

Imperial College Caving Club Spring Tour 2009



Vercors, France



Summary:

The ICCC Spring Tour to the Vercors was extremely successful, with a number of serious trips undertaken and people going caving every single day. The use of the Eurostar meant we could carry vastly more gear (necessary for safely rigging these deep pots) than we would be able to if we flew, as well as carrying out the spirit of the Union Green-Travel policy.

The Vercors is the very birthday of modern lightweight caving technique, and it was extremely instructive to all club members no matter what level of experience to savour the tight, deep, wet and difficult caving that caused such fast evolution in sports caving.

Our ability to plan such a successful tour was enabled by our extensive special interest library, and club records of prior tours going back to the 70s, as well as the latest information emailed from a number of UK and French cavers.

Our timing in the year with respect to the snow couldn't have been worse – it was melting visibly while we were there. This took about three-quarters of the possible caves off the table, either due to the danger of Avalanche getting to the entrance, or due to their flood susceptibility under the massive amounts of melt water. The Vercors is such a rich caving area however that we easily found enough destinations to occupy our week, and it was interesting to be slightly 'off the beaten track'.

Logistics:

Going by Eurostar/TGV was a major boon for caving – we could take as much stuff as we could physically carry. This was essential to be able to tackle the deep Alpine pots present in the Vercors. Approximate per person load was 50kg, far higher than the misery amount available as airplane baggage. The only stipulations on carried content were no gas cylinders and no lock knives (i.e. Opinel), in stark contrast to airport carry on luggage where we are no longer allowed any metal work / nylon tape/ cord / rope.

However, crossing Paris on the Metro was rather stressful and back straining!

Hertz car hire from within the Grenoble trainstation made things very easy, and the caravan a definite worthwhile investment. Extremely cheap and cheerful, it never the less had electric heaters, an on-demand gas boiler, microwave, gas hobs, cooking gear etc.

Budget:

Eurostar/TGV: £554

Car Hire + Petrol: £398.86

Accommodation: £308.34

Food + Living Costs*: £232.39

Total: £1529.72

Tour members: 8

*Nb: Cafe bills, bar tabs settled off accounts. Some 'petite cash' missing – metro tickets etc.

Hard Facts: Our discovery of the p-bolting Trou qui Souffle, and re-GPS'ing of the entrance to Gay Bunny, and feeding this information back to the English speaking cavers has increased the knowledge and ability of other clubs going to this area to cave successfully.

Diary:

9th of April

I and Jarv were first at the St. Pancreas waiting for others. First William come along, who nicely brought the bags of rope. He had to stay in London due to personal reasons. Afterwards Gergely turn up and together we watched time tick away. We start to make phone calls and manage to wake James up, but we were less successful on waking Tim up, who then missed the train. The journey was relaxed with our eyes closed all the way. In no time we were in Paris, getting ready to run for the TGV on the other side of the Paris. You can take as much as you want on a train, but be careful, that it is not too heavy. We over compensate a bit and suffer in Paris underground to move around. All bruised and exhausted we catch the TGV just on time. No words needed here, that we slept all the way. In Grenoble we pick up our rent-a-car and went shopping at the hyper market. The weather was stunning and hot and the journey to Villard de Lans, where we stayed (On 1050m) was very nice.

At 10PM Jarv and Gergely went back down to Grenoble to pick up Tim from the train station, who finally manage to get here. I and James stayed in our lovely Mobile home and discussing which Vercors cave is going to be our first. We found the Guy Bunny cave, which by looking at the survey, depth (-418) and the name of passages and chambers seems most promising. It was also just recently discovered and not too high up in the mountains for as to reach (still loads of fast melting snow). Before bed time, everybody seems happy with a plan.

Jana Carga

Tim, while crossing Paris, is accosted by an extremely smartly dressed business man who spotted the tell-tale rope bags bulging with Nylon. "Speleogy?". "Oui, in Grenoble.". "Ahh! Tres bien! I used to as well! My heart is in the Vercors!"

Caving in France is well nice. You tell someone you're a caver in England and people look at you as if you're admitting some kind of sexual perversion. In France, it's a natural part of Alpinism, where the toughest characters go to get their kicks after the mountaineering gets too easy...

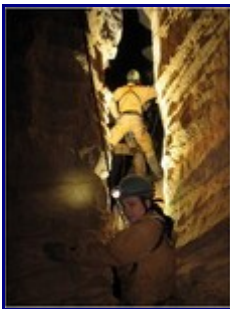
Jarvist Frost

10th of April: The Gay Bunny

We decide to visit the Scialet Gay Bunny. The guide book promises it is "tres sportif" (very

sporting) and "autant soutenu" (rather sustained). It is a recently discovered cave a stone throw away from a car park. We (Gergely) readily find the entrance and start descending. The entrance rift is impossibly simultaneously narrow and large. Most handholds are hard pieces of rock jutting out of smooth limestone, we all turn ourselves into leopards by bruising our limbs onto this damn rift. Then starts a very pleasant pitch series terminating into a 17 m and a 20 m pitch. I rig both of them with the speed of a sloth and the precision of a drunken gnu. The last 20 m pitch is especially pretty if memory serves me right. After this passage: the meandre Sesame. Kind of like sesame street for psychotic butchering kids. It's awkward and seems unterminalable, but eventually we make it through to the end of the rift and a cascade of short pitches that deposits us into the Mozart chamber: a beautiful spray lashed chamber of large dimensions with several inlets. At this point we decide we will return home and meet Izi and Aljosa. Back through the goddmaned rift, this time without tackle sacks tho!

James Kirkpatrick

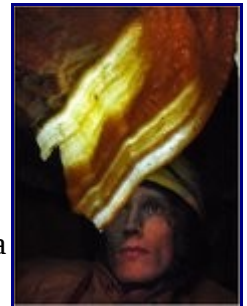


The cave started with a muddy slope which slowly turned into a tight rift with nodules of chert where you had to traverse high up. Reaching the first tight pitch, the cave finally seems to widen up a bit. Not for long - a 70m super tight crawl-ly rift (Sesame Street) was keeping us 'interested' until the cave opened up again. One cascade pitch and we finally reach the Mozart chamber, which was absolutely stunning. We decided it is better to turn around (Izi and Aljosa were to arrive that evening), leaving the ropes to come back the next day. No need to describe the 'lovely' way out.

Jana Carga

11th of April: Return to Sesame Street

Jana is too shagged to return to the very unhappy and unfluffy Gay Bunny, so it will be boys only today. I get stuck at the beginning of the meander and need rescuing, Jarv is behind offering moral support and useful advice ("dont panic" "do what you did to get there in reverse etc.") he also provides light. I ignore his advice, panic and heave myself out with the might of my powerfull mosquito arms and abs. A tooth is slightly chipped on the way and I almost loose my helmet.... We reach the Mozart chamber and climb under a boulder choke. After a few short pitches we enter a high level traverse above the water. The fossil passage is very muddy and rather decorated. Actually it is quite pretty! The rigging is slow and the route finding not 100% straightforward. There are hundreds of crappy little pitches bolted off vintage spits which are rather badly placed. It's not too cold and I am very happy spending the time posing for Izi and smoking fags. Eventually we reach a pendule, the passage becomes muddier and we decided we've had enough and turn around. Exiting the cave is hard but not epic. Jarv derigs the whole way, I am unable to climb out of the entrance rift and am forced to crawl at the bottom like a lifeless bug. Darned Gay Bunny! You guard your secrets carefully!



James Kirkpatrick

Oh the joy of derigging... Never really waiting for long, setting your own gentle pace (feeling puffed out? must be time to pack the rope down a bit!) The steady exit was made much more pleasent by the little Creative Xen MP3 player blasting out from my pocket. Though I do worry to what extent it may have pschic powers, as it rolled over into belting out Leonard Cohen just as Sesame street was getting pretty severe and the combined tactics for moving the tackle utterly necessary! The last bit of entrance rift was naturally the worst, with a fully stuffed tackle sack and a completely stuffed Jarvist! I could barely make it across the traverse, even with full use of the rope that we placed there "just for safety's sake". The slippery chert was almost impossible to climb, its a rather severely inclined rift! Crawling out I sipped a spot of freshly brewed tea and gobbled some

orange segments before we wandered slowly back through the now very slushy snow to the car.

Damn - my knife! Where was it? I remembered cutting the orange, and then cleaning it on the snow... but not putting it away. Rubbish. So I headed off in the pitch black to retrieve it. Wandering across the snowy visage with rather scary owls hooting away - quite exciting! Managed to find the cave without even consulting the GPS. In fact, the GPS resulted in my only injury - I turned it on to see how accurate our newly made coordinate were, and promptly walked into a tree branch while looking down at the screen!

So yes, the Gay Bunny. An interesting place. You can see why it was only pushed recently, when the other caves are so much more pleasant. However, if you are looking for a sporting cave (think King Pot, with bigger pitches and many more of them) at mediocre altitude which can be reached probably most if not all year round, and seems extremely flood resistant, then I definitely recommend it! A real collector's piece, and somewhere I full intend to return. The slowest, most difficult, route to -400 it may be in the Vercors, but the enjoyment of the caving is high. Sesame street is of a similar length (in cave time) to the Daren Entrance crawl, but (you stay) dry. The tight bits are roughly as tight, but you're generally squeezing in a cascade, so you tend to suddenly pop out and have to find some footholds sharpish! For tackle, combined tactics are essential. Bolts are fairly shagged, sometimes strangely placed, and the cave mud is extremely gritty.

Jarvist Frost

Musical Interlude...

"Sesame street has been brought to you today by the letters I and C and by the number 3. Welcome to Sesame Street."

Gay Bunny
Sweepin' the snow away
On my way to where the chert is freaked

Can you tell me how to get,
How to get to Sesame Street

Come and cave
Everything's Not-OK
Tight squeezes on the climbs
That's where you freak

Can you tell me how to get,
How to get out of Sesame Street

It's a deep Alpine pot
Every pitch gapes open wide
The belays unsound,
the description lied

Can you tell my mother,
How not to try and bother...
How to get my cold cadaver...
out of sesame street

Jarvist Frost

By not sleeping too much in the last three days and an upset stomach to contend with, the caving did not seem to me like a sensible choice of how to spend the day. I really needed a day to relax, since on the end I was on holidays. I truly enjoy my day by myself walking around the local hills. I also did some shopping, cleaning and cooking and even find a time for a three hour nap. I estimated they



return for 1 AM and I just fell a sleep when I got the SMS from Jarv: 'We are all out, back in 40'. The time was 1.20 AM. We all went to bed at 4 AM, which defiantly meant a late wake up.

Jana Carga

12th of April: Kit Wash & St Martins

Brain Dead. Jana drags us for a walk somewhere. I have no memories of this day, I think we visit a waterfall???

James Kirkpatrick

Was about noon-ish when we manage to crawl out of our comfy beads. The boys were absolutely smashed from the Guy Bunny and the only sensible idea was to clean the muddy kit and get rested for the next caving day. There was a stream, just few meters away from our home and more then ideal for washing muddy caving stuff. Of course I was totally refreshed and just cleaning the kit was not enough, so I finally manage to drag the boys for a walk. We drove to St Julien En Vercors and then walked on top of the Bournillon cliffs. Amazing view down on the waterfall, the lake, hydro-electric facility and the cave Bournillon itself.

Jana Carga

13th of April: Santes de Glaces

Santes de Glaces to the Hydrokarst chamber in Trou qui souffle. Once again we would never find the entrance without Gergely's magic skills. Take loads of pictures in the Hydrokarst chamber and have a scrumptious underground meal of cheese and biscuits. The way is relatively straightforward and everyone is a bit bored at the bottom: what is all this space between my body and the walls I wonder!

James Kirkpatrick

A nice relaxing trip. Not much effort required (-280m). Walking/climbing down the cascades few pitches and there we were in an enormous chamber with a twin waterfall pouring down from the top. We walked down one way to the end (stopped by flooded passage) and up on the other side (the way to Troi qui Souffle we believe). We had a photo session and on the way out, while I was derigging, Jarv made a few video clips of caving technique:

Jana Carga

14th of April: De Gournier and Bournillon

Highlight of the week? Izi and Aljosa brought an inflatable so we visit the Gournier. A cave with an entrance lake. Seriously! how cool is that!!!! We stomp down the fossil passage passing glorious gour pools and super stals. Really beautiful. Jarv bites the bullet and returns to the bags to paddle and check on our belongings (you never know there might be some thievenouss mendip cavers around?). Jana and Jalia also turn around at some point (dont know why)... Me Gergely Tim and Izi continue to the end of the fossil passage and pop down to the streamway for a look. It is terrifying, maybe with gills and full body armor and a powerful outboard engine I would consider entering the water, as it is I am happy to take a piss and turn around. Soon enough I am paddling back to the light and drinking chamers! VIVA le VERCOURS!

To top the day off we visit a giant cave entrance. It is large. We have some beer. And drive home. Excellent!

James Kirkpatrick

Tetley was really kind and lent as a boat, which Izi and Aljosa brought from Tmin. The cave

entrance starts with a lovely green lake and crossing it with a small inflatable boat was a great fun. After a small climb up the cave continues as a massive long tunnel with gour pools, more small lakes and other cave pretties. Jarv soon decided to turn back, since we all kindly left our valuables (money, passport, 3 SLRs) in front of the lake for other tourist to see them. Not a good idea and we did not want to our holidays end up on a police station. After a while Aljosa complained having stomach cramps, so I went out with him. Others continue just a bit more, where they reach the river, but was too big and dangerous to go down to it.

We then drove back down into the valley and walked to the hydro and from there up to the entrance to Bournillon, which was even more impressive than the De Gournier. Massive entrance with (hydro) lake in front and the river pouring out from the rocks. We brought beers and sat next to the lake to enjoy our self. Time flies when you are having fun (and skimming stones) and we had to drive back to catch the last of the daylight to start cleaning.

Jana Carga

Images:

