

## Berger Trip Report July / August 2022

The year was 2022. I was 47 and not getting any younger, and for some years I had heard about the Berger – once the deepest cave in the world and still a serious undertaking at 1.24km depth. But it was one of those things I just never got around to doing – life always got in the way.

Then, at a Cave Rescue practice in May, one of my team, Steve P.A. just happened to mention that he was going. I told him I had always wanted to do it – more in conversation than any kind of hope of actually going. But he then proceeded to tell me that he was going on his own and had room in his camper van. This got me thinking but at the time I was caving a lot with another DCC member Helen Perkins and I knew that she would want to come – so I mentioned this to Steve and he was happy for her to come along too. And after learning that the ferry was already booked, the camp site already organised and the cave already rigged, I realised that this was too good an opportunity to miss out on. Technically we were joining a French Caving Expedition as part of the Crewe Caving Club even though we were Derbyshire Caving Club members. Complicated – but of no real consequence. I just had to persuade Helen!

As it turned out, Helen didn't need too much persuading. Around 13 seconds as it happens. The trip was on. And we only had a couple of months to get organised! We set about finding out as much as we could about the Berger and what kind of kit we would need. And sorting passports, Covid checks, camping equipment, caving equipment etc. It was a frantic couple of months but we were soon meeting at Steve P.A.'s house in Crewe at 11:30am on Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2022.

The plan was to set off at 12:00 and drive down to Dover. Then to sleep in Steve's camper van overnight before catching the 07:00 Ferry on Saturday morning. We would then have a 12 hour drive through France to get to our destination village of Autrans. We did indeed set off at 12:00 but then the plan quickly fell apart when we learned that Dover was gridlocked with 5 hour traffic jams just to get to the ferry port.

Another one of our Brexit benefits! We ended up only just making the ferry at 07:00 after a mammoth 19 hour drive from Crewe to Dover!!!

The ferry journey itself went to plan at least, and we arrived in France some 1.5 hours later but without any sleep. So after a couple of hours of driving we pulled up for a sleep stop but by now it was in the full heat of the day and it was impossible to sleep in the van due to the 30 deg temperature outside. Steve got some rest at least and was able to continue the driving after a few hours rest. After a further 10 hours of driving we finally reached Autrans and what would be our home for the next 2 weeks.



*Allan & Steve in our favourite Autrans Bar*

The next stroke of genius was down to Steve again. He had opted for a different camp site from the expedition one and what a decision it turned out to be. The other members of Crewe caving club turned up to find that the expedition camp site was horrendous. Basically a field full of cattle with no showers and no shade (it was 30 degrees). But the one Steve had booked for us had a swimming pool, showers, toilets and even free games room with table tennis, air hockey, a bar and a shop! It was perfect! And to top it all off, Steve used to be a chef!

Sunday was a rest day to catch up on lost sleep, investigate the local town and plan our caving for the next day. We met up with the rest of the Crewe Caving group - John Mottram (another Cave Rescue team member), Mark Krause (who had driven over at the same time as us) and Neil Conde and Nicola Wellings who had flown out due to some last minute problems with their lift. This completed the group of 7 of us who would attempt the Berger later in the week.

But first, on Monday 25<sup>th</sup> we would get our first taste of French caving in Grotte Roche followed by Bournillium as these two caves are close together. We met up in the Bourne Gorge – a beautiful deep gorge with huge limestone cliffs soaring above us and a crystal clear river in the bottom. After a very short scramble down to the river we soon saw the large entrance to the Grotte Roche.



*The large entrance to Grotte Roche*

For this trip I decided to take my Camera. It was more to carry, but I had dragged it all the way from England, so might as well use it. We entered the cave up a huge boulder pile and followed large passages until eventually we met a short ladder up into a sloping passage which soon met a pitch. The pitch was awkward as it was sloping at about 30 degrees before going vertical at the bottom and straight onto a traverse – our first taste of French pitches. The traverse was awesome with a huge open drop below us. A perfect pace to get some photos on the way out.



*The Grotte Roche Traverse*

Due to me taking pictures, myself and Helen were last out and therefore were left to de-rig.

After derigging the sloping pitch we realised that everyone had gone! And we were left to find our own way out. This proved a little tricky but after a couple of wrong turns we made it all the way back to the entrance where we found that the other 5 cavers had not come out! 5 missing cavers! We took some time to rest and cool off whilst wondering what could have happened to them and thinking about going back in to look for them. But after about 30 mins they exited, telling us that they had gone off to explore a "labyrinth". Strange day – but all ended well.

The next trip was the Bournillium, a short drive down the gorge and then a long walk up the hill in 30 degrees heat.

The Bournillium has the largest cave entrance in France and the passages inside are just as big. Essentially this was a walking trip in huge passages. But the excitement happened on the way back down the mountain when a scree slope decided to go when myself and Helen were in the middle of it. It started with a rock flying past us at which point we thought "that was close" but then another, and another until it was raining rocks. We didn't know whether to stay still or to run for it, but it soon became apparent that we had to run! It was not stopping. We dashed across the scree slope with rocks flying past literally inches from us and made it to the other side as a fist size rock missed Helen by an inch at most. A close call. Welcome to Expedition Caving!

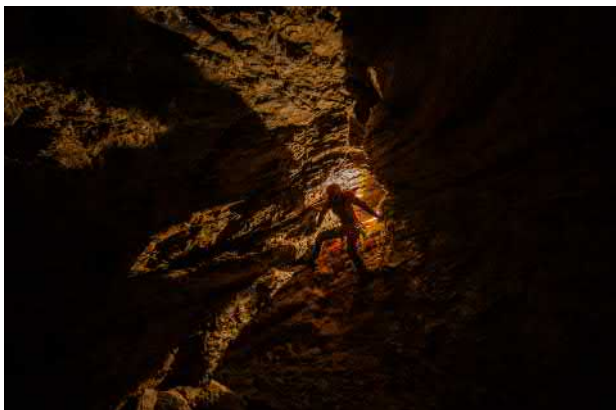
Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> was another day of caving. This time we would do the Saint de Glass cave but we had a deadline to be out by 6pm as we wanted to make the Berger meeting and book ourselves in for Wednesday. We met the others at a parking place close to the entrance and kitted up in SRT kit.

This turned out to be one of the best trips of the expedition. It was a meandering passage very much like P8 in the U.K. But bigger and much longer. It had many small pitches and the highlight was the toboggan run – a slippery slope that was difficult to get back up! It also had quite a wind coming out of the entrance due to the large chambers further in.

Unfortunately we did not get as far as the large

chambers due to our Berger meeting deadline but we vowed to go back in later on the expedition.

Afterwards we went to the Berger meeting, signed up for Wednesday entry and paid our fees. This expedition was about to get real. The anticipation and excitement was obvious and probably a little bit of trepidation too!



*Helen in Cave De Glass*

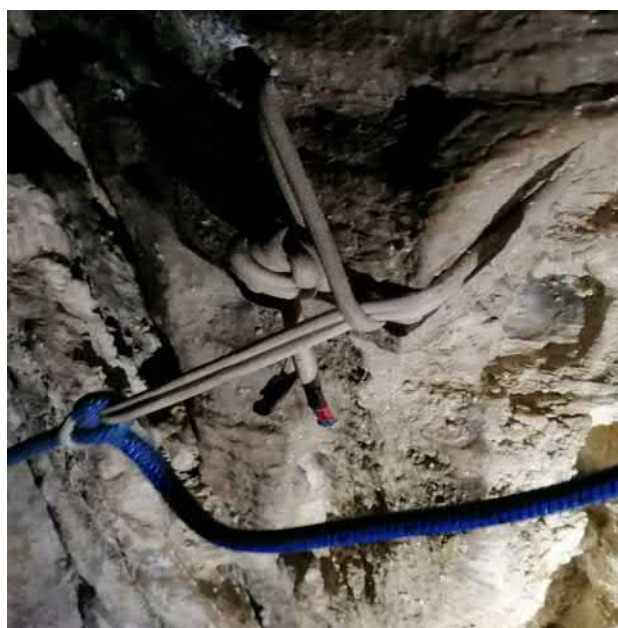
We spent the night packing and repacking and then after an early night arose at 6:45am and drove to meet the rest of the group at 7:30am for a quick pre-prepared sandwich and a banana. The walk to the Berger from the car park is long (about 1 hour) and it was hot! We were dressed in full kit as we could not carry it due to our already full caving bags. To make things worse we took a couple of wrong turns on the way and had to backtrack – it was not easy to find, being in the middle of a forest with no markers. But finally we made it to the entrance.



*Our group about to enter the Berger*

In usual fashion, we had a plan. Mark, Nicola and John were planning on going for the bottom. Steve and Neil set their sites on Camp 1 and back. And myself and Helen were flexible but took enough kit to bottom it if necessary. And again, as usual, the plan fell apart pretty quickly!

The trip down to Camp 1 was long but enjoyable. Each pitch was double rigged – one rope going straight down and one using rebelay. This meant I could take the rebelay route whilst others took the straight down route to save time. But it was still quite slow with 7 people in the team. The sheer length of the trip was hard to comprehend and there were so many pitches that we quickly lost count. Rigging was interesting to say the least as the French used 2mm dynema cord to rig everything, often around stals the size of my finger. After a while we learned not to look! After many pitches of various sizes up to 38m we came to a section of meanders – a traverse along over a large drop for a long long way. Some parts had a traverse line in and then other parts did not. This was quite tiring with heavy bags. It was about half way through these meanders that John decided to turn back. This was our first casualty. I should mention at this point that John is in his 70s and we were already a long way from home. We parted company at this point and John made his way out on his own. We were down to 6.



*Typical rigging in Berger over 45m pitches!*

The remaining 6 of us made our way through the rest of the meanders and then down many more pitches until we reached the final pitch (Aldos). This is an imposing open 45m pitch with exposed rebelay, not for the faint hearted.

After negotiating Aldos we arrived in a huge passage "Startless River". This was breathtakingly big. At times it was hard to see any ceiling and you could fly a plane down the passage – it was so big. The passage went on and on through large boulder piles, huge stream passage, flowstone floors with gower pools and huge stals and even more pitches as the floor fell away multiple times. After hours of walking in this huge passage we finally reached camp 1. The camp was not as I expected. It was a couple of small shelters made from reflective material and some thin yoga mats on the floor. We stopped here for food and decide on the next plan of action.



*Helen in Camp 1 at -500m*

It was at camp 1 that Mark, Nicola, Steve and Neil all decided to get some sleep and then go back out. Myself and Helen however were still feeling fit and in good physical shape and so we made the brave decision to go on by ourselves. This meant we would be completely on our own from this point onwards and would have to find the way out on our own. We left the group at about 5:30pm to proceed into the unknown.

The passage continued in large dimensions with some amazing formations, gour pools and flowstone floors. There were further pitches with similar scary rigging and the further we got the further from home we were. We knew it was a long way out! On the way down we passed some cavers coming out and they told us of a badly damaged rope (down to the inner cores) on Hurricane Pitch. This made us consider at what point we turned back – but not yet. We soon came across a very unusual formation that looked like something from an Alien movie (see picture). This was worth the trip on its own as we had never seen anything like it before.

As we got further in the SRT became more complex. Eventually the large passage seemed to end and a rope disappeared down a hole. A sign above the hole said that we were at -650m and that the next section of cave was the most demanding in the cave – the canals. On abseiling down a sloping flowstone formation we popped through another hole and straight onto a traverse above another huge passage.



*Weird Alien Formation at approx -650m*

This traverse was free hanging and very

exposed. I got onto the traverse and found nothing for my feet at all, so let myself free hang as I pulled myself across to the first belay. This turned out to be a piece of dynema wrapped around a stal the size of my finger. A little dubious – I passed this and looked at the next one – this one was exactly the same and dropped down a pitch of at least 15m off such a stal. At this point we were close to -700m, many hours from the surface and completely on our own with reports of a broken rope further in. I returned across the traverse to talk to Helen and re-think our plans.

**W**e sat and discussed our situation at this point. On the one hand, neither of us were particularly tired and we were both in good physical shape. On the other hand we did not know the cave (nor potentially the way out), we were on our own 700m below surface, we knew we couldn't go past Hurricane due to the broken rope, and we knew we had at least 12 hours caving to get out up some fairly serious pitches – and lots of them. We collectively made the decision to turn around at this point. One which we did not regret. We made our way back to Camp 1 by about 11:30pm – some 12 hours after entering the cave.



*Allan on the Flowstone Floors at -650m*

**B**ack at Camp 1 we changed into dry furry suits and tried to get some sleep with just a space blanket to cover us. But although we were warm when we first lay down, we soon become cold and found it impossible to sleep. We heard the others get up at about 12pm and set off out but we waited until 2am to get up and make breakfast, put wet kit on again and pack up ready to leave. The others had at least a 3 hour head start on us by the time we set off out at about 3am.

**T**he journey out was long! All uphill with many

pitches. And at this point we realised our mistake of carrying full tackle sacks and vowed next time for a different tactic of very small bags with only food and drink and no plans to sleep. We would go straight to the bottom and back without stopping. But that was for next time – for now we had no choice but to deal with it.

**T**he start of the journey along starless river to Aldos was quite slow as we were still warming up after our 3 hour rest and getting used to the heavy bags again. There was a lot of climbing up boulder slopes and a few pitches even to get to Aldos. But eventually we reached the bottom of Aldos – something I really wanted to get past before I would feel like we were really on the way out. Aldo's pitch is big and open and our heavy bags prevented efficient rope walking so we had to frog it.

**A**fter Aldo's I thought we had done the hard pitch but there were many more of nearly equal length. After many hours of caving we eventually reached the most difficult part – the meanders. These turned out to be a nightmare with our large tackle bags as they had to be hung below us in the meanders and they caught on everything. After much swearing and kicking of bags we eventually reached the half way point where John had left us on the way in and we stopped for coffee and chocolate.

**T**hen came the rest of the meanders, even more difficult than the first part. This was followed by yet more and more pitches that seemed to never end. There were times when we thought we were nearly out – but it just kept on going. Eventually however we reached the final pitch and the exit at 11:00am – exactly 24 hours after entry. But it wasn't over yet – we had at least an hours walk through a forest in the midday sun and we didn't know the way! To make matters worse we had no idea where the other team members were and even when we got back to the car park – we had no transport if they hadn't waited for us!



*Allan taking a breather before the final pitch*

Luckily, whilst we were resting outside the entrance a lady and her son, who were with another group of cavers, told us that they were not doing the Berger and would be going back to the car park. They offered to try to show us the way (although even they were not sure of it). We accepted and set off with her son in the lead. And after some short periods of concern over the correct way to go, we did indeed arrive back at the car park very hot and very tired. We had no water left and the others were long gone!

We sat down to take stock. My mobile phone was in Steve's van so that was not an option. Helen had her phone but did not have Steve's number in it. It was at this point that I had the idea of phoning a mutual friend in the U.K. Pete Knight and asking him to text us Steve's phone number. I then modified the number with the 0044 bit and managed to call Steve on Helen's phone and ask him to return to pick us up. Success, and we were soon back at the camp. We had done the Berger and survived. At this point we were both agreed that we would never do it again. We had seen it, done it and the bottom had beaten us. But of course in a couple of days we would be planning our return trip to reach the bottom! That evening we went to a restaurant and had the best Pizza ever and couple of beers before sleeping really well! John went home after this trip leaving 6 of us on the

expedition.

The next day was a rest day but then on Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> July we went to do The Gournier. We had got some intel on this the night before and we knew that we needed an inflatable dingy to enter the cave. We also knew that you had to get off the dingy onto a rope and that there was a traverse at the top of the rope.

Luckily Mark Krause had a dingy and so we arrived at the cave entrance, blew up the dingy and had intended for the first person to cross the lake using oars and then everyone else could be pulled across, but the rope wasn't long enough so we all ended up having to cross with oars. And then on reaching the far side of the lake there was no rope so I had to freeclimb the pitch of about 6m in order to hang a rope for the rest of the group. That was the easy bit. Now for the traverse.



*Our boat in the Gournier Entrance*

The traverse turned out to be a nightmare. It was much longer than we had anticipated and was set up to be rigged with 2mm dynema in typical French fashion. The problem was – I didn't have any. So I had to find new naturals for my slings, wrapping them around anything I could find in very precarious positions. But even then I soon ran out of both rope, carabiners and slings. So I was stuck half way across on the tiniest of toe holds, with a 15m drop into a lake below me. Someone then found a spare piece of rope and passed it along to me along with a couple of slings and carabiners off personal kit. I then managed to join the two ropes and complete the traverse after dropping one of the slings into the lake below (retrieved by Neil using the boat). Eventually we made it across and into huge passage. For me and Helen, this would be a photography trip, whilst the others were going up

a streamway.

Myself and Helen let the others go on ahead as we wandered through the huge passagesways looking for places that would make good photographs. It wasn't long before we found places and proceeded to set up tripods, remote flashes and the camera.



*Helen in the huge chambers of the Gournier*

We continued through the cave which went on and on in huge passages with brilliant formations and flowstone floors with gour pools everywhere. It was easy caving, but with things to look at everywhere.



*Helen on a huge flowstone floor*

After hours of walking and photographing we met the others returning from their streamway trip which they said was excellent – the most decorated streamway they had ever seen. We then made our way back out but had to renegotiate the traverse, de-rigging as we went, and then the lake by abseiling into the boat! All a lot easier than the way in. After changing outside we had drinks at the nearby show cave before a quick visit the Berger camp to purchase Berger Expedition T-shirts. This was the last trip for Neil and Nicola as they were to return home the next day. We would then be down to 4.

Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> July was another rest day and due to it being Steve's birthday the day after, I booked a resteraunt for us all. However we later found out that Mark had decided to return home and so there was only 3 of us left. Still, Steve's birthday meal went down well.

Monday turned into a rest day too as we had a problem with Steve's electrical cable and had to drive to a local town, buy some cable and tools and then construct a new cable assembly to power his van. By the time we had done this half the day was gone so we decided to have a go on the toboggan – a thrill ride down a steep hill in the local village. It was so good we went twice.

On Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> August we were back to caving again. We wanted to go back into the Saint de Glass cave but this time reach the lower chambers (if you remember the last trip was cut short by our Berger meeting).



*Helen and Steve at Saint de Glass Entrance*

We entered the cave at 10:30am, again with photography kit. We retraced our route from last time all the way down 8 pitches to the toboggan run. But this time we kept on going and eventually came to the 10m pitch into the Hydroclast. This was a stunning abseil out of a small passage into a huge 100m by 40m chamber. We explored this chamber, first to the right where it seemed to keep going in huge

phreatic passage, and then to the left which climbed up boulder piles into more chambers and further continuations.



*Helen abseiling into the Hydroclast*

The way back out was all uphill but we made it out for about 15:30 – some 5 hours after entry. Still one of our favourite trips of the expedition.



*Helen in Saint de Glass cave*

This was to be our last caving trip before returning home on the 5<sup>th</sup> August. But we still had a couple of days to enjoy France and to organise ourselves for the trip home.

On Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> August we visited a show cave before going for a swim in a glacial river. The water was extremely cold at about 2 deg C. Steve is a regular cold shower user and so found it no problem but it took me a while to get in!



*Allan and Steve in the Glacial River*

The final day in the Vercors was sad. None of us wanted to leave, it had been the most amazing experience ever. The place, the people, the caves, everything had been perfect and we could easily have stayed. But alas we had to make the long return journey back to England and back to normality. I would recommend this expedition to any cavers and you don't have to stick to the Berger – there are many other caves in the area and most pretty easy compared to British caving. All are long and all are beautiful. I hope that I can return one day and conquer the Berger. Thanks to Helen and Steve for making this expedition the perfect one that it was.