

A visit to eastern Europe

By Tony and Denise Knibbs, Toulouse.

On 27 July 2002 we left all our territorial worldly goods in the safe hands of John, Barbara, Keith and Trish and headed for the A 61 motorway from Toulouse to Narbonne thence, taking the A9 eastwards along the Mediterranean seaboard, reached the A 50 beyond Marseille en route for la Seyne sur Mer near Toulon. This first over-night stop with family friends allowed a coastal walk and a dip in the sea before driving on into Italy next day.

The day started hot and sunny but finished grey and wet. At Genoa we changed motorways from A8/10 to A7 north towards Milan which we bypassed eastwards via Cremona and Brescia. The A4 now led via Verona and Vicenza then passed north of Venice. The sun was setting and the clouds gathering as we turned north on the A23 towards Udine and a hotel for the night. By morning the rain had eased and the scenery going into Austria could be enjoyed. Time to get my German out of mothballs! First language failure was not to correctly translate the meaning of VERKAUFEN on a sign showing a "motorway" logo. It was trying to tell us to buy a motorway wind-screen sticker which was a once-only toll payment in Austria. But nobody troubled us as we rolled on northwards, skirting Vienna (and crossing the Danube twice!) before reaching Bratislava. The frontier post looked like a lorry park and our euros were duly changed for Slovakian Crowns before heading northeast up the A65 motorway towards Trencin and Zilina. The map showed the Carpathian mountains out to the left of us but the sky had sprung a permanent leak and visibility was down to single-figure kilometres. Since our next stop was to be a forest campsite we ignored sight-seeing and pushed on through Ruzomberok, passed Martin and soon found ourselves driving alongside the lake of Liptovsky Mara.

This sits in a wide valley which divides the Low Tatras to the south from the high Tatras to the north. Liptovsky Mikulas town was the first local marker where a signpost pointing to the right (south) directed us into the Demänova Valley. The ATC Bystrina campsite was soon found and in a few minutes we were drinking pivo (Pils beer) with Shepton members, young and old. With a thunderstorm building we put up the tent then wandered down to the reception buildings to check out the facilities and eat at what was to become a very popular campsite restaurant where English was spoken.

The 2200km journey had been tiring so the first few days were spent getting our bearings and gathering local information. Dynamic Shepton "sheep" made brave efforts to get a handle on local caving; they left camp early and came back late saturated but still grimly determined. The only caving readily available was the Demänova show caves. That suited us fine. The Demänova system is some 12km long and has several entrances on the right-hand side of the wooded valley.

The Demänova Valley runs south into the Low Tatras and terminates at the popular ski-resort village of Jasná with a nearby year-round lift up to Chopok (2024m). Frequent thunderstorms persuaded us to keep off exposed heights. Unfortunately no English-speaking local cavers were ever met. There was a caving museum in Liptovsky but all the annotations were in Slovak. I got the opinion that caving in Slovakia is a state-controlled pursuit which is difficult to participate in without a mentor.

From the Editor

This newsletter is again shorter than the usual ten pages. This is because an AGM publication has to be sent to members soon after 11th March when nominations close. This issue 'fills the gap' between January's newsletter and the AGM publication and keeps everyone up to date with the latest news.

Enclosed with this issue is a booking form for the Annual Dinner. It would be nice to see a few new faces at the dinner this year?

Please keep your articles coming in, if only to prevent me from writing up my bird-watching report!

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Demänovská Jaskyne Slobody

Demänovská Jaskyne Slobody (Liberty Cave) is the most popular show cave, and, because visitor numbers are limited, it is a place to arrive at early (about 9h00). The Slovak commentary was hard to follow but the profusely decorated caved needed little description. The most common colouring was from ochreous yellow into orange

Lower down the valley Demänovska l'Adora Jaskyne is entered at 840m and its lowest parts contain ice formations. Less spectacular than Slobody.

The cave of Bystrianska Jaskyna lies to the west of the village of Bystra on the southern slopes of the Low Tatras. It is 2km long and entered at 565m altitude. Unusually it offered a through-trip from the New Cave to the Old Cave. Its chief claim to fame seems to be that it once housed a speleotherapy unit with beds.

Also on the southern slopes of the Low Tatras is Harmanecka Jaskyna, northwest of the town of Banska Bystrica (off the E77). One of the best show caves in the area, it is the only one requiring any effort to reach the entrance up a couple of kilometres of steep, zigzag path. It also boasted the crudest toilet (not WC) that I have ever seen: a plank with a hole in a shed over a 20m ravine. Nine species of bat are said to inhabit the cave; *myotis myotis* being the most common with an estimated population of 1,000. Much of the cave decoration is a solidified variety of moonmilk.

Because time in Slovakia was running out, a joint Knibbs/Mills visit to a salt mine in Poland was carried out. The frontier, again, resembled a great lorry park and the usual money-changing stop was made. Cracow was reached without problem and the Wieliczka Royal Salt Mine duly found – they even had an English language tour. Salt was at the heart of the wealth of Celtic peoples and the importance of a salt mine is obvious. The deepest working is at –327m in nine levels and the total length is nearly 250km. The main interest is in the amazing sculptures created by the miners down the centuries; mainly religious in context, including many chapels – St Kinga's Chapel is immense and has chandeliers of rock salt. The quantity of timber used in certain constructions is amazing. The return drive took in a powerful storm but Kirsty coped.

To take advantage of a slight improvement in the weather we did a walk along the Suchá Belá gorge in the Narodny Park Slovak Raj (Slovak Paradise National Park) to the south of Poprad in East Slovakia. Walking is obviously a popular pursuit hereabouts (Podlesok) and the artificial aids in the gorge (ladders, traverse wires/chains and catwalks) rapidly caused queues to form. The going was easy and a stop for lunch was made at a park lodge before walking down to Hornad to complete a circuit. Adjacent to the car parking area was a pivo hut where thirsts were slaked. Prominent among the customers were numerous armed (knives and machetes) youths dressed in camouflage clothing and large boots, slightly reminiscent of the ethnic-cleansing episode in Kosovo. Wolf, lynx and bear roam in the vicinity but we saw no trace of them.



Wieliczka salt water duct

Leaving the Bystrina campsite was fairly dramatic. Incessant rain was causing rivulets to form around and through the tents and had turned the nearby grass slope up to the cars into a muddy slide. As anticipated, immediately I moved the heavily laden Omega it slid sideways and required a push to get it back on the track. Hero of the day was Butch who pushed at a rear corner and was rewarded by a copious spattering of mud for his efforts.

A planned move to Hungary caused us to again pass via Poprad, then head south through Roznava and pass the

well-known Dobsinska Ice Cave en route for Plesivec near the Hungarian Border. The cave car park was full, so a visit was ruled out. However, another cave visit was possible a couple of kilometres before the border. Domica Cave is formed in the Middle Triassic Wetterstein limestone of the Slovak Karst. It is 5km long and forms part of the Baradla System which runs beneath the frontier and is 25km long. The car park was half empty and the modern entrance buildings and museum were uncrowded – a passing cloudburst might have had something to do with this.

The cave had a “different” feel to it, no less richly decorated than previous Slovakian caves but the ochre/ red colouring was less pronounced. Remains of human occupation – Palaeolithic and Neolithic – have been found in the cave. Surprisingly no guide book was available.

The frontier post was deserted as we crossed into Hungary at late afternoon in heavy rain. Our destination was Aggtelek National Park campsite where several people wisely decided to rent dacha-style wooden huts as an alternative to pitching tents in the rain. Again, the site had a restaurant which served varied meals including “two-way” fish soup. I thought it tasted a bit “off”.

The reason for staying at Aggtelek World Heritage site was to do the “long” trip (pre-booking required) in Baradla Cave which has an entrance in the park, at the base of a prominent 50m high triangular cliff face. The trip was rather like a caving safari lead by two “professional” guides of which the young girl spoke English. Those who so required were issued with handlamps (two tourists joined the group). After a few minutes we entered a large chamber, the Concert Hall (equipped with a sound system and rows of seats). Here we were treated to a “musical experience” – an unidentified piece of music played through their sound system. Poor system; good acoustics. Despite copious rainfall the main underground river was very low (the stream was confined to a lower streamway) and we were able to stroll along the riverbed without getting our feet wet. Progress was easy walking in passages 20+m high and up to 15m wide. A couple of hours brought us to the turn-off to the right into the Radish Branch side passage. This was well decorated as you might expect, the radishes being botryoidal stal on walls and roof. After 1250m the passage terminated at a climb up into dry, muddy chambers. Observing our general ability to move easily in the cave, our guides asked if we were professional cavers. Having sat on a low ledge to watch us climb and return from the chambers, the girl stood up under a roof which was lower than she was and the result of not wearing a helmet was painfully demonstrated. Eventually, some eight kilometres from our starting point we entered the Josvafő show cave (impressive in its own right) where our guides indicated a flight of steps leading up to the Observatory, a gigantic stalagmite 17m high and embellished with secondary calcite deposits. We exited at the busy reception area and headed for the café before being driven back to the campsite. Because the through-trip had taken in almost 10km of cave passage the formations had seemed less concentrated and therefore less impressive than in smaller caves. Nevertheless many of the individual formations were quite spectacular.



Domica Cave



Rakocki iron mine

It should be said that the Aggtelek park contains many other caves (not all open for exploration) and a wide selection of nature and mountain-biking trails and features of interest. It would itself have made a good venue for a holiday.

The following day a park guide took us to the nearby Rakocki iron mine, close to the Slovakian border, which had broken into natural cave. The mine had been worked out and its buildings vandalised. Fixed ladders were in place to enable us to visit the natural section down to water level. Out in daylight again we walked up the hill above the mine to see an abandoned open-cast working and were surprised

to learn that a 300m shaft had been dug into the horizontal mine underneath so that ore could be dropped down for recovery by tubs below. Ferreting around in a vandalised office building, hoping to find some mining documents, I discovered a "Home Guard" manual in which at least the illustrations were understandable.

In order to obtain some Hungarian currency a visit to the nearest large town of Miskolc was necessary. On the way there the heavens opened to transform a couple of kilometres of road into a long, axle-deep lake (just in front of a Tesco supermarket). Miskolc had little to recommend it; one of the two main banks was unable or unwilling to cash travellers cheques. Mind you it was a wet, miserable day!

However another show cave was spotted on the map, Szent Istvan Barlang at Lillafured, just a few kilometres west of Miskolc; in the Bükki Nemzeti (national) Park. A half-hour drive in the continuous downpour brought us to the reception building where it was possible to await the next trip in the dry. A man-made tunnel led into a modest chamber from which steps were followed up a dripping rift, reminiscent of the outside world, soon to reach a terminal chamber. I think we only did this cave "because it was there".

Time was now running out for our East European jaunt and European weather reports were indicating widespread flooding. We decided to return via Budapest where we rejoined Martin and Kirsty Mills for a weekend in the city. It was a wet drive down the M3 (having bought the required windscreen sticker permit) from beyond Miskolc. The rendezvous was a bit hazy; a campsite at Szentendre 40km north of Budapest and on the right bank of the Danube. In view of the now-atrocious weather it was thought wise to have the option of renting a bungalow.

Budapest was easy to find – Szentendre less so. To our surprise we arrived first. Since it was still raining we decided to check out the hotels, finding one that offered secure underground parking in a wall-to-wall pond several centimetres deep. Martin and Kirsty soon hove into sight and we had the pleasure of sipping Budweiser in the bar whilst watching an incredible cloudburst outside. Next morning we took the local train into the city and traipsed around the historic sights in the pouring rain, ending up at a philatelist shop where Martin found and bought some Hungarian stamps featuring cave illustrations. The river Danube was in full flood but carried its charge of huge trees and other debris still within its banks. Szentendre was a happy choice of stopover: interesting in itself and within easy reach of the city. In better weather we would have even taken a cruise on the river!

Martin and Kirsty went northeast into Czechoslovakia – we went southwest into Austria where the rain finally ceased. Our return route was planned to take in the world's largest ice-cave; Eisriesenwelt (Cave of the Ice Giants) at Werfen. The local tourist office put us onto a picturesque hotel from which we set off early next morning to catch the minibus up to the cablecar and the cave. Worldwide popularity results in crowds visiting the cave, so early arrivals are sensible. Setting foot on the mountainside approach path high above the clouds was a quite spectacular start to the visit. Inside the vast entrance portal (alt. 1664m) the guide handed out carbide handlamps and a single sheet of descriptive text in English (quote:"don't worry if your lamps are blown off – I'll light them again in the cave") and we set off up the 700 wooden stairs long-since frozen into the ice floor. Among the points of interest was Hymirburg (Castle of Hymir the Ice Giant) with spectacular ice stalagmites. The visit culminates 134m above the entrance at the great Mörk Chamber, the early explorer Alexander von Mörk was killed in the First World War and his ashes repose in an urn high up in the wall of the chamber. From here we descended the steps back to the entrance where the sun was now shining.

Next day, 16 August we drove around Salzburg thence into Bavaria and via Munich and Freiburg back into France near Besançon. Back home on 17 August we found Anne and Bryan in control of the house and cats.

Postscript Visiting Eastern Europe takes one to places where almost every aspect of life is different compared to elsewhere on the Continent. The language barrier is important and the way of life is very different. We really felt we were in foreign countries. The need to spend/waste time finding the way around on arrival is notable; obtaining information in advance of the visit is not easy; communicating in English is rarely successful. Communism probably made everybody suspicious of everybody else, so there is a lack of spontaneous warmth. Caving appears to be very regionalised with limits set as to the autonomy of the caver. We suspect that cavers are "professional" in the sense of being state-controlled and giving information to foreigners is probably frowned on.

Accession to the EU will doubtless bring changes – in both directions. Slovakia appeared to be rather mediaeval in many ways; Poland overtly catholic; Hungary more attuned to "Western values". On any future visit we would consider staying at hotels; they are only slightly more expensive than camping. In good weather there is much to do: Slovakia is a walkers paradise but not in pouring rain!

We should record our thanks to SMCC and, in particular, to Mark Faulkner for organising the visit.

Cave protection

Tony Knibbs drew my attention to an interesting website at <http://users.skynet.be/sky75112/avalonuk/av06.htm> This link takes you to a cave protection project by Paul De Bie of Speleoclub Avalon, België (Belgium). The translation from Dutch to English is still going on but one thing you can already find, entirely translated, is a slide presentation (64 slides) covering many aspects of cave conservation.

"You can download it and use it where and how you want. My aim is to make people think about cave protection... or better, making them aware. The more people see the presentation, the better (whether they agree with it or not). So go ahead and spread the word around" he says.

You can also visit Speleoclub Avalon at <http://users.skynet.be/avalon> For those who do not have access to the web, the following is a summary of what the website is about..

Cave protection is a very large and complex topic. Although a lot of its (mainly environmental) aspects can not be handled by cavers alone, we cavers can also make a difference. The way we visit and move around in caves, things we do to really protect caves (taping off routes or formations, gating), actions we take to make the non-caving community (the public) aware of cave protection problems, the way we handle "commercial cave tours", ... are just a few examples of how we, cavers, can contribute.

"Cave protection: some thoughts, tips and actions": a slide presentation of more than 60 slides that covers most aspects of cave protection: protecting formations, cleaning formations, gates, electric light, "soft caving rules". You can download this slide-show for free and you can distribute and use it everywhere to educate other cavers. The slide-show exists in English, French and Dutch.

What Speleoclub Avalon thinks about cave protection... our point of view.

Cave protection: what can we do ourselves: an article covering some aspects of caving in Belgium in a cave-friendly way.

Problems because of "commercial caving" and how we handle it.

Taping of trails and taking care of formations: an article about the techniques of taping off formations and taking care or cleaning of formations.

Impossible or not? Is protecting caves really so difficult?

Serdu's Code of Honour: a unique series of 15 cartoons by Serdu, illustrating the Caver's Code of Honour.

Links & documents about cave protection



Cave going hole-sale

Stump Cross Caverns in North Yorkshire is on the market for £675,000. There is more than a mile of show cave with another four miles of passageways, only partly explored and said to include an underground lake. The caves were first explored in the 1850s by lead miners. 70 years later, Christopher Long, a Cambridge University student, opened up new parts of the caves, finding prehistoric reindeer and wolverine bones. He also claimed to have found the lost lake, but he refused to give its location unless the caves' owners gave him a share of the tourist takings. He is said to have walled up the cave entrance when negotiations failed. Stump Cross was last sold in 1926, when a potholer, Septimus Wray, paid the £400 bill. The new owners will have to guarantee access for the lake's main enthusiast, Geoff Workman, 73, a former government rocket scientist, who in 1963 spent 105 days underground at Stump Cross to study health effects, and still visits the caves every week.

MENDIP CAVING GROUP ANNUAL DINNER

5th April 2003

Lyncombe Lodge Hotel,

Churchill

7.30 - late

£21.50 per person

Menu choices

Starters

Cream of tomato soup

Tulip of baby melon fillet with citrus fruits steeped in Grand Marnier

Smoked fish terrine surrounded by tomato, lime and chervil coulis

Cajun spiced sweet potato cakes with dressed salad leaves

Main courses

Poached supreme of chicken sliced onto a black cherry, balsamic vinegar and basil sauce

Strips of pork fillet dusted with cumin and ginger; surrounded by a rosemary and thyme jus

Grilled salmon supreme topped with chive butter and sauteed peppers

Saute of seafood and shellfish in a Thai style lime and coconut sauce served with a timbale of rice

Mushroom ravioli with a smoked cheddar and caramelised onion sauce

Desserts

A choice of desserts

Butcombe will be available at the bar

Cheques and menu choices to Linda Milne by 31 March 2003, please.

Annual Dinner 2003

This year's dinner will be held at Lyncombe Lodge Hotel, Churchill, about 7 miles from the cottage. Rooms are available at £70 for a double and £45 for a single. All rooms are ensuite and include a full English breakfast. Tel. 01934 8548000 for room reservations.

Beer was a popular request from last year, so the Hotel will be getting in some Butcombe just for us! Marvellous. There will of course be the ever popular raffle (donations are very welcome – any unwanted Christmas pressies or caving gear out there?).

Dessert choices do not appear on the Menu just yet. I will let you know nearer the time what they are. Don't let that stop you from sending in the cheques and reply slips! I will contact you with dessert details when I know them. Can you stand the suspense?

Reply slips are attached to this newsletter, or you can send me an email (linda.milne@btinternet.com).

Special activities As well as being within walking distance from Mangle Hole and Sandford Levvy caves, the hotel is situated next to a dry ski slope and riding centre, and offers hill walking straight from the hotel. Far too energetic for an AGM weekend surely.....

Ski-slope £10.00/hr including equipment for skiing and snowboarding (£9.00 for kids)
£4.50/hr for tobogganing (kids only!)
Lessons are also available

Riding One hour group ride £13.00 pp
Two hour group ride £23.50pp (longer rides / beach rides also available)
Lessons are also available

For bookings and further details for these special activities, contact High Action Ltd 01934 852335.

Transport A coach/mini-bus will be provided (for a nominal fee), with the usual pick up stops, Wells and the Hunters.

And finally.....Is there anyone in the club that you would like to nominate for an award? E.g. Best article in newsletter, worst article in newsletter, best photo underground, nastiest caving injury, unluckiest caver, most active caver, least active caver (!!!!), biggest cock-up (excuse me) mistake, funniest story, etc, etc. You know the sort of thing, serious or otherwise, we want to hear from you.....
Linda

Annual General Meeting, 5th April 2003

Notice of the AGM was published in January's newsletter. Don't forget to get your committee nominations in the post before 11th March, as well as any amendments to the constitution.

The agenda, officers reports and other AGM documents will be sent to all members a few days after 11th March as a special publication.

MCG is your Group; the AGM is your opportunity to say how you want the Group to be run. Please make the effort to come to the AGM.
Yvonne Rowe

MCG DOINGS...

E-mail addresses:

Brian Snell has had some problems with his work e-mail addresses, brian.snell@dsia.com brian.snell@hayscsg.com but his personal address brian.snell@tinyworld.co.uk should always be ok.

Simon Tanner has a new e-mail address which is: sims_t@v21.me.uk

50TH DINNER 2004

Plans continue to progress for the anniversary dinner on 27th March 2004.

As Combe Lodge, Blagdon can only cater for 100 comfortably, the committee are looking at other nearby venues with capacities up to 200.

MYSTERY CAVE

There were no correct answers to last month's puzzle (A New Year's Day Paving Trip). In fact, the trip was to Sandford Levvy. This little mine is full of surprises and well worth a visit. An ideal Sunday bumble after the Annual Dinner perhaps?



2003/04 CAVING AND SOCIAL CALENDAR

DATE	AREA	EVENT	CONTACT	TELEPHONE
Memb W/Es	Mendip	Digging in Carcass Cave	Bill Chadwick	0118 9691812
5th April 2003	Mendip	AGM	John Pudduck	01749 870383
5th April 2003	Mendip	Annual Dinner	Linda Milne	01344 774589
3rd May 2003	Mendip	Archaeology walk	Yvonne Rowe	01524 762664
7th June 2003	Mendip	Cottage Work weekend	Ben Cooper	01344 776306
27th March 2004	Mendip	50th Anniversary Dinner	John Pudduck	01749 870383

GROUP INFORMATION

Weekly Meetings	At The Hunters Lodge, Somerset, Tuesday at about 10pm
Monthly Meetings	At the Group HQ on the first Fri/Sa/Sunday of the month
Accommodation	Available at the Group HQ (for members and guests)
Cottage Fees	MCG members, members children, SWCC, NPC £ 1.50
(per night)	Guest clubs and member's guests £ 2.50
Season Ticket	Available to members only £30.00
Subscription	Full and Probationary Members £30.00
	Associate Members £15.00
Reciprocal rights	MCG members have reciprocal rights with SWCC and NPC
	NPC bookings Nic Blundell tel 01203 713849 (hm) or 01203 838940 (wk)
	SWCC bookings Ian Middleton tel 01703 736997 email ian_m@tcp.co.uk

Group Headquarters

Nordrach Cottage
Charterhouse-on-
Mendip, Blagdon
Bristol BS407XW
01761 462797
Grid Ref ST51475606

Non-committee Posts

Rescue Warden
Vacant

Conservation Officer
Peat Bennett
01223 2406333

Examiners
Wayne Hiscox
01749 671282
Mike Lovell
0118 966 3747

Gift Aid Administrator
Malcolm Cotter
01784 252643

THE 2002 - 2003 MCG COMMITTEE

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COTTAGE BOOKINGS

Please make bookings for Groups (whether MCG or Guests) through the Cottage Warden to avoid double bookings

Who	Date Arrive	Date Leave	Nights	Beds
Steve Tibbert	Fri 14/02/03	Sun 16/02/03	2	26
Pete Mullins	Fri 14/03/03	Sun 16/03/03	2	20
Steve Tibbert	Fri 21/03/03	Sun 23/03/03	2	12
Pete Mullins	Fri 12/09/03	Sun 14/09/03	2	24