



Caving on the Isle of Portland (or Sun, Sand and Speleology)

By Julie Hesketh

Richard Carey, Julie Hesketh, Tim Francis, Lorna Cotter, Malcolm Cotter, Norma Cotter, Ben Cooper, Bill Richards, Lynne Furneaux, Jean-Paul Burch, Barry Parker, John Barnett, Ross Laird.

The Isle of Portland is absolutely riddled with caves. Unfortunately most of them are only about 50 feet long. Blacknor and Sandy Holes are the notable exception though and it was with these caves in mind that the MCG gave the fog in Mendip a miss for one weekend and headed for the sun on the south coast. And sun we got. Blistering heat, fabulous for camping and exactly the sort of weather for abseiling off cliffs, swimming in the sea and long Sunday pub lunches. Oh, and caving. Caving huts are non-existent on Portland but we found a reasonable campsite a few miles away. JP and Mary also found it separately and just to prove that great minds think alike, they had already, by complete coincidence booked a week's holiday there before the MCG decided to descend. The Cotters however provided the most smiles on the camping front as they had managed to come camping without their tent poles. Bill and Lynne came to the rescue with their multi-coloured beach canopy which provided a practical if somewhat amusing frame for the Cotters' temporary home.

We made a reasonably early start on Saturday to Lynne and Bill's amazement. We were up bright and early, practically forced out of our tents by the heat. Lynne and Bill had of course been up for hours, cooked a huge cooked breakfast, washed up, been for a 5 mile run, mown the grass and cleaned the car by the time I surfaced. With such gorgeous weather, it was hard to motivate ourselves to go underground but the idea of abseiling off a sea cliff into a cave was an intriguing one and so we headed off to the Isle of Portland. We all agreed that Portland was not the prettiest place we had been caving – much of the isle suffers from the scars of past industrial activity and many of the towns and villages have seen better days. We changed in the carpark of a small estate – fairly busy with tourists and locals who seemed used to cavers and climbers using their backyard as a changing room.

Blacknor Hole is a 10 minute walk along the coast and is marked by a couple of fixed hangers on the cliff top, right by the path. The cliff, about 60m in total is a spectacular start to a trip. It seemed to be a sweltering wait in the sunshine in full kit whilst a ladder and SRT line was rigged and the party started down to the cave. The actual entrance itself, Ariel Entrance, is a small opening, about 4 feet high and 6 feet wide in the cliff face, about 35m down. There is a heavy steel chain to assist the first person to swing into the entrance. My first impression was that it was just like caving somewhere like Mallorca – a very warm, dry and dusty cave with sea views and fabulous weather. I was proved wrong once we set off on the long crawl! The cave starts out just as it means to carry on with a hands and knees crawl. A couple of windows onto the sea below may be seen from some impressively large cross-rifts but, alas, our way on was the low crawl ahead. The Grand Canyon provides a very bold step and marks a change in the cave from bedding plane to vadose passage. From here on things got a bit tubey and wriggly as we headed into aptly named sections called "Wriggle-Push" and the loose bouldery area of "Derek's Dilemma".

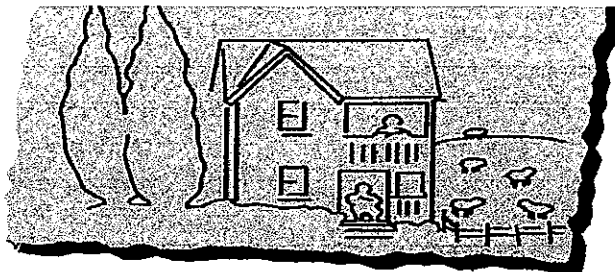
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Weekly Meetings:

- At The Beehive, Egham, Surrey, on Thursdays from 9.30 pm
- At The Hunters Lodge, Somerset, on Tuesdays around 10pm or at the cottage at 7pm for caving trips.

Prepayment Stickers:

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MCG (members only) have reciprocal booking rights with SWCC and NPC.
 NPC bookings via Nic Blundell on tel. : 01203 713849 (home) or 01203 838940 (work) or on email : nic.blundell@bigfoot.com.
 SWCC bookings via Ian Middleton tel. : 01703 736997. Email : ian_m@tcp.co.uk

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News in Brief



➤ **On the Move :**

Goeff Fisher to : 25 Abbey Road, Steyning, West Sussex. BN44 3SQ. Tel. 01903.813599.

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E.mail eemlrw@ee.surrey.ac.uk

➤ **Change on Email address :**

Pete Hollings now at: Peter.Hollings@utas.edu.au



➤ **Congatulations...4**

To Marcus Ward & Zoe Hammersley on their wedding. All the best for the future for all your friends in the caving club.

Forward Meets Programme :

<i>DATE</i>	<i>VENUE</i>	<i>EVENTS</i>	<i>CONTACT</i>
6 th - 7 th November	Nordrach Cottage	Half-yearly meeting. Contact Tim Francis for details of the forum. Skittles evening in the New Inn. For more information contact ➔	Tim Francis TimF@bjm.co.uk 0181 392 3572 (eves) Pete Moseley 01458 860524
13 th & 14 th Nov.	Mendip	CSCC training event.	
27 th and 28 th November	Wales	Agem Allwed. A key is booked for the weekend. Please contact Julie if you would like a trip.	Tel : (0181 340 2613)
6 February 2000.	Mendip	Shatter Cave (Fairy Caves Quarry): Trip limited to 5 plus leader. Please contact Julie to reserve a place.	Tel : (0181 340 2613)



Cottage Bookings by Ben Cooper :

Date	Nights	Numbers	Who
Sat 30/10/99	1	12	OUCG
Sat 13/11/99	1	10	CUCC
Fri 09/06/00	2	??	Gloucester Guides

Dve pivos, prosim!

By Tony Knibbs

The ability to speak in foreign tongues is not mandatory but being able to order two beers in Slovenian is a step in the right direction. I suppose it must have been about forty years ago that I became aware that there were some superb caves and karst scenery in what was then known as Yugoslavia. I had ideas of visiting the region a few years ago but the inhabitants declared war in all directions, so a return to peace was awaited. All is now calm in Slovenia, at least, and the possibility of having all the necessary planning work done by SMCC made the choice of joining their special club 50th Anniversary visit an easy one, and the first two weeks in August were duly set aside for this purpose. The MCG attendance was enhanced by the presence of Mike and Sue Haselden and Peter Harvey.

A campsite at the village of Laze, near Logatec – the Speleocamp, owned and run by Franc Fajica – was the chosen venue. Laze is about 10km NNE of Postojna and is easily reached from the motorway which runs from Trieste/Gornica eastwards across Slovenia. Local bars and restaurants supplied most of our gastronomic needs at very sensible prices; other supplies being obtained from shops and supermarkets in Laze, Postojna, Logatec, etc. The Slovenian capital Ljubljana was about an hour's drive NE, mostly on the motorway, and was well worth a visit.

The campsite itself had the usual facilities, albeit of a more rudimentary quality than your average three-star family site but quite in keeping with the basic needs of cavers. It enjoys a pastoral location in which cavers can pursue their usual, bottle-clinking night-life without disturbing the locals! The camp population probably rose to some 60 souls, losses through departures being made up by WCC arrivals and sundry Polish and German cavers who stayed only for the occasional night.

My own activities were rather limited by lingering sciatica caused by an ill-advised caving trip (Grotte du Saut de la Pucelle, in the Lot) a few weeks earlier. However, the Slovenian karst is ideal for the elderly spastic caver and I found plenty of caving to make it worth donning helmet and lamp.

Planinska Jama is in the village of Planina, only 3km from Laze. It is a classic river resurgence cave 6km long requiring the use of inflatable boats, and it is under the control of local cavers who provide a guide and boats – and charge ten pounds per head for the service. But that's all part of life's rich pattern and the trip is stunning – a cruise liner could probably fit into some passages in the system!

Planinska is but one link in a chain of sinks and resurgences extending over many kilometres of karst landscape. It contains two rivers – Pivka and Rak – of which the confluence is met just inside the entrance in a chamber too large to appreciate what is going on. Water levels were low in August and our journey up the Pivka involved the occasional portage of the boats over boulders. On reaching the upstream sump (after en-route punctures) we disembarked to climb up into the well-decorated Paradiz passage for an hour or so of harmless fun.

Paddling back downstream gave ample opportunity to observe the numerous white *Proteus Anguinus*, easily visible against the dark riverbed, and the remains of earlier show cave operations – widened ledges, wire traverses and broken bridges – added interest. In all, a superb introductory trip.

But even the show caves are something special in Slovenia as we discovered in **Skocjanske Jama**, 30km SW of Postojna. A walk down into a huge doline brings one to a monumental concrete-shrouded artificial entrance. The guide verified the language requirements and set about explanations in Slovenian, Italian, German and English. Half an hour or so of steady descent through sloping, dry passages - the Silent Cave - quite well decorated at the start and gathering momentum in both size and decoration content as we progressed. A particularly large chamber contained an impressive assortment of gigantic stalagmite columns, a sight soon to be eclipsed by our arrival at a breathtaking 30m wide canyon through which flows the Reka about 100m below and audible as a dull rumble.

A narrow bridge – Hanks Bridge – spans the chasm and the path now clung to the canyon wall. The atmosphere now became notably humid and we walked, now upslope through clouds of fog, to emerge into daylight in a deep doline from which a cable rail-car made a steep ascent to the surface. Before quaffing a well-earned pivo or two, we spent a few minutes walking up to a viewpoint overlooking the upstream end of the river Reka with Skocjan village visible on the far side of the enormous entrance doline – very impressive.

Smaller-scale amusement was available in the forest NE of Laze where waymarked paths constitute the **Cave Walk** can followed to make a tour of numerous entrances in dolines: jamas Stota, Za Teglovko, Na Meji, Vranja, Najdena and Skednena. These vary in length from 100m to 5km and in depth from 23m to 121m and can provide amusing hours of grovelling and/or SRT practice. Sue (demon cyclist) led three of us on a mountain-bike tour which had its moments and excused us going underground – only two bikes had lights! Be informed that walking round is more sensible.

About 10km NW of Laze is the small **Rakov Skocjan National Park**, a fascinating karst area through which the river Rak flows in and out of the limestone, initially resurging from **Zelske Jama**. The cave is 3km long and is approached by descending either of two collapsed dolines: one has a steep footpath, the other offers a fine 40m pitch from a natural bridge. Boats are required for much of the cave and several portages are necessary before the passage roof descends to within 2 or 3m of the river whose bed becomes increasingly rocky. There are interesting side passages which we omitted to visit. Indeed, this whole area is worth devoting much more time to than we did.

Predjama showcave entrance is well known for the 12th century castle it contains. The tourist trip is nothing special – an hour spent wandering through several roomy, dry chambers. However, guided caving trips are possible at (again) ten pounds per head and provide a few hours of mostly easy-going fun: big passages (with some very muddy stretches!), huge chambers and many finely decorated areas. Most of my photos were rather foggy, but a tripod and the use of the self-timer function would have cured this.

The **Postojna cave** system is over 19km long and is another essential visit. The trip starts with a 15-minute train ride through grandiose passages – the formations are almost unbelievable – to reach the ‘station’ from which an uphill walk brings one to Great Chamber. This lives up to its name and sets the tone for the next hour of the trip, passing through a succession of large and remarkably decorated passages linking even-bigger chambers. A momentary change of gear is felt as the walk reaches its conclusion and the profuse decoration slightly diminishes where the smoke-blackened walls of a side-passage on the left give evidence of the destruction of an underground Nazi fuel dump by partisans in 1944. (The effects of this same smoke can be seen also from the train). A final awesome scene is provided as the route opens out into the richly decorated Concert Hall, about 50m high and 80m in diameter. Gift shops and cafés are dwarfed by this void from which a short tunnel leads down to a ‘station’ to start the return train journey.

And so to perhaps the star attraction – a guided visit conducted by a local caver (costing ten pounds, again!) to **Krizna Jama** with its impressive river passage. The cave is near Bloska Polica, about half an hour’s drive eastwards from Laze; a forest road leads into a blind valley which terminates at the cave entrance with its adjacent guide’s hut. The cost of the trip includes the obligatory hire of clean oversuit, boots, helmets and electric lamps (carbide is taboo) to ensure maximum cleanliness – cave conservation is written in capital letters here! Our guide Alojz paid close attention to this aspect, and the party was limited to four cavers to aid supervision and minimise damage.

The gated entrance passage quickly enlarges to become a roomy, boulder-strewn, elongated chamber. Large quantities of cave bear bones were discovered here and many boulders had been polished in places by passing animals; over 100 complete skeletons are thought to have been recovered. The first lake is held back by a calcite barrier of which several more are crossed as the trip progresses upstream. Uniquely, the boat used to cross this 2m deep lake was fitted with an underwater floodlight which illuminated the white crystalline deposits below us. To avoid unnecessary portage, more inflatable boats were strategically positioned along the streamway, the process of getting in and out of boats being carefully monitored by Alojz.

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Such was the beauty of this large river passage that frequent use was made of a hand-held floodlight and, of course, much film was exposed. At the well-decorated Kalvarija chamber the streamway bifurcates: Blata Rov (passage) goes left and Pisani Rov is followed by boat to the right. Eventually we left the boat to walk carefully among the boulders and profuse stalagmite formations of Kristalna Gora (Crystal mountain), the climax of the 3h trip. We emerged into suffused daylight, having missed the almost total eclipse of the sun by a few minutes – but what is an eclipse compared to the wonders of Krizna Jama!

Slovenia is a long drive, even from Toulouse (1500km) but is really worth making the effort to visit. Advance planning is essential to get access to those caves (and the campsite) which require booking. The “Lonely Planet – Slovenia” guide book proved very useful. But I have reservations concerning Ian Bishop’s “Cave Guide – Slovenia” which devotes much space to introducing Slovenian caving and the language, yet gives limited descriptions of the actual caves and offers surveys of which many are almost illegible. There is room on my shelves for a better-written, more precise document.



Carries on from Front page :

We barely noticed “The Guillotine” as there was so much loose stuff, we could barely work out which bit of hanging death held this dubious name. Eventually solid rock was regained and things got a bit bedding-planey again. We even saw some straws – small, orangey straws in a typically low section. Blacknor Hole has only a handful of decorations and these were particularly vulnerable – the Guidebook does well in warning visitors – Portland does not have much stal to spare! We finally crawled on to a canyony rift section where, to our relief it was possible to stand up! Hurrah! Sadly, this was short lived and went on to more collapses, squeezes and crawls. We made it eventually to Squezy Rift and things started to get interesting here in the routefinding department. Instead of following our instincts, we decided to follow the guidebook directions. Barely able to see ahead for jammed bodies or manoeuvre, let alone read out directions from a guide book, we all shouted helpful and conflicting suggestions to poor old Ben and Richard Carey who furtled and thrutched about in the dry, deep rift. Eons later, they abandoned the guidebook and went on Mendip-instinct and finally found the small chamber which we were looking for, no thanks to the completely confusing guide book directions. The chamber contained the longest stal on Portland – about 2 feet long – fairly impressive for this cave. It is near this point that the connection into Sandy Hole was made and the cave changes markedly from dry, fossil to tacky, grey mud and watery puddles. It was at this point that my directions get a bit vague as we all just got our heads down and “enjoyed” the crawl.... Along Gold and Silver Passage to Hardye’s Hole, to World’s End and on and on and on..... There was practically no let up until we rounded a corner and found the enormous ammonite in the floor which gives the entrance passage to Sandy Hole it’s name. A final push out to the entrance – another cliff face entrance, this time only about 12 feet from the deck and a freeclimb down onto the path below.

After dcrrigging Blacknor, just around the corner and finding the sunbathing possc, it was back to the campsite for a well deserved barbecue, courtesy of JP who had been out (in the absence of local caving shops) and bought a shiny new bit of cooking kit to grill our steaks on. In fact we were all surprised that Bill and Lynne had not packed a gas fired BBQ, to compliment their wide and varied cooking and camping equipment list, but our fears of their standards slipping were quashed when Lynne produced a roast chicken with cold trimmings she had, in true lightweight camping style “prepared earlier” Food was inevitably followed by beer and after reflection and a few pints of Local Ringwood Ale, Blacknor to Sandy Hole was pronounced a success.

It was far too nice a day to do anything too energetic on Sunday so we spent it walking to Chesil beach, filling up Ben’s shorts and Richards hat with pebbles and counting just how many pebbles make up Chesil beach itself. Oh, and drinking beer. Portland is definitely worth spending a weekend over. Blacknor to Sandy Hole is a good, long trip, strictly for those who don’t mind crawling too much. It took over 4 hours to do the through trip and is one of the better “collectors’ items” to do. There is also stacks of grovelling to be done in the smaller caves and even looks like some good SRT practice in some of the vertical rifts. So, maybe we’ll be back one day for a bit of digging!