we continued on the Slov route, named Antivox, which kept looping back under itself, following the fault deeper down. One section, rather unpleasantly, involved sliding down a narrow, very muddy tube and then wriggling through a small, low passage filled with clay-mud. Now completely covered in sticky mud the cave became active again - a really draughty, drippy place to be hanging around. The other pair really drew the short straw, I thought, as I imagined them surveying through this squalor, cursing that damned pencil!

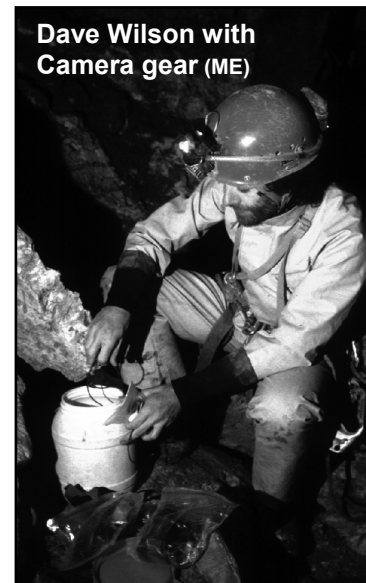
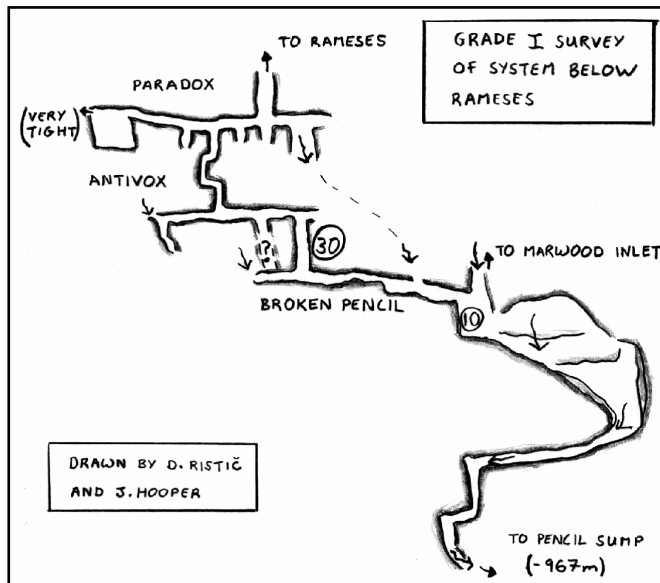
Several slippery, unprotected climbs were carefully negotiated to the ever increasing sound of rumbling water. Soon a large river, later called Marwood Inlet, came roaring in on the left before draining away down a hole in the fault plane.

Knowing we were about 900m below the surface, we decided to rig a line protecting the dodgy traverse over this drop. Huggy placed three bolts but it took him an age. By the time he had finished, Jim and Tetley had got dangerously cold and shouted that they were returning to the Hotel. I had sung every song I could think of twice and then sat in silence, in fading light, shivering and shouting every so often for Huggy to get a move on. Eventually, the traverse line was rigged to another pitch and we headed back to camp. We arrived at about 6am to find Tetley and Jim fast asleep (but apparently quite worried!).



The water was gushing down Porcelain pitch when we awoke at 10am. There had obviously been a downpour up top and the water was at least four times its normal volume. We had no option but to stay in bed, listen to another two episodes of Blackadder and doze off to sleep, rousing again mid afternoon. It took a lot of psyching up get back into caving clothes given that the gear was muddy and soaked through, we were still quite knackered and it was a hell of a way back to the surface, up, up, up all the way. We packed a tacklebag of rubbish each and checked out of the Hotel. Five hours later I was back at the surface in intermittent drizzle. The deserted bivvy was in a mess but I feasted over onion bhajis and chocolate angel delight scrapings before going to bed in my wet sleeping bag lying in pools of water in Hugh's leaking tent. At least the water situation at the bivvy had been resolved with all available receptacles filled with run off from the tarpaulin.

Sarah Wingrove



Dave Wilson with Camera gear (ME)

“Made an attempt to clean up the mess tins, but not with water, oh no! The custard from two days ago has now dried in the sun over a layer or two of curries and the only way to return to base metal is to scrape the tins with another hard metal object.”

Sarah Wingrove

Safety First: Rigging the Wire

In 1998, we'd decided to concentrate on the deepest leads below Hotel Tolminka, so the underground camp was in constant use. Every trip had many tacklebags of rope or camping equipment. Gladiators traverse was infamously regarded as the most difficult and dangerous to cross while carrying a tackle bag (due to rub points). We had spent the previous Easter in France in the Dent de Crolles system where there were many tensioned traverses which were rigged with steel wire. Seeing how effective these were, we decided to rig the Gladiators traverse in the same way. It was hoped that people could cross much more quickly and easily with tackle bags and, in the event of a rescue, an injured caver could be much more easily evacuated from the cave.

All of the necessary materials were bought in Tolmin:

- 35m of 5mm galvanized steel wire
- 60m of 5mm cord
- 6 18mm rawl bolts
- 20 'U' bolts
- 1 Tensioning bar
- 1 18mm drill bit

"When buying the wire we asked the man in the shop how strong it was. He replied, 'I don't know but, don't worry, if it breaks you can return it and I've got some stronger stuff'. Suitably reassured, we bought it!"

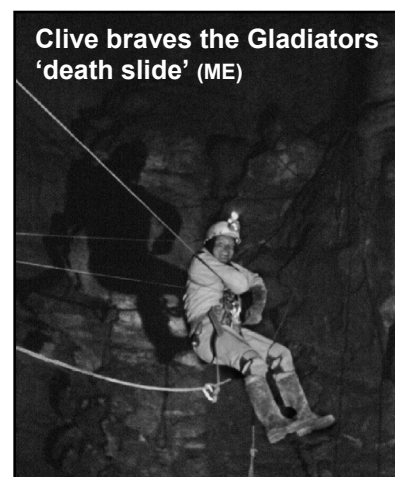
A Petzl double pulley was brought out from London.

Iain and I took everything down to Hotline and rigged some cord across first. We were then able to work out the best locations for the belay points to get as horizontal a span as possible. Our plan was to drill 3 holes on each side, a process that took a number of hours as they were much larger and deeper than the normal spit holes. The rawl bolts were then inserted and tightened by inserting a bar into the eye holes that Simon's brother Mišo had welded onto the end of the bolts.

The wire was rigged as a Y-hang with a backup on each side. In both cases, the wire was not cut at any point but threaded through and clamped using the U bolts. This was done to improve the strength but also to avoid having to cut the wire with a hacksaw. Once the near side was rigged, Iain pulled the other end of the wire and the rest of the rigging material across on the cord. I crossed over by going down and up in the usual way.

Drilling the holes on the far side was much easier as there was a convenient ledge to stand on. Only the highest bolt required some climbing and reaching overhead. Once the bolts were tightened and the wire was threaded, we set the length of the wire section that spanned the pitch. It is crucial to leave some slack in the wire as there is very little stretch in the system, though a taut wire is much easier to cross. This can, however, produce very high tension in the wire and high loads on the belays. In the end we decided to leave plenty of slack and perhaps tighten it later if it proved to be difficult to cross.

By the time we'd finished we were freezing cold and covered in white limestone powder from drilling the holes. On the way out, neither of us was willing to go across the wire but we vowed to return the next day to fully proof test the system, the hot topic of discussion over dinner at the bivvy. Eventually we decided to hang a rope from the pulley in the middle of the span and load this rope with one or two cavers from the rope bridge below. This way, if the wire failed, we'd only fall a few feet (instead of up to 60m!). We had just cracked open a bottle of Vodka and started to pass it round when Huggy came down into the bivvy, returning from a camping trip at the Hotel. "Love the wire traverse" he said, "but it's a little difficult to get off on the near side".....



Mark Evans

One jammer short: A camping trip with an epic exit

The '98 expedition was really buzzing. A team of hotbedders were due out today. A group of Slovenians had set off with Huggy and Tetley to push the lower depths "to -1000" with all of the available rigging gear. Other teams were heading off to various locations to discover miles of new cave. Jan was hunting for his wetsocks... Our plan was to head down to the Hotel with Clewin and Kathryn but it was hard finding the motivation in the boiling sun. Eventually, after six hours of faff, we said our goodbyes to the others and headed off to M16.

We had the dubious privilege of being the first group to test the new wire 'death slide' traverse over Gladiators. I flew across the void, although the wire gave off ominous creaks and groans, and landed safely on the other side. Getting off the line involved a careful jiggling and balancing act to avoid slipping off the landing platform.



At XXX, I was just about to abseil when I noticed a serious fray in the rope. I quickly slapped on my cowtails and hand jammer (you can't be too safe) and got off the pitch. Luckily, someone had left 70m of rope at Bikini Carwash, so Kathryn nipped back and got it. A quick re-rig and we headed on down. At camp, we had some re-hydrated gloop, snuggled into layers of warm, dry Polartec and fell asleep listening to Blackadder: pure luxury.



At 7am, Huggy, Tetley and the Slovenians (the Glory Team) arrived to make us tea and breakfast. They had hit a siphon, Pencil Sump, at -967m, and were clearly disappointed that the cave had "ended." They also explored Marwood Inlet, which they related as a gorgeous stream passage with clear blue meanders ending in a 10m aven, requiring aid climbing. My team braced ourselves for the misery of putting on damp furries and allowed Tetley and Huggy to crawl into bed. The Slovenians set off out (they had to work the next day!). Clewin and Kathryn went down to investigate Marwood inlet and other deep leads. Meanwhile Jan and I headed down Wonderstuff, extended over the previous year by the Slovenians but not fully surveyed. We did an exciting traverse, using brute force and ignorance, over Porcelain Pitch with its unique Ammoniac smell. Straddling the remains of a rock arch, we abseiled down Earthquake Way, a series of interestingly rigged, large dry pitches. Snap gates, home-made hangers, no back ups and dodgy naturals were the standard for Slovenian rigging - their philosophy was to get down (and maybe out) as quickly as possible. We found several interesting leads, some of which have good potential, and noted them down for the future.

Back at the Hotel, we kipped before going out the next day. On the way out we investigated the Northern Line and abseiled into the Elephant's Graveyard. The graveyard is a boulder choked chamber with several leads, including a rift which ends in a pitch surrounded by hanging death. While Jan was bolting the pitch, I dug up into a chamber full of boulder breakdown but decided to leave it alone - I didn't fancy playing hide and seek in a pile of loose, car-sized blocks. Clewin and Kathryn surveyed a glutinous mud filled rift called Chocolate Moose. On the way out, we saw a pitch below where we came in. I declined to go down as there was a six inch crack in the main 'wall' and it was getting late.

Going out we bumped into Scuzzer, Stephan Pier, and Cecile Chabot and exchanged news. By the time we reached Sajeta we were slowing down. I was about half up the 85 metre pitch when I heard a whooshing sound and a cry of BELOW! Something bounced off the rock below me as I clung to the rope and made love to the rock. I cursed Clewin above me.



At home in the dark...
Brewing tea at the Hotel
(DW)

A minute later, Clewin shouted down something about a jammer and I took part in a strange version of Chinese Whispers....

"You want what? Where did you leave it?"

I wondered how you could leave your jammer behind; oh it must be his spare I thought. Eventually I reached the top and found out that Clewin had dropped his hand jammer down the pitch. Doh!!!

"Do you have a spare jammer?"....

"No."

"Do you have some spare cord?"...

"No."

"Oh!" I quickly found a loop of cord.

"Do you know how to use a French Prussik knot?"...

"No".....

"Ah!"



While I was giving a quick lesson on how to tie a prussik knot, Kathryn arrived, quickly followed by Jan. A rescue plan formed in my head and I gave Jesus 'The Good News' that he was to head out the cave as quickly as possible while the three of us slowly plodded up the Exhibition Road to the traverse. Jesus and Kathryn soon disappeared from sight, while Clewin and I tandem prussiked up the rope. Clewin prussiked for several minutes and then I did a few strokes and caught him up. At the changeovers I got nervous because if the prussik cord was dropped then I would have to do a mid-rope rescue and haul Clewin out, plus give him a good kicking later. Luckily it didn't come to that and about an hour later we reached the top. No more rope for some time. Phew!!

After a brew and some chocolate, the three of us clambered up Exhibition Road, while Jesus flew out of the cave to save us. Carrying our tacklebags helped us to warm up in this cold alpine prison. Mentally it took no time to reach Gladiators traverse, but I know, on reflection, that this wasn't true as we all struggled up the climbs. I climbed over to the zip line (death slide) and pulled myself across it. Everything was being done slowly as fatigue took its toll on the grey cells, or maybe it was just more difficult to go up the line. The plan had been for me to send my hand jammer back with the pulley so Clewin could get across.



I clipped on my jammer and yelled for Clewin to pull it across. The pulley moved about a foot and then stopped. Damn! The string to bring the pulley back had snapped. So I had to climb back down and struggled to retrieve the jammer. I was intensely aware that if I could not get it or if I dropped it down the void, then the two of us would be stuck in the cave. My intense nervous struggle finally paid off and I slowly slithered and stumbled up towards Hotline with my failing carbide.

As I continued on out, I kept imagining I heard someone. Tiredness, coldness and lack of food were taking their toll. I turned on my electric at the rebelay, as my carbide was next to useless, and slowly counted off each pitch, crawl, and climb. Every noise was amplified by my imagination, 'Ey Ho?' no, it was just pebbles falling, water dripping.

As I crawled through to Vhodni Del, I heard the scree being dislodged and hitting the chamber floor. I abseiled down and saw Iain whizzing down into the chamber on the other rope. He was illuminated in a halo of carbide, holding aloof a hand jammer like Arthur and Excalibur - our salvation. I slowly continued out, struggling on the awkward window at the top of the last pitch. Eventually I crashed in my tent at 3.00am

Martin M^cGowan

Repaid with Interest: The continuing Jammer Saga



It is worth remembering in life that bad fortune and good fortune usually balance themselves out in the long run. We had prepared for an emergency at some point in our expeditions over the years; not in such a manner that we had written down a lengthy procedure or anything so mundane as a flow chart showing responsibilities and actions, but we had discussed it over a bottle of vodka round the fire a few times. Often when retiring to the tent at night, we would linger for a second or two to look at the stars, and think how lucky it was to sleep under such a vast canopy, compared to the enclosed camp in the limestone 600 metres below us. Our ears would usually strain to hear anything that might be out of place, then, satisfied that all was quiet on the caving front, we would allow our heads to hit the proverbial pillow like a proverbial lead balloon.

And finally it came! A series of shouts at 3am. We were all glad to have mentally prepared so well for this eventuality. The straws were drawn and I pulled the short one, forcing me to put on my caving gear in a hurry. Jan delivered news - fortunately nobody was hurt.

Clewin had just scared himself silly at the top rebelay in Sajeta by allowing his hand hammer to become unattached and watched in horror as it fell almost ninety metres to the boulder strewn floor of the shaft below. Clewin, Kathryn and Martin were making their way out very slowly, and all they really needed was a replacement jammer, which was delivered to them with a smile in Hotline, at the foot of the entrance series.

The following afternoon Jim, Tetley, Colm and I ventured underground for a two day trip to survey and push a few new leads. On the way down we searched the boulders at the foot of Sajeta for Clewin's jammer, but gave up after a short while - it was a piece of equipment that couldn't be trusted anymore anyway, so we would leave it to its bouldery grave. Further down the cave, I can remember these leads we were pushing and surveying being not very pleasant and very cold. On the second day I could feel the onset of hypothermia in The Northern Line series. Quickly completing our tasks, we headed on out.

The journey out from camp was becoming quite routine, and soon we were starting to warm up and feel human again. On this occasion, however, in a small awkward pitch just below Sajeta, I became inexplicably jammed, and on wrenching free heard a crack and a tinkle of falling metal. Uh-oh. Checking the SRT kit in the boulder chamber at the foot of Sajeta, we quickly worked out what had given up the ghost. It was my hand jammer! It's days were over; it was now an ex-hand jammer.

The glove was on the other hand now. This was the location where Clewin had lost his jammer, and had needed the services of an intrepid caver to deliver a shiny new one in the middle of the night. Now that very same intrepid caver was in virtually the same predicament as Clewin had been in! We sat down and thought for a minute, until all four of us were sitting quietly. "But hang on," said Jim, "Clewin's jammer is down here somewhere".

It took ten or fifteen minutes of steadily less optimistic searching before we found it. It was a bit bashed after it's ninety metre fall, but we were all grateful of it's resurrection. It supported Jim's ample mass by way of a test, and so with no further ado we headed on out. As a send off, before being retired to the caving stores in the sky, no jammer could have asked for a better final trip. We were in high spirits and couldn't help thinking that this was just repayment for the help that had been given three days earlier. A tale of good fortune long recounted around the camp fire, and like the vodka that is passed from person to person, will continue to leave a warm glow deep inside for a while yet.



Our Friends from England

On a fine sunny day in 1998, an Earthquake shook. The village of Tolminske Ravne was seriously damaged, including our house. As we ran out of our home, we heard rumbling sounds from above. A large rock slide on Migovec changed the face of the mountain.



It is to this mountain that our English cavers come regularly each year. For the first two years we didn't have much contact with them as they initially stayed at the bar house in the village. They only came to us to buy cheese. In fact, the first Slovene words they learnt were 'cheese, thank you, good afternoon, hello...'. Mostly we saw Jackie, smiling, sunburnt, coming through the door saying, "Good afternoon, cheese?" My mother nodded. Jackie added, "No problem."

In 1996, the cavers were camping on the grass nearby, where they keep their van. In the morning the cows going out to pasture were very surprised by these strange humans lying in their sleeping bags all over the place. They were so tired that even the cows smelling them couldn't wake them up.

These people were supposed to be cultivated since they came from England, but we soon realised this was not the case. Tired from walking, dirty, sweaty, hungry without real food to cook, they surpassed all our expectations... Over the following years, our friendship has deepened. They have become like a family that comes to stay every year for their holidays.

In the year of the earthquake, our family and other people from the village were staying in the new building nearby that was used for festivities. Therefore our house was empty, awaiting repairs. When the cavers came, we let them use it. I think they had a great time as they used the kitchen, bedrooms and, most of all, the bathroom with the toilet. When they came down from Migovec, they all queued up in front of the bathroom, waiting for the shower. They slept in the rooms, on the balcony, everywhere. One night, an after-tremor was felt. I was sleeping with my boyfriend in a tent behind the house, so when I felt the earthquake I opened the tent to run if necessary. But in the house the light turned on for a few seconds and then everything was quiet. The cavers were not afraid.



When they left at the end of the summer, they arranged a party for us all to celebrate. My father brought out his accordion and we were soon in a proper mood. We danced and sang and enjoyed ourselves. The food they prepared was excellent, but in particular I remember the perfect Slovene desert that Hugh had learned to prepare while on a course to improve his Slovenian in Ljubljana. This was wonderful and hopefully he'll also make this dish at his home in England.

I'd like to add that my family are very glad to know the English cavers. Hopefully they'll continue to visit us, perhaps with their families, or because of their need to explore Migovec. Until they came, we didn't know what we had nearby. I wish them a lot of luck and success with their expeditions in years to come.

Hopefully we'll remain in your good memories; we sure won't forget you.

Nada Klobučar (on behalf of all the Klobučar family)

There be Caves in them 'ills: Digging in the Valleys



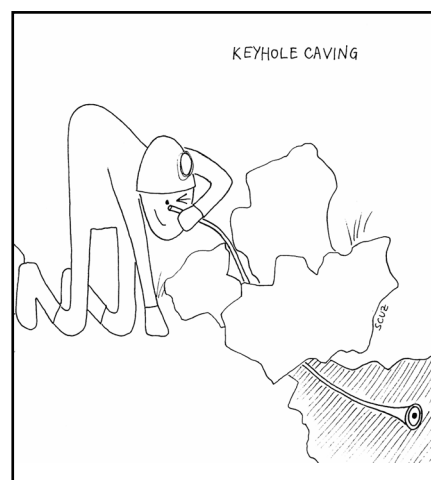
Being a Mendip digger by nature (and with broken foot bones ruling me out from deep caving trips), I became interested in the potential of the valley between the east of the plateau and Škrbina. After all, all cave exploration starts from an entrance, however small....

Mark and Jackie showed me the first site to grab my attention, an obvious rock arch halfway down the side of the valley. This cave had been known about for a while, but was low on the list of priorities due to discoveries in the main system. At the back of the entrance shelter, a short grovel through gravel dropped into a sizeable sloping passage ending in a boulder pile. To the side, a small passage beckoned. I squeezed through, in normal clothes, until it became too tight. The passage continued, however. Dark space seemed to lie beyond. Lying flat, listening to the unnerving beat of my heart, I could also discern a slight draught. I retreated back out to daylight - this needed full kit to proceed. A mental note of the lead was made, (though it was another two years before we returned to pass the squeeze and start the discovery of what became Gardeners' World cave). The entrance was initially known as "Ben's Crap Lead" - luckily a non-prophetic name!

Further down in the valley, I was shown a collection of caves around a large shakehole. These pumped out freezing cold air and, at roughly the same horizontal level as Level 2, were potentially lower entrances to the Migovec system. The first to receive any great attention became known as East Pole. This began with a triangular, descending passage lined with scree. A short distance in, the passage closed down slightly but possible continuations lay both ahead and to the left. I pursued the tight squeeze ahead and was soon rewarded with a very sharp, tight pitch head. A bolt was needed and this was to be my first. Lying flat on my stomach, bolting kit at arms length, I struggled for what must have been 40 minutes to finally get the bolt in. What I was going to do then I didn't know - the pitch was far too tight. Luckily, Tetley found another route - just in the nick of time.

Tetley's route involved a climb over a boulder into the roof of a small chamber with an unstable air. The obvious way on continued down to a small squeeze. Attacking this with a hammer, we soon broke through to a spacious pitch. A bold step over the pitch head led, via a sizeable passage and boulder slope, back to the bottom of the drop that I had 'bolted'. Tetley played in the choke at the end but disappointingly he didn't find a way on. We still had the main pitch though. This turned out to be about 10m deep and not quite vertical. With excitement rising, we continued on down a well-formed passage to an area of breakdown. A strong icy wind blows out of this choke, christened the IC Draft. Time for a game of 'incoming' - throwing rocks up at the loose boulders, shouting 'incoming' and then scurrying back before the roof collapses and buries you alive. Stupid, mad, but worryingly addictive. The large surface shakehole probably lies above this choke, while below we speculated that there must be a large shaft. Several digging trips returned to this promising lead but no breakthroughs were made.

Other caves around the shakehole were also investigated; the main ones of note were named T2 and the Hairdryer. T2 was broken into after a brief (but manic) spasm of digging and smashing. A tight, strongly drafting rift passage requires hammering to progress further, but "I'll be back." The Hairdryer was found to the side of an obvious cave entrance on the north side of the shakehole. The obvious cave is blocked, but by digging out a low bedding plane, the hairdryer was entered, a windy place. A slow shuffle into the bedding leads to a small, 8" hole. Beyond this restriction was black space, and the source of the very strong draft. The through-trip to the Soča still waits to be found. With luck and persistence who knows???



Ben Ogborne

Heading into Blank Mountain: The Northern Line

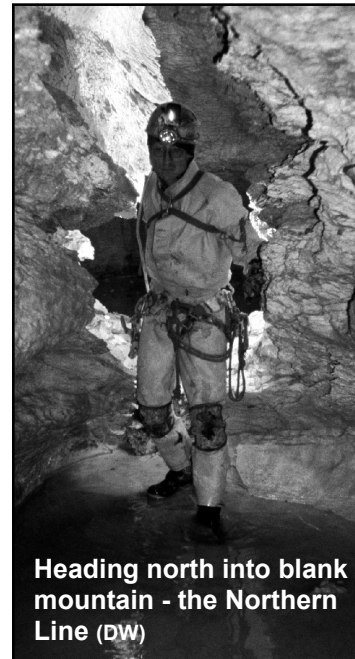
During the trips to set up the '98 underground camp, a siege operation involving the transportation of 12 tacklebags of equipment, an intersecting rift was discovered in the stream passage about 50m higher up than Hotel Tolminka.

“Look, a dry inlet.... let’s follow it.... it seems to be sloping down.... I’ll check the compass...., its heading North into blank mountain.... Wow, its going, it’s going.... the mountain’s hollow.....”

The passage became know as 'the Northern Line' and soon broke through into a 25m pitch into the large Elephant chamber, with huge elephant-sized boulders.

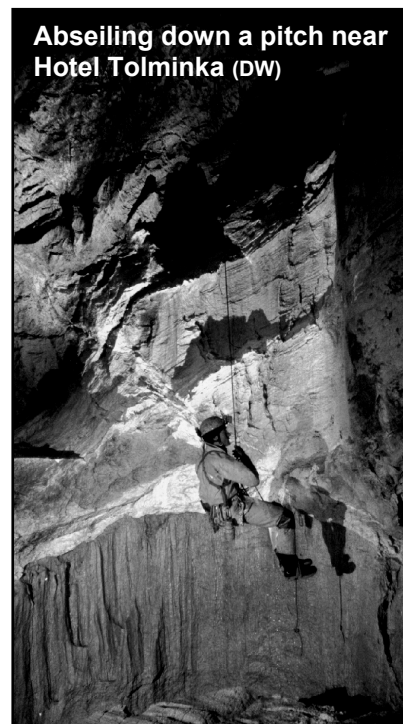
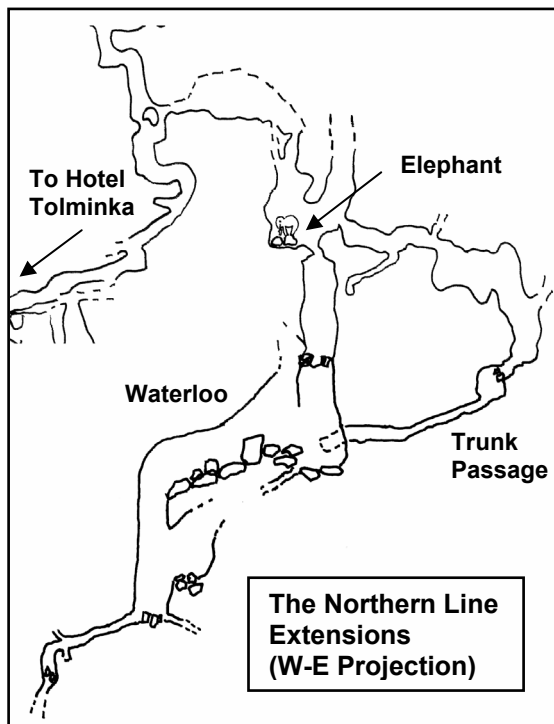
Investigating this chamber, a number of extensions were found. A small passage heading south east led to a short pitch. Here, Colm and Tetley became excited. A large, horizontal trunk passage led off into blackness and thoughts of discovering another 'Level 2' started to mount. “This could be another Level 2....” we thought. Unfortunately after 50m the route suddenly closed down. No draught was present and it didn’t seem to be worth digging at the time.

A route through the boulders at the base of Elephant chamber led to a 30 m pitch “rigged off a big boulder resting on a little boulder.” This was indeed frightening, the whole lot threatened to come crashing down with dire consequences - prussiking up you weren’t sure whether to go slowly, carefully, minimising any shock or as quickly as possible to pass this forbidding obstacle. This was followed immediately by a 15m pitch into a “black void” - a huge chamber named Waterloo. Many possible ways led off this chamber but due to lack of time only a few were investigated. The pitch at the end was found to be 25m and led to a small and unpleasant crawling passage, which closed down after 20m.



Heading north into blank mountain - the Northern Line (DW)

James Hooper and Jim Evans



Abseiling down a pitch near Hotel Tolminka (DW)

Further Discoveries by the “Knights of Beit”**

While the deep level camping trips were taking place, a fair number of day trippers set off to extend the frontier higher up in the system. An obvious, previously undescended shaft, Waffles, and a small passageway which led to a large pitch (Poltergeist) were connected some 70m below Exhibition Road with no obvious ways on. A small hole in the chamber wall at the bottom of XXX led to a wet, parallel aven. Inlet rifts were also found at the bottom of Sajeta and Pawoden. Both were followed upstream until climbing became too difficult.

Finally, the black, breezy, phreatic NCB passage was revisited. The draughting passage at the east end was dug to no avail and a tantalising lead, Zebra passage, was found but not pushed in the west. Scuz returned to the now almost mythical Plop pitch with Kathryn. After hammering the tight pitch head for an hour and a half, with little improvement, Kathryn squeezed through to place in her first bolt. Scuz descended 40m and hammered in a second spit. The bottom of this huge pitch remained out of sight but as time was running out they beat a retreat to the bivvy, to find gourmet food, including samosas and soups, waiting for them.

James Hooper

Below FA999

The wet way down the original 'Glory Boys' route had been investigated in 1997 and pushed to a spray filled 30m pitch (FA999). Revisiting this area in the winter of '97/'98 (when the cave system is much drier) Dejan Ristic and friends, clad in wet suits, were able to continue exploration down a further 10m drop. This was followed by a sloping river passage, punctuated with deep pools (Water Hope), which led to a sump at -970m, currently the deepest part of the cave.

James Hooper

**Alternative nomenclature for IC³ cavers in '98, after Beit Quad in South Ken - a.k.a.: KnoBS

Yet More Logbook Extracts 1998

“I hate people who doss... - Let’s put the kettle on.” Tetley.

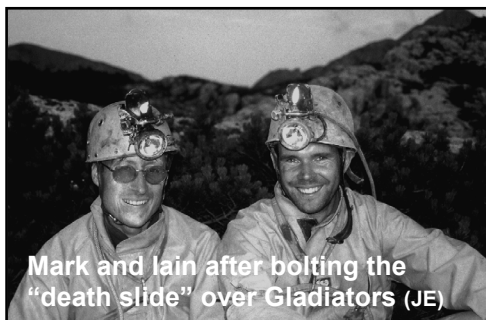
“...but then Clive had his badger...”

“The girl Scouts express keen interest when they hear Jim is going to be staying down for the day. Maybe he will rival Tetley and Jan as the love interest.”

“Everyone down to Tolmin for a session. Seven of us leaving tomorrow, just under half the expedition. Odisej for food, the Soča until the mozzies started to bite, back to the barracks for a game of cards, another session in the Odisej and then down to the ‘bar of bad reputation’ until late...”



Dave on Spirit of Elvis, the traverse over Challenger (ME)



Mark and Iain after bolting the “death slide” over Gladiators (JE)

“Eventually the unavoidable task of derigging came. On our last trip, the hardcore cavers went in. It was a pleasure coming up Exhibition Road in a large group as you could look back to see a string of carbide pearls strung out along the majestic traverses contrasting with the absolute blackness of the pitches below.” - Martin

