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BRITISH SPELEOLOGICAL EXPEDITION

TO THE

APEUN ALPS 1967

ANTRO DEL CORCHIA

NORTHERN ITALY

BY

D. SINCLAIR

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In the Summer of 1966 members of the British Speleological Association Manchester Group decided to mount an Expedition to the Antro del Corchia, a 2,600 ft. deep cave in Northern Italy.

It has three main objectives, firstly to survey and photograph the main system, secondly to extend the cave beyond the final boulder fall, and finally to carry out a programme of diving in the large upstream syphon at a depth of 1,800 ft.

The only information printed in England appears in the C.P.C. journal, Vol.3 No.2, and although this is quite good we found it necessary to write direct to the Italian Alpine Club, who generously furnished us with a survey, an account of their 1963 Expedition, and an invitation to join them in 1967.

To enable us to meet the cost of financing our venture we approached Industry, and were most fortunate in securing their support in the form of Donations of wire, rope, Duralamin tubing, Polypropylene and assorted Polythene material; food was also obtained at a reduced rate. The D.C.C. held a dance in June, the proceeds of which were donated to the Expedition. Eventually all the stores and equipment was assembled at a large school room in Stockport, placed at our disposal by the D.C.C.

To carry out our programme, two teams were built up, comprising of seven cavers in each, drawn from Lancashire, Cheshire and Derbyshire. Training meets were held in South Wales and Yorkshire, and as far as possible both teams operated independently; this was done to infuse team spirit and co-ordination, and proved quite successful on the Expedition.

ASSUALI TEAM

SUPPORT TEAM

D. SINCLAIR (LEADER)
D. ROBERTS (DIVER)
G. EDWARDS
D. JUDSON
R. MUMFORD (DIVER)
J. KIRKBY
R. ACULAS

E. JOHNSON (LEADER)
N. HARPER (MEDICAL OFFICER)
A. GAMBLE (COMMUNICATIONS)
B. LEWIS (PHOTOGRAPHER)
H. LOMAS (SURVEYOR)
B. DAVIES (SURVEYOR)
C. DAVIES (SURVEYOR)

FRIDAY

The main party left Stockport on Friday, 21st July and on Tuesday 25th the first vehicle arrived in Levigliani.

This is a charming little village, 20 miles N.E. of Viaraggio, perched 1,200 ft. on the flanks of Mount Corchia, seemingly carved into the mountain side. As there is no other industry, all the men work in the Marble Quarry, in which the Cave entrance is situated.

TUESDAY

Our first task was to contact the Belgium team who were encamped in the quarry out buildings, at an altitude of 3,300 ft. and faced with a climb of something like 1,800 ft. before us J. Kirkby and I set off, using as a guide the ramp on which the Marble blocks are lowered to the village below.

We could not have chosen a hotter time of day, and very soon the brisk pace we had set up soon dropped off; during our ascent it became increasingly obvious that an alternative method of establishing ourselves at the Cave entrance had to be found, as we could not expect to make more than two or three trips with a full load.

Arriving at the top we met the Belgium leader, who put us in the picture, explaining that they were pulling out, and hoped to complete the detackling by the Wednesday. We offered to help, as we wished to have a short reconnaissance trip to choose a site for our underground camp.

We raised the problem of getting up our equipment, whereupon he arranged an interview with the Director of the ~~Talacchio~~ ~~Quarry~~. Later in the day, with the local Hotel owner acting as interpreter, we obtained the necessary permission, on the conditions that we did not camp in the quarry buildings but in the valley below, and that we did not emerge from the Cave during the hours of daylight, the reasoning behind the last request only becoming obvious later.

WEDNESDAY

On Wednesday morning at 6.0 a.m. a party of four descended down to the syphons at 1,800 ft. it was a magnificent trip and enabled us to choose a site for Camp 1. The best place was obviously where the Italian team were camped, but was in such a filthy condition that we decided to forfeit comfort for cleanliness, and chose the camp in the chamber at the foot of the Pozza De Portella. The floor was not flat, but it was very well ventilated and had an adequate water supply.

We met the Belgium team at the syphons and helped carry bottles, valves and ladders as far as the Stalactite Gallery, but here we had to leave them to continue alone.

On returning to the surface we learned that the Land Rover had arrived, but was forced to leave behind the underground food, most of the carbide and all the Photographic equipment in Bourg, due to a tow bar failure.

The Italian leader, through their charming interpreter, Gabriella, then offered to let us use their equipment. As this would save two days, I agreed, on the condition that we could detackle. I also agreed to have all their equipment out for Monday evening, as they were leaving for home on Tuesday.

THURSDAY

Thursday was spent repacking the amended food box, and establishing all the personal kit bags and equipment at the entrance.

FRIDAY

Friday morning at 6.0 a.m. we were awaiting our turn at the base of the lift, we let the quarry workers go up first, and at 8.0 a.m. we were assembled at the entrance, together with 25 kit bags, 600 ft of ladder, belays, rope, food and carbide, also three cylinders of air and two valves.

The present entrance to the Cave is a small man made tunnel, in a large mound of quarry waste, and, being constantly under bombardment from the workings above, we were forced to ask the men to stop work to enable us to descend. For the first three hundred feet carbide lamps could not be used, due to the strong draught, but eventually all the gear was assembled in the first gallery. This initial section of the cave is quite arduous, containing four small pitches, some awkward chimneys, and rather delicate traverses. Most of the men had to make several trips to the large 160 ft. Pozzachione, but after about an hour I noticed that Judson and Edwards were missing. I eventually found them at the bottom of the 160 ft. pitch struggling manfully with one kit bag between them! I persuaded Judson to reclimb the pitch and contribute to the effort. Eventually six men were down the pitch with all the equipment, then D. Roberts was forced to retire with an injured hand and C. Davies decided that the call of the sun was stronger than the call of the syphon. Reluctantly he was forced to leave behind, on his trip out, his personal bag, we in turn were forced also to leave it behind, reluctantly, four days later. From the foot of the Pozzachione the cave continues as a large boulder chamber, likened to Agen Allwed, and the dip of the beds is quite alarming but fortunately the Italians had left a 160 ft. rope in position. At the bottom of the rift a pitch of 65 ft. was encountered, this in turn gave rise to a 25 ft. climb. The landing was in the floor of a parallel rift, in fact it is possible to do the whole pitch as a 140 ft. climbs, this would be easier for sack hauling. Further along the rift was the well rigged Pozzi De Portelle, a 90 ft. free hanger, at the foot of which was the start of the Stalactite Galleries, in which we were to set up our camp. We arrived at 8.30 p.m. the survey team who had begun their work from the entrance, arrived at 1.0 a.m. making very slow progress in the rift sections. After a meal of Steak, potatoes and peas, followed by fruit and biscuits, we all retired.

The first day had gone quite well, we were down to 1,100 feet with our camp set up, but unfortunately, with the loss of a diver we were forced to abandon our diving programme.

Saturday 8.0 a.m. the plan was, that the six men assault team would push for the bottom, taking with them the boat 600 ft. of ladder, ropes, stoves and some emergency food. We intended to use 200 ft. of ladder, rerigging the cascades, whilst the support team would continue surveying from the camp to the bottom, leaving the entrance section to be finished on the way out.

At 9.30 a.m. we set off, and after passing through the Stalactite Galleries, we climbed down a 35ft. pitch into an even larger passage, which contained the stream proper. These Galleries were quite fantastic, being about 80 ft. high and very wide, with elaborate decoration on the walls and ceiling.

Soon we were at the Italian camp, where we found them still in bed, they awoke and we exchanged photographs and cigarettes. About 500 ft. from the camp was the 100 ft. Cascade Pitch, this had been re-laddered dry, but the take off was on some very loose and dusty ledges. I, personally, preferred it hanging down the wall, as on our first trip, but it was obviously better rigged this way for sack-hauling.

Arriving at the foot of the ladder we were in a very large chamber, and from here onwards we were never more than a few feet from the stream, and although not very large in this section, it provided good sport on the climb.

Two short cascades were our next encounter, and soon we were overlooking two very deep shafts, separated by a narrow rib of rock. The rib was laddered with a 35 ft. section of ladder (very exposed). Arriving in the smaller rift at the base of the ladder, we chose the dry left shaft, this was the Pozzi Ad L?, a free hanging climb of 180 ft. which gave everyone trouble on the way out.

The passage continues as a descending rift, with the stream in the bottom. Lower down the passages become restricted, and after a few hundred feet, two more Cascades pitches and a short, delicate traverse, we passed a right angle bend, where the passage became quite low, and it was not hard to imagine a near duck in very wet weather.

After a short meander section, we emerged into the very impressive River Gallery. Going upstream we met the long upstream syphon, a very inviting sort of pool, at least 18 ft. deep, with a nice sandy take off. I regretted not bringing the diving gear, but with no cover diver for Mumford, I could not let him take the risk at this depth.

We were making very good time, and except for a boat burning attempt, with an awkward tin of carbide, every thing was going well.

Leaving the syphons behind us, we set off down the River Gallery. Edwards, Arculus and Judson were in front carrying the boat and some ropes, Kirkby, Mumford and I followed with the ladders, stove and food.

The Gallery is quite big, about 25 ft. wide in places, The Stream flows in deep pools, but these were easily traversed. A high standard of climbing was needed to negotiate the numerous cascades, many of which should have been laddered. We rigged what we had to, but I wanted to keep 400 ft. in reserve.

We caught up with the first three at the fourth cascade and learned that they had left behind our boat, for some obscure reason. Fortunately, we did not need to use it, as Lake Marika was quite low.

Continuing downstream the river suddenly plunged 50 ft. to the floor below, but the way on was a rather delicate traverse of about 20 ft. on hand holds, that were not above suspicion.

After further cascades the river levelled off and became hemmed in by huge blocks, eventually disappearing along a low creep.

Edwards and I arrived at the bottom and proceeded to attack the choke, which was about 20 ft. along the crawl, but after half an hour's work it became obvious that without proper tools and explosives we were wasting our time. Eventually the other four arrived, Judson and Arculus had a go at the choke, but soon came to the same conclusion, meanwhile Kirkby and Mumford climbed the chamber wall into some very large caverns, these were the ones discovered by the Italians in 1963. After a search around they returned to the stream, whereupon Judson decided to have a look for himself. Fortunately he kept his eyes open and soon discovered an 800 ft. long passage, terminating in a calcite choke.

After a meal of HF5 bars, sardines and chocolate, the assault team started back to Camp 1. We met the support team at the top of the traverse, they had packed up surveying, the reason being quite obvious, they were shattered.

As the line was not running properly, I left Kirkby at the top of the 180 ft. pitch; he lined up Judson and party, who in turn left Edwards to line up the Support team. At 7.0 p.m. we were all back at Camp 1, and after a grand meal, we all retired to bed.

On the Sunday we de-laddered the cave as far as Camp 1, ladders and ropes being hauled a further two pitches higher. On the Saturday, whilst returning from the Italian camp, Judson got lost, and returned with a story of a fantastic passage, which eventually was blocked by a lake.

Late on the Sunday afternoon, after the de-laddering, Mumford and I decided to investigate, we arrived at the waters edge and waded across.

It was not very deep, and soon we were on the far bank, the floor was of sand, and extended back to reveal a large passage about 18 ft. high and 20 ft. wide. We followed, and soon realised that we were on virgin ground, we climbed down three small pitches, then the passage developed into a rapidly descending rift. Without any ladders we could not follow. Returning 100 ft. back we saw high in the roof a large passage, Mumford climbed the wall which was about 25 ft. high. He left to investigate, returning ten minutes later he reported that the passage continued, but, unfortunately our carbide was running low, so we were forced to return to the Camp. On the way we paced the length - 1,000 ft. long. We also found the bones of what looked like a bat.

Arriving back at the Camp, we were amazed to find that we had been away four hours. We were having an early start on the Monday so we had to shelve our plans to push our find, and retired to bed at 11.0 p.m.

Monday morning everyone was up by 8.0 a.m. After breakfast we spent two hours cleaning up the Camp and packing gear, but eventually we got under way. Most people got stuck in and the gear was moved very quickly up to the top of the Pozzachione, where it was ferried to the entrance. This section proved very difficult, but eventually, at 6.0 p.m. all the men and gear were on the surface.

This last day was quite hard, in the eleven hours since waking we had carried 12 personal bags, 1,500 ft. of ladder, 2,000 ft. of rope, air bottles, pulleys etc. up 1,100 ft. of cave, de-laddering as we went.

CONCLUSION

Although the cave has been well visited in the last twenty years, it still holds great potential.

Both our extensions need working on, but it is doubtful that any progress will be made without the use of explosives.

List of pitches and Equipment used.

1. 20 ft. from piton. (can be climbed).
2. 20 ft. (overhand).
3. 50 ft. traverse in rift at height of 20 ft.
4. 160 ft. Pozzachione - short belay from bar. Awkward inclined pitch.
5. 25 ft. from piton into chamber.
6. 150 ft. rope for inclined rift.
7. 90 ft. broken at 60 ft. 20 ft. belay around large boss.
8. 25 ft. from piton.
9. 90 ft. clear hang. 20ft. belay from large rock above.

BRITISH CAMP

10. 30ft. overhang, 4ft. belay. (Stalactite Galleries).

ITALIAN CAMP.

11. 100 ft. freehang. 10 ft. belay (Can be done as a 60 ft. wet pitch).
12. 30 ft. Rawl-bolt belay (Cascade).
13. 25ft. 2ft. belay (Cascade).
14. 33ft. Rawl-bolt belay (exposed wall climb).
15. 180 ft. Pozzo Ad L. (100 ft. freehang ladder left hand shaft).
16. 25ft. Cascade.
17. 25ft. Cascade.

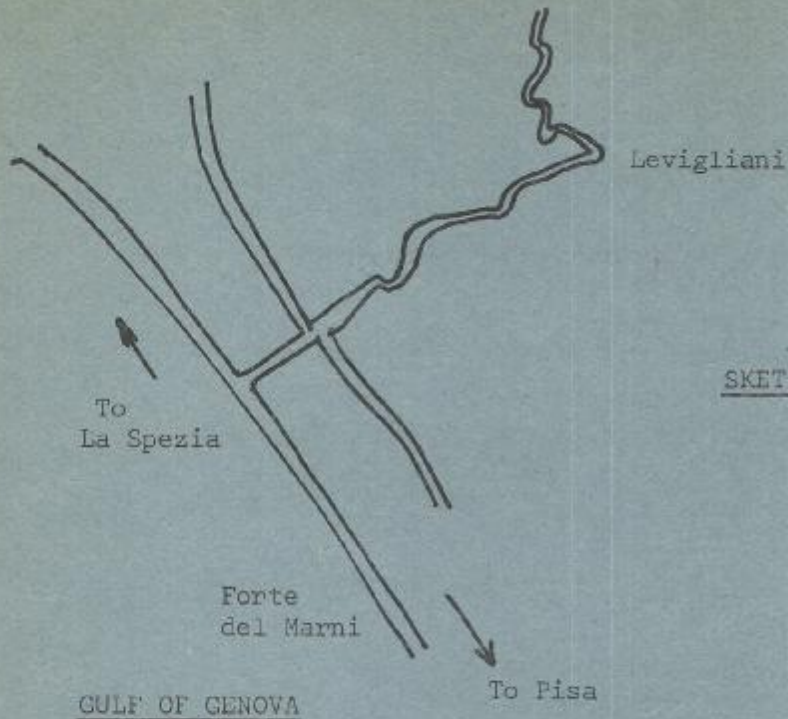
RESTRICTED MEANDER SECTION. (Near sump in very wet conditions).

18. Traverse around cascade 30 ft. rope.

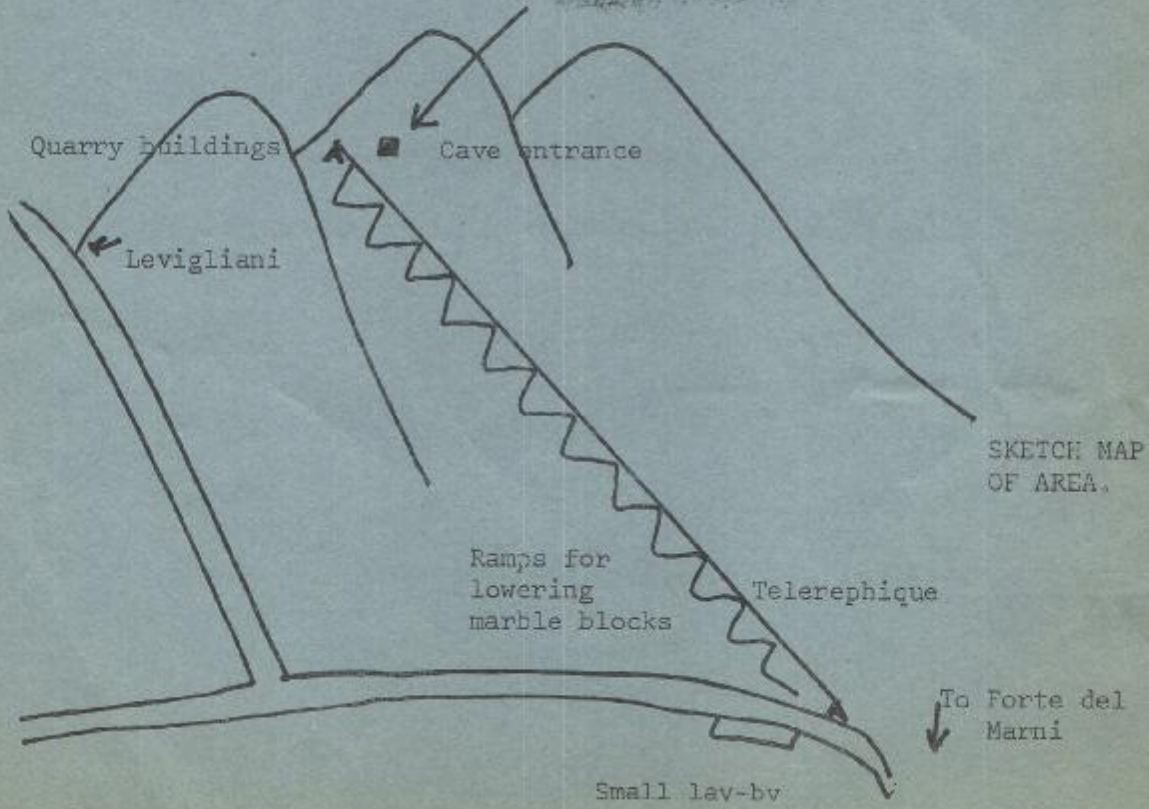
MAIN RIVER GALLERY. UP STREAM SYPHON.

19. 25 ft.)
20. 25 ft.)
21. 25 ft.)
22. 25 ft.)
23. 25 ft.) This pitch can be avoided with a 20 ft. traverse
24. 25 ft.) on the right hand wall.
25. 25 ft.)
26. 25 ft.)

Boat only required in very wet conditions.



SKETCH MAP OF AREA



SKETCH MAP OF AREA.