

Scarborough Caving Club trip to the Vercors 5th to 13th June '98

Dear Member

The Vercors is a superb caving area - see the articles from the August/September issue (137) of Descent.

I hope we can fit in 3 or 4 good caving trips that everybody can take part in. These should include a long through trip and perhaps one with an overnight camp. The arrangements will have to be flexible enough to allow those who want to, to opt into detours or separate trips with big pitches, digging diving etc. If all that isn't enough to fill the week up and for those who want to see France in the daylight, we could try canyoning and climbing.

A party of 8 seems to be about right to spread the cost of travel without making the logistics of caving trips too ridiculous. I have therefore booked a bunkroom at Le Lapiaz at Presles in the Vercors, France for 8 happy cavers from the afternoon of Saturday 6th June to Saturday morning of 13th June.

We aim to set off in the early evening of Friday 5th June to reach the Channel Tunnel around midnight. The total distance to the Vercors is 1000 miles (IE allow 2,500 miles for the return trip and travelling in the area). The minibus has to have a tachograph fitted and the speed limit in France is 68 mph on motorways (62mph on dual carriage ways, 50mph outside built up areas, 31 in built up areas). IE 17 hours to get down there. I therefore hope we will arrive by mid afternoon on Saturday. If you can think of a better way of travelling down, please let me know!

A rough estimate of costs is as follows

	£
15 seater minibus with seats removed for luggage space (quote from Mennell Motors, Malton)	439
Insurance for extra named drivers - £8 X 2	16
Fuel 2500 miles @ 35mpg = 71 gallons Diesel	207
Tolls	115
Chunnel	169
Bunkhouse £5 per night X 7 = £35 each X 8	280
Caving and holiday insurance £28.20 each X 8	226

Total -----
1452

The estimated cost per person based on 8 in the party is therefore £181.50.

Food

We can self cater at the bunkhouse at minimal cost and have a Fountains breakfast every day and in the evening a meal of pasta, curry or Jerry's 8p a can baked beans on toast. For those who want to eat out the cost of a 3 course meal at a bar in the local town (Presles) start at 60FF (£6) or a pizza is 30FF -40FF (IE £3 - £4)

Deposit

A non refundable deposit of £50 is requested by Mid November. (Please make cheques payable to 'R Wilsdon') A further payment will be required nearer to the departure date. Those who have already paid their deposits are:

1. Richard Wilsdon
 2. Rob Simpson
 3. Shaun Aconley
-
- 4-8 First come first served

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2 November, 1997

A caver's guide to the Vercors

OFTEN described in the rhetorical prose of the tourist information brochures as a 'massive fortress', the Vercors was indeed a fortress to the French resistance fighters who held back the invading German troops until being quashed by Nazi glider pilots in 1944. The historic past of this area thus offers a unique opportunity for gliding enthusiasts who dislike sharing their airspace with Germans, who are, naturally, discouraged from flying their gliders over the high plateaux.

The Vercors Regional Natural Park is 60km long, stretching between Grenoble and Die and sprawling into the Isère and Drôme departments, separating the Rhône valley from the Dauphiné Alps. The park is a playground for a multitude of activities – from the serenity afforded by the solitude of its wild countryside to the tasty fungi and fish that can be coaxied home for dinner; to the group activities requiring a splash of energy to get up and go ... pony-trekking, skiing, climbing, mountain biking, canyoning, and, of course, caving.

There is a dazzling array of 'cave-types' in the Vercors – from grovelly digs to easy walking passage, and impressive vertical shafts to serious expedition-style ventures. Here's a few examples for your perusal:

Gouffre Berger

Often quoted as one of the biggest and best tourist trips in the world, the cave of the goofy shepherd has long been regarded by British cavers as a Mecca. However, due to its flood-prone nature and popularity, it often requires booking three years in advance via the mayor of Engins. If you're not stumbling backwards in amazement at the gargantuan passage dimensions in this cave, revealed by only the most penetrating lights, then your marvel might be aroused at the surreal congregation of stal huddling in the vast expanse of the Hall of the Thirteen amidst an ocean of gour pools.

Antre des Damnés

With an incredible 200m pitch, the Antre des Damnés also offers a serious undertaking and is really an expedition-type cave, both because of the remoteness of its entrance and the depth reached before the first horizontal cave passage is encountered at around -500m.

Scialet du Pot 2

Found and explored by a couple of Scouts dangling on a winch, Pot 2 drops to -319m without any horizontal development. It's a fearsome shaft for the energetic enigmatic caver (it's a mystery to me why anyone would want to abseil down there just to prusik back out again).

Grotte de Gournier

Alongside the 'unique to Europe' Grottes de Choranche showcave, the Gournier is not to be missed, with what must be one of the most outstanding streamways in the planet. Determined cavers can find themselves at over 700m higher than the entrance, if they are prepared to persevere to the more remote parts of this system. But, for an easy day-trip you're unlikely to find much better than this. Don't be put off by the haunting tales of phantom cavers wandering adrift.

Trou qui Souffle and Trou de l'Aygue

The Trou qui Souffle and Trou de l'Aygue are two splendid systems, each offering challenging and exciting through-trips. The Trou de l'Aygue is the more amiable of the two, with the Trou qui Souffle posing as a more testing adventure with some awkward route-finding and tricky traverses that leave you relying on rather dodgy-looking bits of tat. In the summer the first pitch for the Trou qui Souffle can be rigged from the seat of the car as it is right beside the road.

Gour Fumant

Reminiscent of Yorkshire caving, a few short pitches in Gour Fumant lead to an entertaining section of pleasant horizontal development. A wholesome, fairly laid-back trip can be enjoyed here with a cool beer never too far away on the surface.

Grotte de Bury

The Grotte de Bury is a rarely visited site (relative to the other caves of the region) that offers some absolutely classic caving down to -400m (or -520m for cave divers). It is also in the vicinity of the friendly hostel of Le Lapiaz – an added bonus if you're staying there.

Grottes de Couffin-Chevaline (Grottes de Choranche)

Although the Couffin-Chevaline (Grottes de Choranche) is a spectacular showcave for Mr Man-in-the-Street, a few well-placed words with the owner or the Group Spéléo de Valence can elicit a leader and a fantastic trip beyond the dazzling illuminations.

Canyoning

Just like caving without the roof, and therefore without the problems of light failure and banging your head on low ceilings, canyoning has become a very

popular sport, especially around the Vercors. Classic canyoning trips include the three sections of the Écouges (where each section can be descended independently; you'll need a full day to complete all three sections), the 450m, almost vertical Moulin Marquis, and the Gorge du Furon, near Grenoble.

Climbing

There is too much climbing information to include in this short article; if you're a collector of past issues of *Climber* dig out the August 1995 edition, or if you're a Net surfer then surf away. Otherwise, briefly, there's the 300m high, about 11km long, cliffs at Presles to whet one's appetite.

Accommodation

Nestling in the salubrious ether of Presles, the hostel of Le Lapiaz poses as the *numero uno* contender for the best caving hostel in the world (well, in Presles at least). For a frugal 45F you can slumber in the bunkroom, or pay 30F for camping, and there's no charge for the company of Monsieur Le Director Hugh Penney – a wonderfully helpful, funny and generous chap who just so happens to be a British caver. Contact Hugh Penney, Le Lapiaz, 38680 PRESLES, France. Tel: +33 (0)4.76.36.09.31. E-mail: hughpenney@aol.com

Another caving hostel is run by Pierre Rias at La Batteuse, 26420, St Martin-en-Vercors. Tel: +33 (0)4.75.45.51.69

Camping is available at Camping Municipal, 26420 La Chapelle-en-Vercors, while for hotels there are Le Bois Barnier, 26420 St Julien-en-Vercors (+33 (0)4.75.45.51.30) and La Mirailome, 26420 St Agnan-en-Vercors (+33 (0)4.75.48.21.22). A tourist information centre is located at St. Martin (+33 (0)4.75.45.50.69) during summer months.

References

There are two principle caving guides for this area: an English guide, *Vercors Caves*, that lists a few of the routes in some of the better holes (see review in *Descent* 115), and a French guide, *Spéléo Sportive dans le Vercors* (Édisud, 1987). A new French edition, in two volumes, will appear soon and will be very thorough and reliable. There are various other, more definitive registries around – a copy of the big inventory is held at Le Lapiaz.

As with everything these days, if you want to know about it it'll probably appear on several different sites on the world wide web. These are worth a visit if you're sold on the idea of a speleological sojourn to south-east France and the Vercors (the first three are in French):

<http://www.alpes-net.fr/~grimpe/presles.htm> – see under hébergement

<http://www.lps.u-psud.fr/cosiroc/Le-Vercors.html>

<http://huizen.dds.nl/~mol/vercors.htm>

<http://members.aol.com/HughPenney>

Toby Stewart



Le Lapiaz. Photo: Bruce Sinclair

The Limestone Entrantress

JOURNEYING down the road from Lyon towards Grenoble a shadowy figure rises up, hunched over the horizon. Looming in the aura of its foreboding presence, the threatening menace of Le Vercors grins like a terrible giant through the hazy glare of the summer sky. On ap-

by Bruce Sinclair, Jim Page and Toby Stewart

proach, however, the distant ogre is unveiled as a limestone enchantress, a worthy ally – full of holes. The icing over this hollowed gâteau is as sweet as any, with all the splendours of the finest limestone landscape, sprinkled by a confetti of flora and fauna imaginable as a fairy-tale magic dust. Some might say it is one of the most magnificent areas of France – I'd be inclined to agree. Had it been made of sandstone or granite, on the other hand, now that would be an entirely different story. But I get ahead of myself.

In 1996 the prize for one of *Descent's* caption competitions was a holiday in France. It was won by Bruce Sinclair, who takes up the tale of two Englishmen in the Vercors.

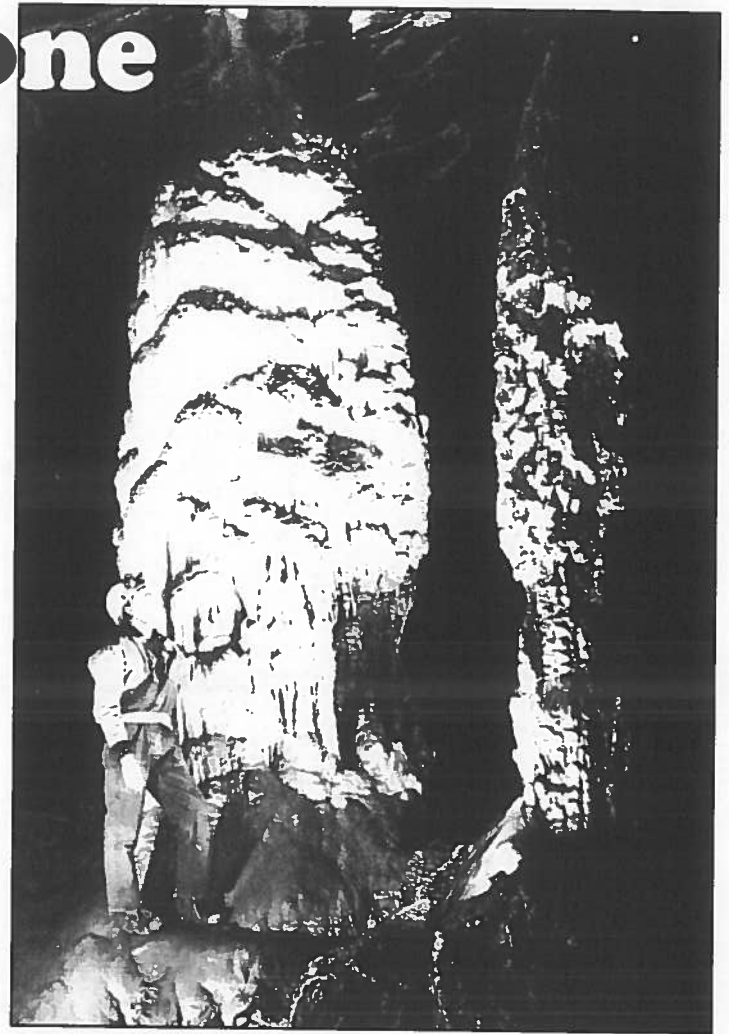
Toby Stewart

ON the morning of my 26th birthday I raced to the front door expectedly as I heard the postman struggling to stuff my letterbox with cards (in my dreams!). Amongst the reality of the meagre array was a letter from *Descent*; strange, I thought, they don't usually send out birthday wishes. However, I was wrong: they do! I had won a holiday in the Caption Competition

– wow!

The euphoria lasted until I told my caving partner, Jim Page, then sheer panic set in. Neither of us had ever caved outside England before and we had no idea what we needed to organise. A couple of months of frantic preparation followed before life calmed down again....

Fourteen hours and several wrong turnings after we had left



A decorated area of the Grotte de Bournillon

Photo: Jim Page

Calais we almost arrived at our destination, Le Lapiaz. We had made it as far as the village of Le Charmeil, but had arrived at a junction without signposts. Bemused, I wound down the window and popped my head out to take a look around: behold, in

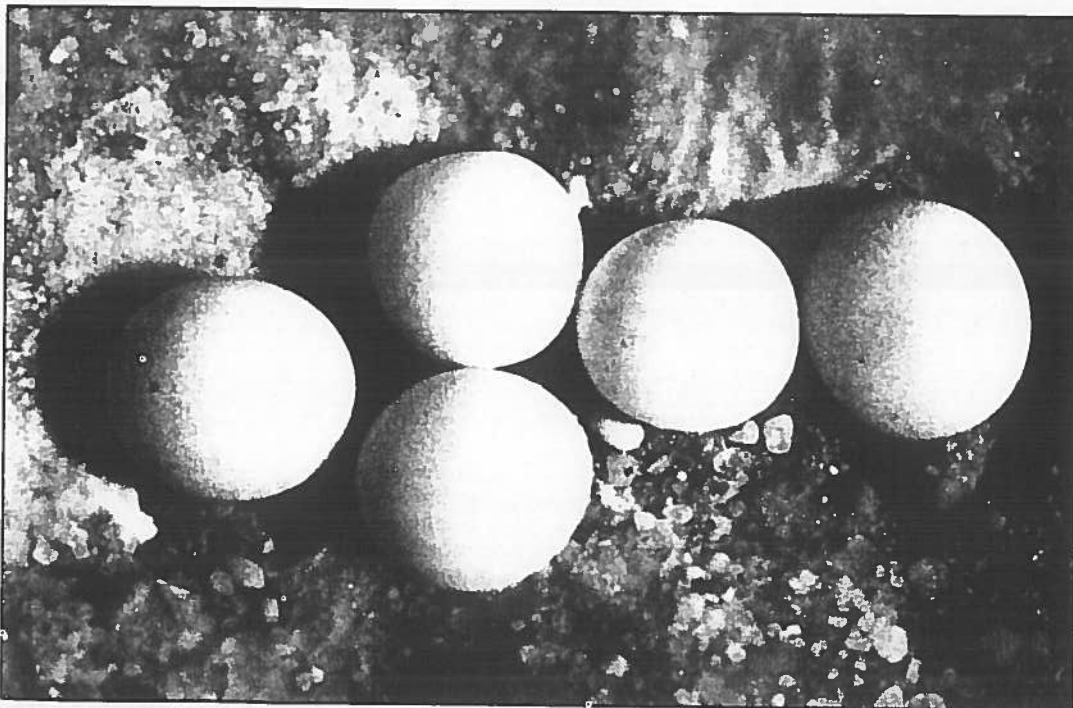
front of us was a sign for Le Lapiaz. Confused, I slipped back into the car and the sign mysteriously disappeared from sight.

'Left, I think?'

As we moved off the sign magically appeared to the right of the car! It turned out to be a yellow signpost and the yellow filters we had placed over the headlights obliterated the sign, a cunning plan by Hugh Penney (owner of Le Lapiaz) to fool the French from finding his superb bunkhouse.

Our first French cave was the Grotte de Bournillon, with the largest cave entrance in France at over 80m high. Well, you have to start somewhere. We switched on our lights and stepped forward like a pair of eager virgins. The Bournillon is impressive, the enormous main passage continuing for around 1km until a sump is reached. At the tightest spot I could almost touch the roof and could have sworn I could see both walls at the same time. There is a small decorated area along the way with a couple of 5m high stalagmites. Emerging

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Cave pearls in Le Scialet Neuf

Photo: Serge Caillaud

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into daylight I began to realise that caving in Derbyshire was never going to be the same again and I had indeed lost my virginity. The following days passed with some superb SRT trips and mountain biking; Le Lapiaz is ideally situated for this with a track on its doorstep. However, taking spare brake blocks is essential – I literally managed to burn a set out in less than 15km.

The highlight of the holiday was a trip into the Grotte de Gournier, probably the best active stream passage I have ever seen. As usual, the day started early at 6.30am to avoid the heat of the day. A quick cooked breakfast and we set off for the Gorges de la Bourne. At the Choranche showcave the caretaker granted us permission to visit the Gournier and gave us directions to the entrance; walking through a souvenir shop and cafe to reach a cave entrance is something of a novelty when it comes to caver-landowner relationships.

Standing on the shore of the lake that fills the entrance to the Gournier, the deep blue crystal clear water was only spoiled by the vast quantities of carbide carelessly dumped over the rocks; sadly this was typical of every cave we visited. Eager to get going I zipped up my wetsuit and

took the plunge. The lake wasn't as cold as I had expected and the swim to the far end was exhilarating. Climbing out of the water on to a ledge leads to a short free climb up to the start of a 30m traverse around the remainder of the lake and into the high-level fossil gallery. The water in the gours at the start of this passage is deceptively clear; many are chest deep as I was to soon find out.

The spectacular fossil gallery is huge at 10m by 20m and continues for several kilometres. After 850m of boulder-hopping, a well-marked funnel-shaped depression is reached, this marking the first access to the stream. A squeeze down through boulders leads to the a ledge overlooking the stream. A short stretch of easy-going passage ends in a short boulder choke. Passing this obstacle can be described as 'sporting' as the way on is through a series of crawls in the stream. Unfortunately, your body tends to occupy the space the water wants to be in, resulting in a dramatic build-up of water.

Shortly after the choke the first deep pool and cascade is reached. After starting to swim I noticed a steel traverse wire high on the right, leading to above the cascade. The traverse turned out

to be essential, if some what hair raising. The undercut cascade is certainly not free-climbable; however, the wire is only fixed by dubious home-made hangers that have the unnerving habit of rotating when your weight is transferred onto them. The complete absence of footholds over much of the traverse creates a white-knuckle-ride experience.

Above the cascade the stream passage continues through a seemingly endless series of meanders, cascades, pools and the inevitable piles of dumped carbide. After a couple of kilometres of wading against the stream an impressive 12m waterfall is the first serious obstacle.

There is a fixed handline to the right of the waterfall, but we decided to head back to the entrance. On the way out we met a small group of French cavers from a local club, the first cavers we had encountered in over 30 hours of exploring caves in the Vercors.

Reaching the traverse above the lake we had a surprise. There was a gaggle of cavers, adorned in Warmbac oversuits, surrounding the gours. They were supposedly a university caving club, but nobody was actually enrolled. This is funny because when I was at university everybody was enrolled yet nobody attended. During a chat it emerged that there was a second group of French cavers preparing to cross the lake. By the time we had reached the start of the traverse the lake resembled a scale model of Calais as there was an armada of rubber dinghies moored to the ledge. Unfortunately for us there were also ten schoolchildren attached to the beginning of the traverse, five attached to each anchor point and what appeared to be their leader running back and forth, untethered, trying to organise them! We



Derigging P12. Photo: Jim Page

emerged from the Gournier into glorious sunshine, a tremendous day's caving over.

As for Le Lapiaz, what can I say that can do justice to the fantastic facilities? The accommodation is first rate, and the many English cavers who came to have a chat and a drink help to create the warm and friendly atmosphere. Apart from caving they all shared one thing in common: they left green with envy after seeing the huge bunkrooms, the spacious family rooms and the luxuriously equipped self-contained *gîte* and, above all, probably the only English toilet in the Vercors.

This is fast becoming the place to stay in the Vercors; unfortunately, the climbing fraternity has also discovered it as a couple of separate groups from Bristol arrived for what they described as the best technical climbing in Europe. We will certainly return to the Vercors in the not-too-distant future.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Hugh Penney for his memorable hospitality, to P&O European Ferries for uneventful crossings, to the countless others who provided invaluable advice, and to *Descent* for making it all happen.

Bruce Sinclair & Jim Page



La Cascade du Mât in the Grottes de Couffin-Chevaline
Photo: Serge Caillaud