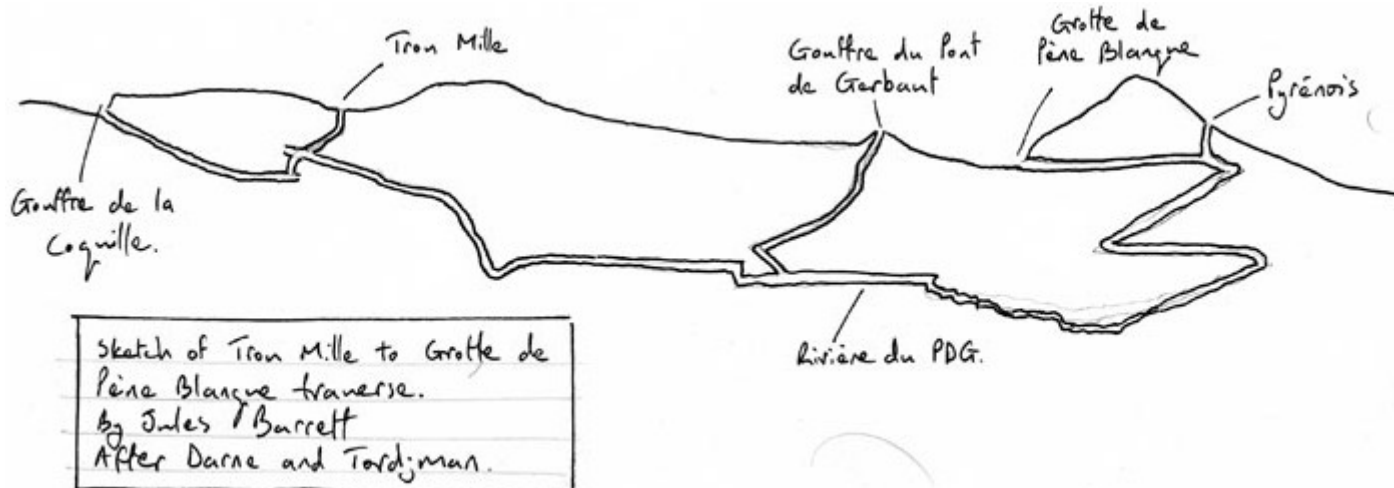


Réseau Félix Trombe – Henne Morte – 23rd to 30th August 2009

Report by Jase Rider

Cavers: Jules Barrett (EPC), Jase Rider (EPC), Nige Strong (EPC), Julian McIntosh, Joy and Rowan (EPC), Tam and Leann Rennie (EPC), Phil Baker (Masson), Lee Langdon (Masson), Keith Mason (Masson)



Sunday 23rd August

We arrived in the picturesque village of Aspet on Sunday afternoon to find Julian, Joy and Rowan already in prime position outside one of the several bars in the square... beer already in hand. We were shortly joined by the Masson lads and later Nige's bright orange van rolled into town. Over a meal that evening we discussed tactics for the week, the main aim being the Trou Mille to Pène Blanche through trip... Unfortunately we didn't get to meet Barny (who lives near Aspet) on this trip as he was out of the country.

Monday 24th August - Grotte de Pène Blanche

Tam, Leann, Julian, Jules and myself recce'd the Pène Blanche system as far as the Pont De Gerbaut streamway. This is a complex series of dry passages and galleries which would be our exit route (all being well) on the through trip later that week. It took 4.5 hours to reach the streamway as we were route finding and leaving tape markers on the way and about 2.5 hours to get back out to daylight. While there are no big SRT pitches, some 400m of vertical height make the trip somewhat demanding. The highlight of the trip was undoubtedly the huge chamber Salle du Dromadaire.

Tuesday 25th August - Gouffre du Pont de Gerbaut

The previous day, the Masson boys plus Nige had rigged the Pont de Gerbaut down to the streamway. We left wetsuits and provisions at the upstream end of the wet sections. We also took a detour to recce the direction we would be coming from on the through trip, including the magnificent Salle Elizabeth Casteret. From our vantage point high on a ledge, huge flowstone columns towered upwards and downwards out of view. A waterfall entered high above... a beautiful scene and Julian remarked how the place resembled something out of a Tolkien novel - I have to thoroughly agree! We ended this trip at the very exposed double traverse lines which were jumped upon by Tam while others looked on apprehensively.

Wednesday 26th August

An easy day! - located the Trou Mille entrance and left ropes and SRT kits ready for the following morning.

Thursday 27th August - Trou Mille to Grotte de Pène Blanche through trip

We split into two groups for the trip, the Masson lads going in first as a group of three followed by our slower group of five. The entrance series soon joined a small stream with many sporting free-climbable cascades. A few pull-through pitches were followed by a section of awkward muddy crawling and climbs more akin to Derbyshire caving than the Pyrenees. We reached the vast tectonic void of Salle du Trou du Vent after about three hours caving and took an unintentional detour of the chamber. Lots more pull-through pitches followed, many with 'interesting' take-offs. Eventually we left the streamway behind far below and climbed up into a huge and long dry section of fossil passages. Route finding errors added a good 45 minutes to the trip here. However, eventually we reached the double traverse lines (exposed) that we had got to on Tuesday from the Pont de Gerbaut side. It was nice to have half an hour caving in this recognisable, and spectacular section of cave. A break followed as others swapped furry suits for wetsuits (I had elected to wear a wetsuit for the whole trip which may not have been the best idea!). The streamway is spectacular and pretty though the moonmilk coating makes it slippery and hard going in places. Soon we took a dry shunt to bypass a sump followed by a few more pull

through pitches back down to the streamway. Several more pull-throughs were followed by deep canal sections that made the wetsuit worthwhile, though not essential (as Nige in his furry suit proved!). Immediately before a 50m pitch, handline climbs take you up to a traverse high above the streamway which leads in to the Pène Blanche exit series. A mere 3 hours hard caving from here, including a coffee and snack break in Salle du Bivouac, and we'd be out... and at least we knew the way! We exited the cave at about 2am and got back to the campsite for about 4am. It had been an amazing trip!

Saturday 29th August

Myself, Nige and Julian derigged the Pont de Gerbaut pitches. Others had a trip into the Gouffre de la Henne Morte. A group meal and drinks capped an excellent weeks caving in an area with plenty of potential and lots more to go back for. Well organised Jules!

Additional Info from Jules Barrett

Friday 28th August – Gouffre des Pyrenois to Grotte de Pène Blanche through trip

On Friday 28th August Julian, Joy, Rowan and I did the excellent Pyrenois to Pène Blanche through trip. Barny had introduced me to this trip in 2008 when Mark Harrison and I visited and it was the perfect outing for a short day. We drove up to the parking in rain and low cloud and despite my misgivings about whether I could remember where the entrance was we pretty much went straight to it. The cave is rigged with rope Y-hangs and maillons in-situ so that you can pull through down it but we decided to hard rig it. The descent begins with an easy climb down to the top of the first pitch which is short and leads straight into the second pitch. This is also quite short and a duck under a low bit leads to the head of another pitch. Descend down that and clip into an in-situ traverse line at the top of the big pitch. Here you're actually at the top of a 130m monster but you don't necessarily know it because it's a narrow rift-type pitch head. You don't go all the way down but an easy swing after about 30m lands you on a beautifully exposed rock ridge splitting the shaft. Rowan passed the deviation where the shaft opens out and coolly swung onto the rock bridge. Julian and Joy followed down and then we started the great series of short climbs, traverses and short pitches that lead towards the Pene Blanche entrance. When we arrived there Joy, Rowan and Julian trekked back over the hill (it wouldn't have been fair for Joy and Rowan to have missed out on that!) whilst I caved back to de-rig and met them on the way down through the forest. A great trip that we all enjoyed!



The 2009 Félix Trombe – Henne Morte team.
Clockwise from L. T. Rennie, L. Rennie, J. McIntosh, J. Rider, K. Mason, P. Baker, N. Strong, L. Langdon, J. Barrett, R. McIntosh, J. McIntosh.

Saturday 29th August - Gouffre de la Henne Morte

On Saturday 29th August, whilst Jase, Nige and Julian were de-rigging the Pont de Gerbaut Phil, Lee, Keith and I walked up to the Henne Morte. Fortunately the other three had recce'd the route to the entrance the previous day. Less fortunately for me they had also dropped all their caving kit (including their share of the rope) at the entrance the previous day meaning that they were keen to crack on during the walk in. I laboured under a heavy rucksack full of caving kit and a large tackle bag full of rope but on we marched. Eventually we got to the entrance and Phil set off rigging. We weren't really sure whether we were going to find Spits, hangers in-situ, rope Y-hangs or what but found it to be well-bolted with hangers in-situ. The cave is primarily vertical with fantastic pitches and is just brilliant! Unfortunately we were short of time and we reached our turn-around time at the top of the 45m final pitch – Puits de la Mort. We traversed around to the pitch head proper and looked down – a superb-looking final pitch! Lee and I had a scout up some newish-looking in-situ ropes that lead the way to the Grotte des Commingeois whilst Phil and Keith headed out up the ropes. An uneventful de-rigging trip saw us out, back to the cars and back to the campsite to pack before heading home the next day.

Camping

We stayed on the municipal campsite called 'Le Cagire' in Aspet. It's very handy for the caving and you can walk into the centre of the village from there. The facilities are good and it's not expensive. I sound like Judith Chalmers here! Don't expect the people who run it to speak any English. I thought I'd successfully booked us onto the campsite by phone a few weeks before with several tents for several nights. However, there was a fairly tense time when we arrived as the woman seemed to have no record of us being booked in when we arrived. Eventually she realised that I was English (unfortunately my french accent is good enough to hide my true nationality but my french campsite vocabulary is

obviously not good enough to make myself understood!), reached into another drawer and found our details!

Gouffre de la Coquille to Pène Blanque in the future

It's worth mentioning that the Trou Mille to Pène Blanque isn't the big daddy! The Coquille is the highest entrance to the system and the through trip from Coquille to Pène Blanque needs doing. The upper section from the Coquille to the Trou Mille looks like harder/tighter caving but now we know the route through from the Trou Mille it should be relatively straightforward. Guidebook time is 20 hours for the through trip!

Reading and Surveys

CLÉMENT, S. & VENNARECCI, P. *Réseau Félix Trombe - Henne Morte*. Comité Départemental de Spéléologie de la Haute-Garonne. 2003. ISBN: 2-9520056

DARNE, F. and TORDJMAN, P. *À travers le karst: Les traversées spéléologiques françaises*. Abymes. 2002. pp86-91. ISBN: 2-915166-00-5

The book by Clément and Vennarecci is the definitive set of surveys of the system and is written in French. The re-survey which must have been done relatively recently must have been a massive piece of work. It's a large-format, hardback, quality publication. If you're going there buy it and support caving in the area.

The book by Darne and Tordjman is basically classic through-trips of France and is also in French. It has an excellent description of the Coquille/Trou Mille to Pène Blanque through trip along with several others in the area. We used the description in conjunction with the surveys in the other reference and worked it out without too many problems. An english translation of the Coquille/Trou Mille to Pène Blanque description is now in the Eldon library (see page 4 of this newsletter).