A photograph taken from inside a cave, looking out through a large, irregular opening. The cave walls are dark, textured rock. Outside, a rugged mountain range with sharp, light-colored peaks is visible under a cloudy sky. The foreground shows a rocky path leading out of the cave.

# *Albania 2019*

*Crapping out Caves indefinitely  
With The Eldon Pothole Club*

## **Contents**

- Introduction
- Wolf Cave
- Dragon Cave,
  - Background & History
  - 2019 Exploration
  - Survey
  
- Snake Cave
- EPC 503
- S.T.S
- Broderick
- One day at the Cwm
- Abbing off the Dragon Peninsular
- Medical report
- Stashed gear
- Conclusion



*Luke in a Cave - JRP*

## **Introduction**

Lëpushë is a settlement in the former Kelmend municipality, Shkodër County, in northern Albania. It is a remote area with just one road through, and is skirted all around by the boarder with Montenegro. It is situated at roughly 1,300m altitude and has deep snow from October through April. The increasingly excellent accommodation at the Alpini Hotel is gratefully used.

The Eldon Pothole Club first had a recognisance to the area in 2009 and have organised a return trip almost every year since. The exploration has concentrated on a high karst area to the south with peaks reaching over 2,500m in altitude. The ascent each morning is strenuous so it is only fitting that the caves are also extremely demanding. Typically vertical in nature and with many spacious shafts, any horizontal development is generally very tight and awkward. At least they are mostly clean.

The deepest to date is Madhe Ben which was concluded in 2011 at a depth of 435m at a sump. So far exploration in all caves has been stopped either due to snow plugs (near the entrance), too tight rifts, or sumps. All sumps are still above valley floor and may well hide exciting secrets beyond, especially as all known resurgences are far away and much lower. Although the tight nature of the known horizontal, vadose development suggests the sumps may well be on the small side.

This 2019 expedition team of 5 was to concentrate efforts in an area with a number of caves already reaching a good depth, predominantly Dragon Cave, and to hopefully give a few new leads for future trips.



***What a team! : Ade Pedley, Jon Pemberton, Luke Cafferty, Dave Gledhill, Rob Eavis***

## **Wolf Cave (Shpella Ujku)**

**9<sup>th</sup> September 2019**



**Wolf Cave Entrance - Rob**

We all made the hike up to our gear stash from the previous day fortunately everything was still there too except for Ade's bolting hammer which had dropped out. Luckily for him he didn't need it today as once we had arrived up to Wolf Cave to grab gear it was already later than anticipated after a heavy night on the juice so I came up with the fantastic idea to push and survey Wolf Cave.

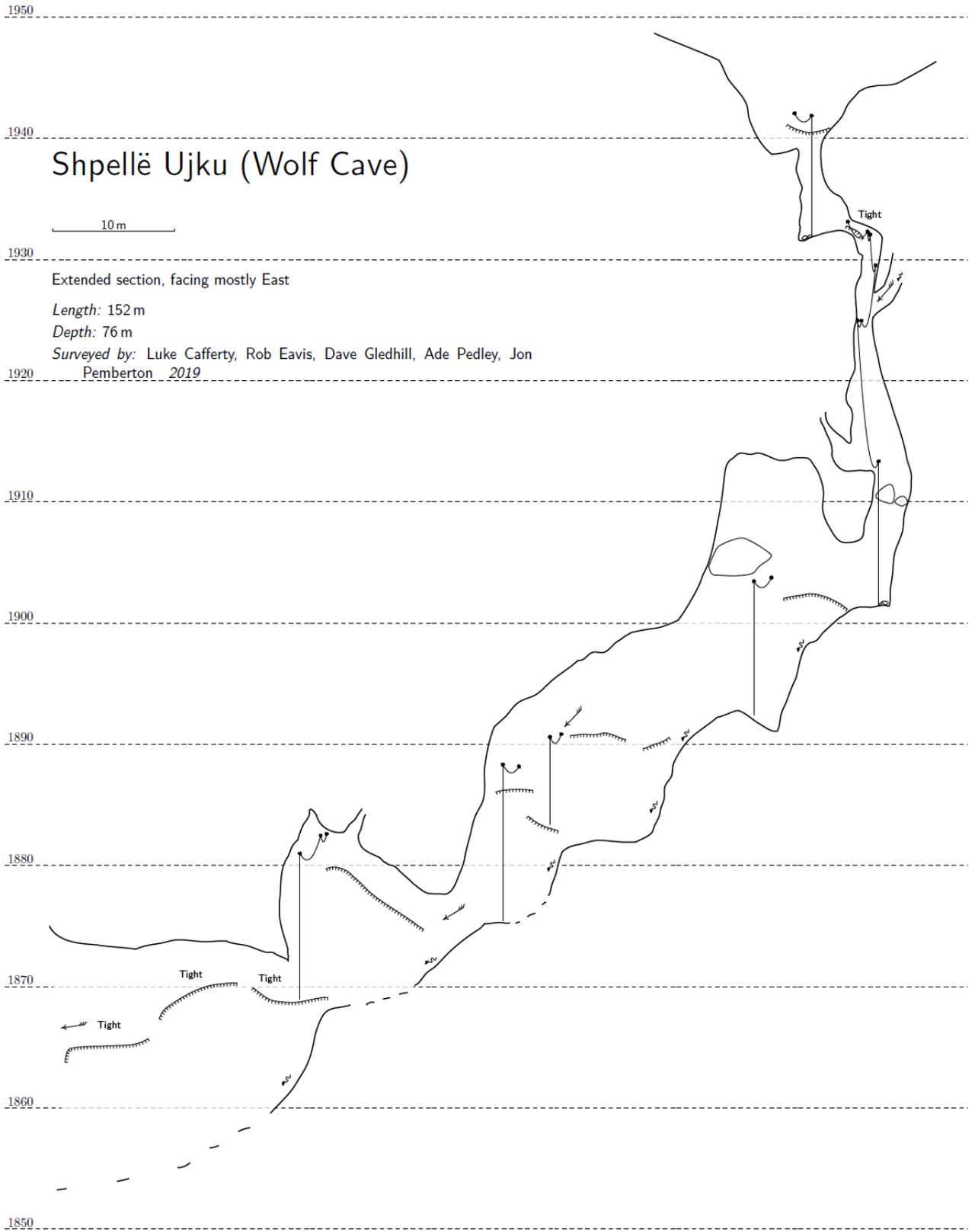
It had rained on the walk up and the sun was barely piercing the clouded sky as we sat around eating lunch pondering kitting up to go underground. Someone eventually gained enthusiasm and we started our way down. Dave and I had told Luke and Ade that there was a couple of tight pitch heads but my memory from one trip 8 years ago was pretty rubbish and with Dave's mind rambling they just went for it with Rob and I to follow with the survey and Dave at the back taking photos. Ade got well jammed at the head of the

second pitch choosing to slip through where skinny Luke had abseiled down, he managed to put his head back on and with the use of wisdom took the easy route over the top. I remember Lee Langdon and I pushing through these on the original exploration and referring to these as "The Upward Struggles" Rob and I followed and luckily there were only 2 more pitch heads like this.

The second pitch drops to a ledge which then drops to boulders some way below. A short abseil through the boulders drops to the head of the third pitch which passes under a large (car sized) chocked boulder. The base of this leads to the second "Upward Struggle", at first this drops into a wide meander but soon tightens up. A thurutch north leads to the final and third "Upward Struggle". Ade bolted the final pitch and all five of us dropped this to a tiny ledge a short way down. I attempted to push a little higher up whilst Rob pushed at floor level. Higher up soon pinched up whilst lower down continued tight around an awkward dog leg to a Rob sized tight meander continuation not looking appealing. We decided to bin this one off here meaning we could progress forward with Plan A (Dragon Cave) so we de-rigged the cave and headed to Bob's bar for refreshments. The cave was terminated at -84m. The squeezes were a lot harder on the way out.



**Luke negotiating one of the "upward struggles" - JRP**



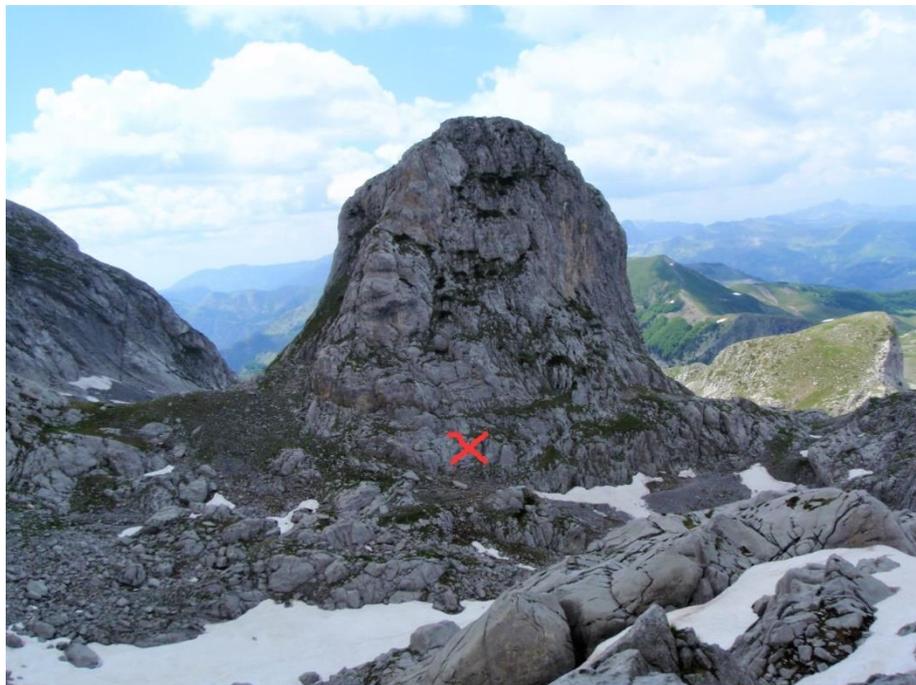
## **Dragon Cave – Background & History**

### ***Exploration history***

The cave (EPC 519) was originally discovered during an early season prospecting trip in June 2015. There was still a significant amount of snow around at this time, particularly above the 1700m contour.

The entrance consisted of a narrow slot between vertical fins of sharp limestone, high up on a bench on the eastern aspect of a large tower of rock.

A cold draught could be felt and dropped rocks could be heard rattling down for a considerable distance, although visibility down the shaft was limited due to the tortuous nature of the opening.



***Dragon pinnacle - DG***

The decision was made to attempt a descent through the opening, although this was not without a degree of trepidation, mainly as a result of the constricted and 'grippy' nature of the rock which formed the top of the rift and in view that there were only two members of the team who had been able to venture out to the area this area of the country so relatively early in the season.

Rigging was initially off natural anchors, then proceeding with a number of bolts once the rift proper had been obtained.

After the initial few metres of vertical rift, the route down haded off from the vertical, until it once more dropped straight down, entering a chamber of large proportions, with the end of the 35m rope coming to rest on the snow/ice covered floor, which sloped down towards the North. No further exploration possible at this time due to limited equipment taken on a purely prospecting outing.

September 2015 found a group of three returning to the region to begin pushing the cave.

The first chamber was still found to contain snow, but far less than previously and a rock path could be negotiated down to the far end where a shaft in the floor was found to drop down beyond line of sight.

The shaft was dropped in a series of three pitches, before landing on a rocky floor which again sloped down to the North. After clearing some rocks, a low passage was found to lead to several small climbs down, before dropping into a small shattered chamber with a way leading off to a loose rocky ledge overlooking a large rift and the way on.

Passing an alcove/balcony part-way down, the floor of the rift headed down and along to a slightly constricted area (The Honeycombs) through which a shaft/drop/void could be discerned.



***Expedition rigging - DG***

Returning up and swinging into the alcove/balcony part-way back up the rift, a window was found to lead straight onto a pitch into a large chamber and it was decided that as the more 'open' of the two options, this would be the first choice as a way on.

Two pitches led to a steeply sloping mud/rock slope which in turn dropped under a rock arch and down into a short narrow rift before a constricted pitch-head opened up into yet another large chamber with sloping mud floor. The lowest point of the chamber once again led to another short but constricted passage before emerging through a small window in the wall of a large shaft of considerable proportions - far larger than anything encountered so far. A series of three pitches led down to a 'perched' rubble floor of what was to become known the 'Uneventful Horizon'.

From here, the roof of the shaft could not be discerned, although a further two passages could be seen to lead into the shaft from the wall opposite from where we had entered. In front were a number of holes in the floor, the walls of which seemed to be made from perched blocks. Beyond these lay a climb up of around five metres and beyond which, a shaft appeared to enter from above. To the right, a mud and rock slope up led after some 5m to a platform overlooking a rift of some 30m depth and as was the case of the main shaft, no discernible roof visible at that point.

The most obvious way on was in the opposite direction to the holes in the floor and the slope up to the rift. Heading North once again, the route on and down went over the edge of the balcony forming Uneventful Horizon, taking in a number of pitches over a vertical wall before swinging across into a rock channel and down to a rocky ledge where, a further two pitches landed in a small streamway, more than 100m below Uneventful Horizon.

The streamway continued down, still heading North, in the base of a large open rift / canyon, the roof as ever beyond the reach of our lights.

The canyon containing the stream was pushed further, onwards and downwards, necessitating the requirement to traverse along high narrow ledges in order to keep out of the water in the cold alpine conditions.

It was at a point some four pitches from the point where the streamway was first met, that both rope (or lack thereof) and time called for an adjournment until the following year.

September 2016 again found a small team pushing the canyon, which was now taking on a more meandering aspect, although with the main direction being that of continuing Northwards.

Each trip was becoming increasingly tiring, due in no small part to the need for a return to base in Lepushe each day in order to recharge/refuel both batteries and bodies alike.

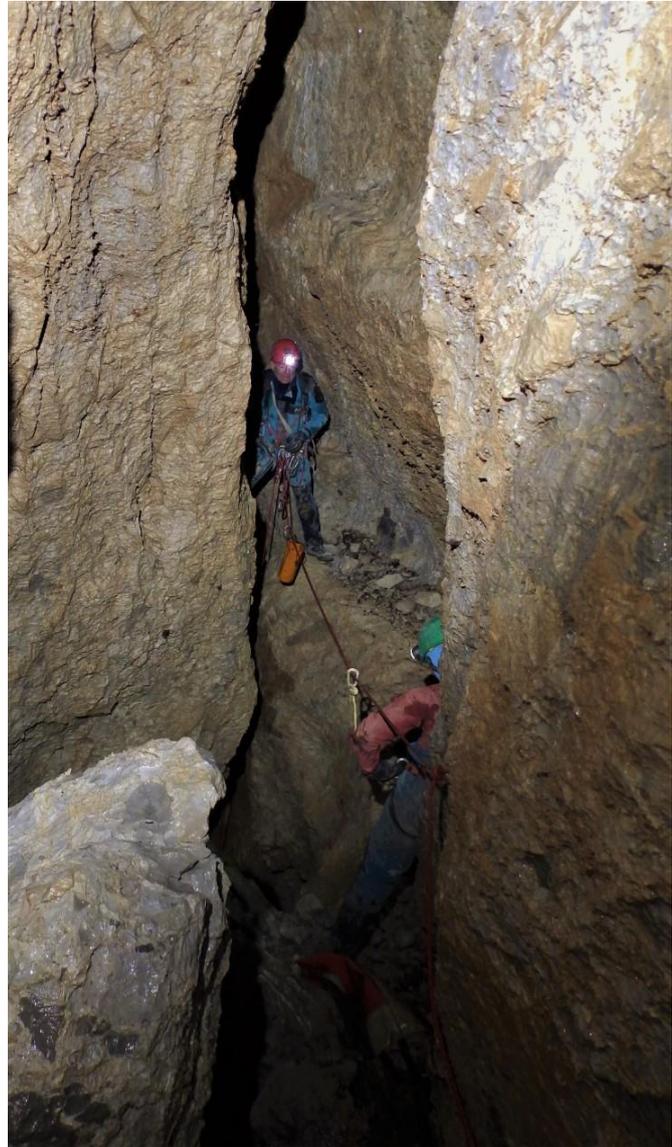
Due to the small numbers available to commit each year for a number of reasons, it was not yet practical to take on the added logistics of creating a high base camp up in the mountains nearer to the caves.

Steady progress continued, albeit with an exponentially increasing amount of energy being required for each new length of cave discovered.

October 2017 followed the same pattern as 2016, with each trip to the sharp end of the cave taking an increasing amount out of any intrepid explorer.

Whilst progress continued, to prevent complete burnout of participants, some active rest and recuperation was undertaken in the form of pushing some new sections of the cave which were far nearer the entrance.

One resulting benefit from this additional focus was that found in the area reached at the bottom the rift in 2015 and which had been referred to as 'The Honeycombs'.



***Barny and Jon in the Canyon - DG***

A shaft leading off from the initial constricted 'honeycomb' section of passage was pushed downwards, leading via a series of three splendid pitches in a clean and wide shaft, landing on a rock floor at the same level as Uneventful Horizon, but at the opposite side of the five metre 'wall' described earlier.



***Ade descending Bubbles route - DG***

Once off the rope, a small scramble down a slope revealed that Uneventful Horizon consisted predominantly of many blocks and was for the most part a hanging platform within a huge shaft. Beneath this 'platform' a shaft was readily visible although an approach was not made towards it due to the steep sloping and precariously loose 'bouldery' nature of the floor.

A short aside: The route described down to this point from The Honeycombs has since been named as 'Bubbles'; the reasoning being that it describes a similar alternative way down a later found shaft to a common point, as is found in Ireby Fell Cavern, where the Bubbles route is a later alternative route to that of Ding, Dong and Bell pitches.

Another area explored from Uneventful Horizon at this time was that of descending the rift which was accessed via the 5m mud and rock slope described earlier. Being between three and four metres wide, the rift cuts vertically down some 30m to a boulder strewn floor which contains a small stream. Again, being on a more or less North/South orientation, the rift floor sloped away down to the North before swinging off East and into a passage which appears to be under Uneventful Horizon, where-upon it drops down into a vertical shaft, which at this point remains to be explored.

Unfortunately, due to the combination of a series of unique but unconnected series of events, there was no exploration possible in 2018.

## **2019 Exploration**

### ***10<sup>th</sup> September – Re-acquaintance with the Dragon***

With a proper start time this morning we found ourselves up at Dragon's entrance around 11:30am and after a quick bite to eat we slowly kitted up in anticipation for a good stint underground. Armed with everything we needed for a long vertical pushing trip (distoX, camera, drill, bolts and rope) we descended around noon grabbing the stashed bag in the entrance containing what we thought was 100m of pristine white 9mm rope and aimed for the centre of the earth.

We were careful to check the ropes as we got further into the system having not seen any use since the 2017 expedition taking us about one and half hours to reach the top of the meanders. From here it was a further two and half hours of route finding, squeezing, thrutching and climbing to gain access to survey station 117 which ends the 2017 survey and exploration.

From here a short pitch dropped to the floor of a large wet cascade. We continued forward to a traverse which we bolted for safety being so far in the system at this point through some torturous passage a rescue at this point would be pretty hopeless so we were being as safe as possible. The traverse led to a further short pitch where we cut the rope a few metres from the floor to progress at the widest part. Luke and I were trembling with shivers at this point and ready to do one. Rob was keen to continue but put his bravado to the side as we knew it was going to be a long arduous trip out.

From survey station 117 it took us three hours to regain the surface at 9:15pm and attempted to contact Ade and Dave to tell them we're ok by Rob texting his wife in the UK to then text Ade on WhatsApp in order to receive his message. Unfortunately it didn't work on this occasion but made it work the second time around and was nice to have to contact for any worried members drinking around the dinner table. We made for Hotel Alpini deciding to leave the bar until the next day and arrived for dinner at 11:45pm all members of the party pretty destroyed and ready for beer.



***Entrance to Dragon Cave - JRP***

**12<sup>th</sup> September – Slaying the Dragon**

After an epic rest day we returned to slay the Dragon. We made sure to have enough food with us this time as we'd run desperately low on the last trip, and also a couple of beers for when we returned to surface (creature comforts).



***A pitch in the meanders - JRP***

All we had to take down on this trip was the surveying equipment and drill batteries which made for a much easier trip to the far reaches of the Meanders than the previous trip. We arrived at our terminal point from the previous trip within one and half hours now that we knew the route through the meanders. Rob explored whilst Luke and I surveyed up the rear.

From the previous limit Rob continued a few metres from the floor through some awkward, contorting, corners which were nightmares to survey through. We put on a couple more short pitches following the water before finally reaching a traverse over a deep widening canyon. By this point Luke and I were struggling to keep warm again. Rob was having a bit of trouble with the rigging as what we thought was 100m of white 9mm suddenly turned out to be a bag of tricks! The white rope stopped and we suddenly had an even shorter bit of red 9mm which Rob improvised and rigged the hang and traverse with. The original white rope dropped the pitch but unfortunately stopped before the bottom. The last bit of tat we had in the bottom of the bag of tricks was an even shorter 8mm length of purple chord. So we now had a knot pass some 5m from the floor of this 12m pitch on some very dubious rigging.

By this point Luke had opted out. He didn't like the rigging as much as I didn't and decided to warm up by making a slow and steady retreat back through the Meanders. After a few minutes questioning my sanity I agreed to join Rob and continue the survey along what he said was nice Crabwalk sized passage. I altered the rigging slightly adding a couple more knots for my nerves sake and abseiled to the knot pass and made my way to the floor. Now really cold we dumped all our gear and made quick work surveying down the Crabwalk sized passage.

Finally it felt like the Cave had given up and was now ready to reveal its secrets! We were both grinning, stomping down the passage and surveying with ease until suddenly after 50m we turned a corner to reach a dark looking pool. Rob caught up and on closer examination reality suddenly hit home, we'd found a sump, The Dragon Slayer!

We finished the survey and Rob had a closer inspection in the roof. There appeared to be a small, obscure looking climb over the sump pool but didn't look very promising. At the end of the sump



pool there was a small 5cm archway which would be a full on duck ready for any crazy bastard to attempt but wasn't for us on this day, especially as it wasn't draughting. We took some photos and caught some footage and started to make our way to the bottom of the pitch. We left the bag as an emergency dump for this end of the cave as it had a bolting kit, spits, strops and a couple of space blankets. We made our way back through the Meanders pulling the ropes up at all 14 pitches ready for the next wanna-go-heroes, leaving the end at 4:45pm.

We caught up with Luke around the Uneventful Horizon and made surface after three and a half hours of leaving the sump. As we approached the entrance pitch it sounded as though there was a storm on surface which turned out to be the wind. We regained surface at 8:15pm had a quick break and finally gave Lukey Boy the bad news that the Cave had crapped out. Think he was glad that he'd not have to return back to this hell hole!

We left around 8:30pm and made the bar a swift one with Ade and Dave around 9:40pm before celebrating properly down at Hotel Alpini with a guaranteed easy day tomorrow.

***Rob above the sump - JRP***



***Rob savouring a Chocolate bar – JRP***

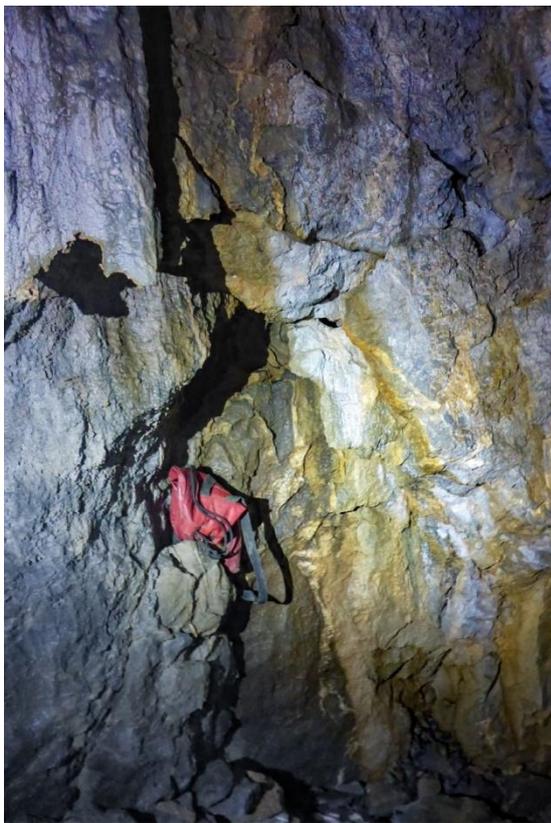


***Celebratory beers after our kill***

### ***South Rift beneath Uneventful Horizon & Friday the 13th Series (Cliché shaft).***

The initial plan was to descend and explore beyond the 30m deep rift which leads off down from the top of the 5m rock and mud slope of Uneventful Horizon in EPC 519 (see section Dragon - background & history).

As with many things in life, plans can and do sometimes become blown off course by, as Harold Macmillan is alleged to have put it, 'Events dear boy, events'.



***Climb up in to Friday 13th Series - DG***

Descending through the upper sections of the cave, one via Bubbles (see section Dragon - background & history) and the other via the original exploration route, the latter route on this occasion proved to have placed an interesting change of direction in the exploration of the cave.

Whilst on a solo decent via the original route, a number of rocks managed to become dislodged after they had been passed, resulting in a small cascade falling on the explorer below. Whilst no injury occurred, it was certainly disconcerting for the recipient upon who the stones fell. A few moments later, whilst negotiating the constricted pitch-head leading into the large shaft above Uneventful Horizon, a decent sized boulder which was until this point lodged in the floor at the head of the pitch, somehow became detached and in doing so, released with it a number of other rocks which went crashing to the floor some three pitches below. This unintentional remodelling of the head of the pitch left the intrepid explorer hanging from the top belays by his cowstails and in a somewhat shaken

state. Understandably, the enthusiasm for further pushing exploits given events to this point was, at least for one of the two protagonists, somewhat muted. Did I mention that it was Friday the 13th?

Retracing the route back to surface, both this time via the Bubbles route, a brief examination was made of a small alcove in the wall at the base of the second large shaft when descending from the entrance. This alcove had been passed-by many times and with little interest, it appearing to be nothing more than another inlet heading back to surface.

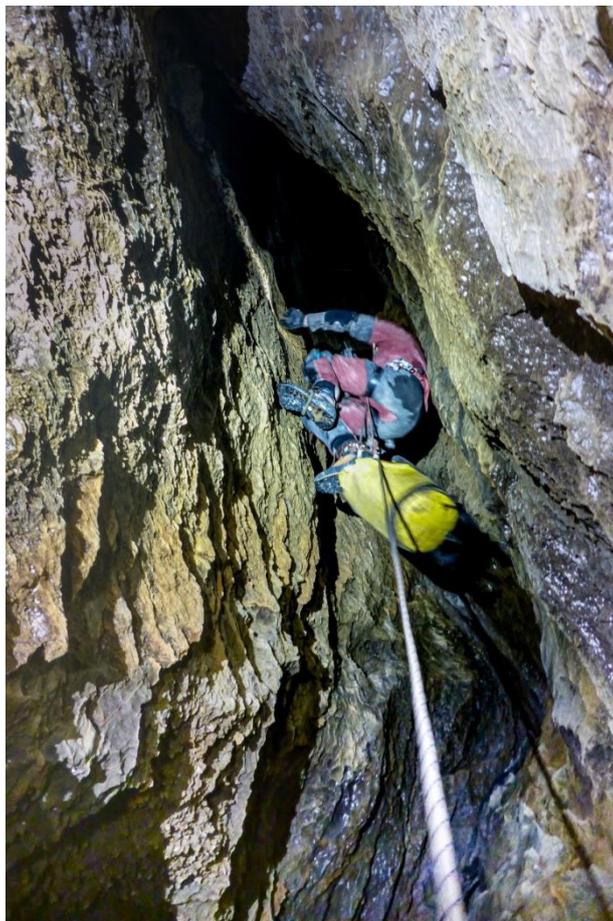
On this occasion, with less pressing matters to distract, there was enough time to have a poke around in the passage leading up from the alcove. An awkward climb and thrutch up gained an ascending rift of some 6m high and 60cm wide.

An easy climb led into a wide opening, with a large rift leading up and which also continued down, this time in a South-West direction, rather than a more Northerly bearing, which was the trend of the majority of other caves in this region.

Initially rigging from natural features, a traverse out into the rift revealed a shaft of some 3m x 6m and around 20m deep to a solid rock floor with a further continuation seen through a hole in the floor. Passing through the hole revealed a large chamber which had loose rock around what looked like the continuation down via a hading rift/shaft. Clearing the loose rock from the head of the next shaft allowed an easy descent down a clean-washed stepped shaft which haded at around 20° from the vertical. Reaching the limit of the rope to hand (60m), the shaft could be seen to descend a further 25m +/- to another chamber, again with a rock strewn floor. There was throughout an intermittent outward draught.

At present, this shaft/rift appears to be on a separate development to that of Dragon. The direction of the shaft/rift is South-West rather than North. Initially it had been thought that the shaft would connect with the 'Bubbles' series (see section Dragon - background & history), but it soon became obvious that we were well below the level by which we would have certainly broken through.

A return is required to continue the exploration of this new development of the cave, and this is eagerly anticipated in 2020.



*Ade ascending the shaft in F13 series - DG*

2081m -

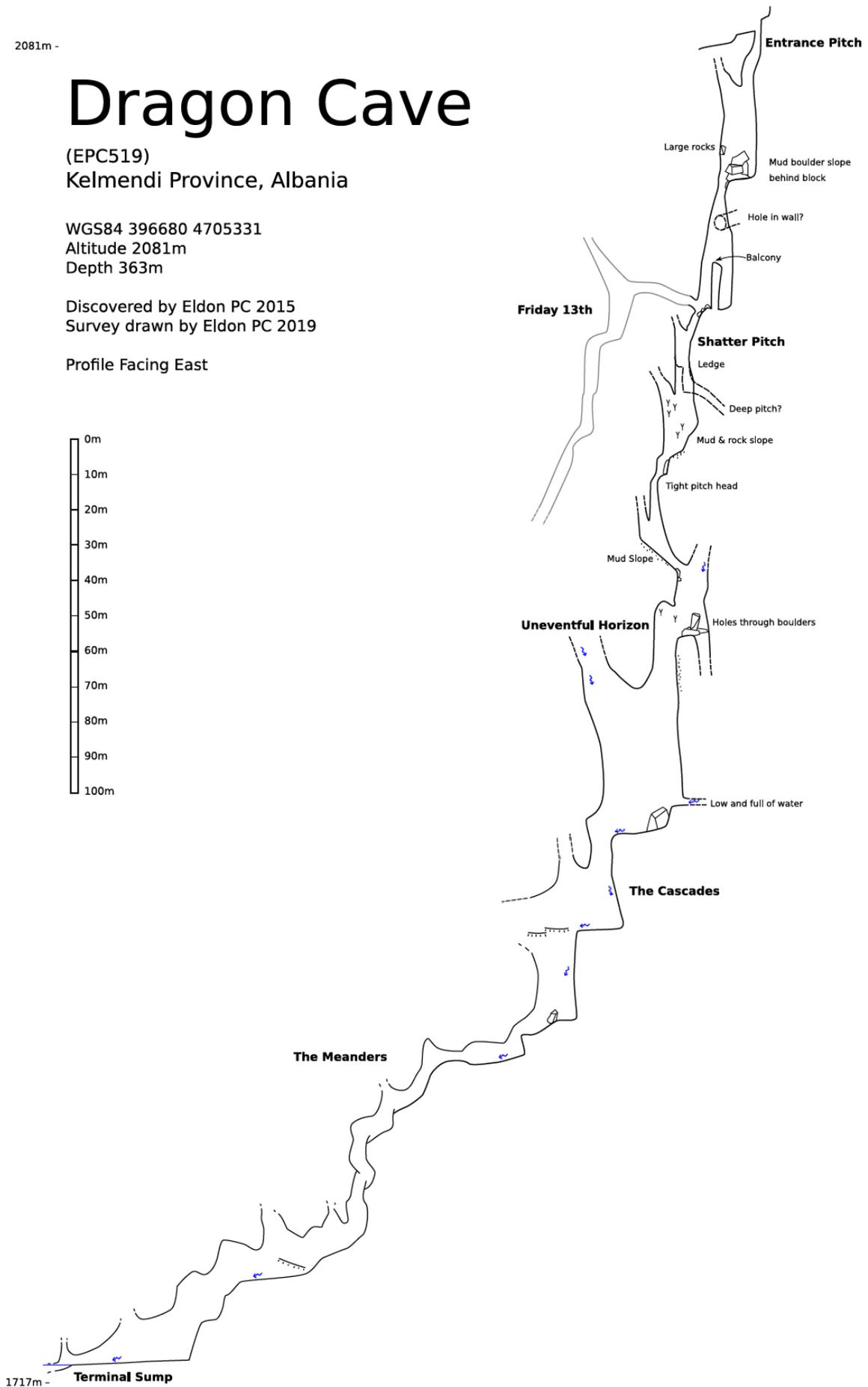
# Dragon Cave

(EPC519)  
Kelmendi Province, Albania

WGS84 396680 4705331  
Altitude 2081m  
Depth 363m

Discovered by Eldon PC 2015  
Survey drawn by Eldon PC 2019

Profile Facing East



## Snake Cave

**15<sup>th</sup> September – Snake Cave**



**Snake Cave entrance - JRP**

After gaining knowledge of a very cold cave from local Samantha whilst sipping on Coffee and Raki up in the summer village our attentions were grabbed for sure. Snake Cave got its name after Samantha found a snake up there some years ago with her sibling and never returned! Dave found the cave on a quick reconnaissance mission one morning and pointed it out to us the next day along with another higher entrance which we couldn't relocate.

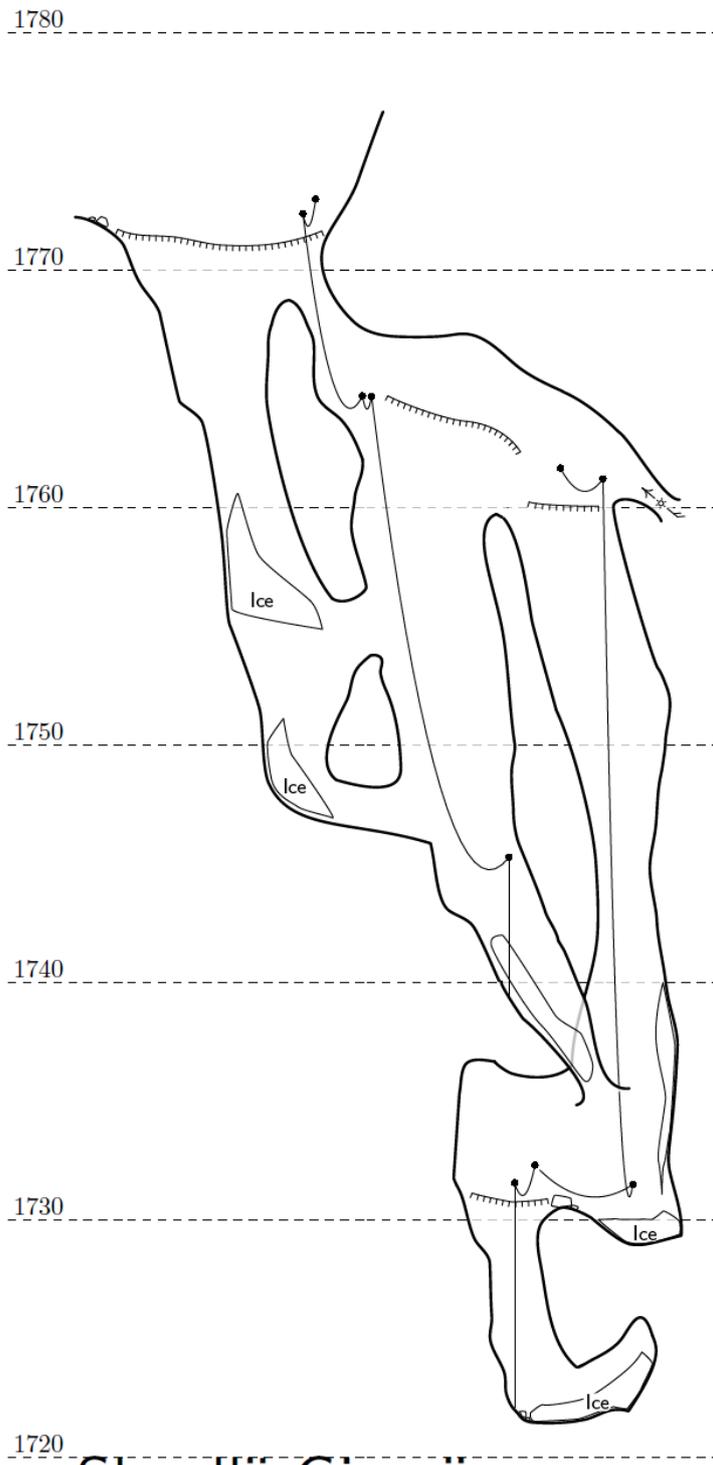
The entrance lays in a shake-hole close to the limestone/shale margin 100m SSE from the funny Church looking building. Two holes form the entrance with a ledge in between. The hole on the right which is the largest of the two drops some way to a blockage of snow and boulders. The left hole being the proper entrance and descends a short pitch to the head of a large rift. It was at this point Rob and I found bolts placed above the pitch – Drats!



**Rob rigging the traverse - JRP**

We decided to descend anyway to survey and double check to make sure this previously enjoyed cave had not let something slip. The pitch led to a blockage of boulders and ice some 20m down. Back at the top Rob made an easy traverse over the top of the pitch to a large ledge above a second wider pitch and with no bolts present and no obvious naturals this pitch had definitely not been previously enjoyed. Rob abseiled with some soft rub points and carefully knocked down a large ice waterfall to gain access to a boulder floor below the ice blockage in the first pitch. We descended one final pitch beyond but unfortunately this was again blocked with snow and ice.

We ascended to the top and made a valiant effort on enlarging a further hole beyond the top of the pitch but to no avail this time around. After stashing the gear we were glad to break surface and head for a farewell party at Bob's Bar.



## Shpellë Gjarpër

10 m

Extended section, facing mostly North East

*Length:* 104 m

*Depth:* 52 m

*Surveyed by:* Luke Cafferty, Rob Eavis, Jon Pemberton 2019

## **EPC 503**

EPC 503 is a big open shaft with a snow plug blocking the bottom. It has been GPS tagged on previous expeditions. On the previous trips there no way could be found past the huge snow block at the bottom we thought we would have a look to see if it was any different.

An easy down climb a grassed slope leads you to the start of the loose rock and steep slope. A big boulder acts as a good anchor for a handline, which would benefit from being rigged off bolts. After a short 1M climb down the side of a large flake of rock you have to swing yourself around the base of the flake to get yourself away from the really loose slope. An easy 3M climb down a bit less loose slope ends at the top of a 6M pitch. A small step across this pitch head and you can get onto the snow plug. Down the backside of this plug it had receded enough that you can see the floor. We never actually got to the floor but we could see a boulder strewn floor. A cold drought was blowing up from the bottom. This certainly needs another look at.



*Luke faffing in EPC 503 - DG*

## **S.T.S**

S.T.S is a small tight cave which is found roughly 50M NW from Bari Cave. It is located in a small valley. A short 3m climb down some boulders leads you to the valley floor. The entrance is a tall but quite tight crack in the cliff face. A climb over a rock in the entrance and you enter a tight and very snaggy rift. Heading North and at a slight decline you follow the rift. After approx. 20M you have a very awkward climb down. This bit of the cave is very tight and does feel quite committing. At the bottom of the climb the rift starts to get a bit wider. Continue following the rift down and after another 10M you enter the bottom of a small roundish chamber with a rock covered floor. A very tight a mostly filled in passage continues off at floor level but this was left unexplored.

## **Broderick**

Originally found in 2011, this cave is a short classic. An almost impossibly tight entrance rift quickly pops out into the roof of spacious 60m deep shaft, with only one small ledge upon which to balance to put ones SRT kit back on. Not a place for the faint hearted. In 2011 the rope was 10m too short to reach the bottom of the big shaft.

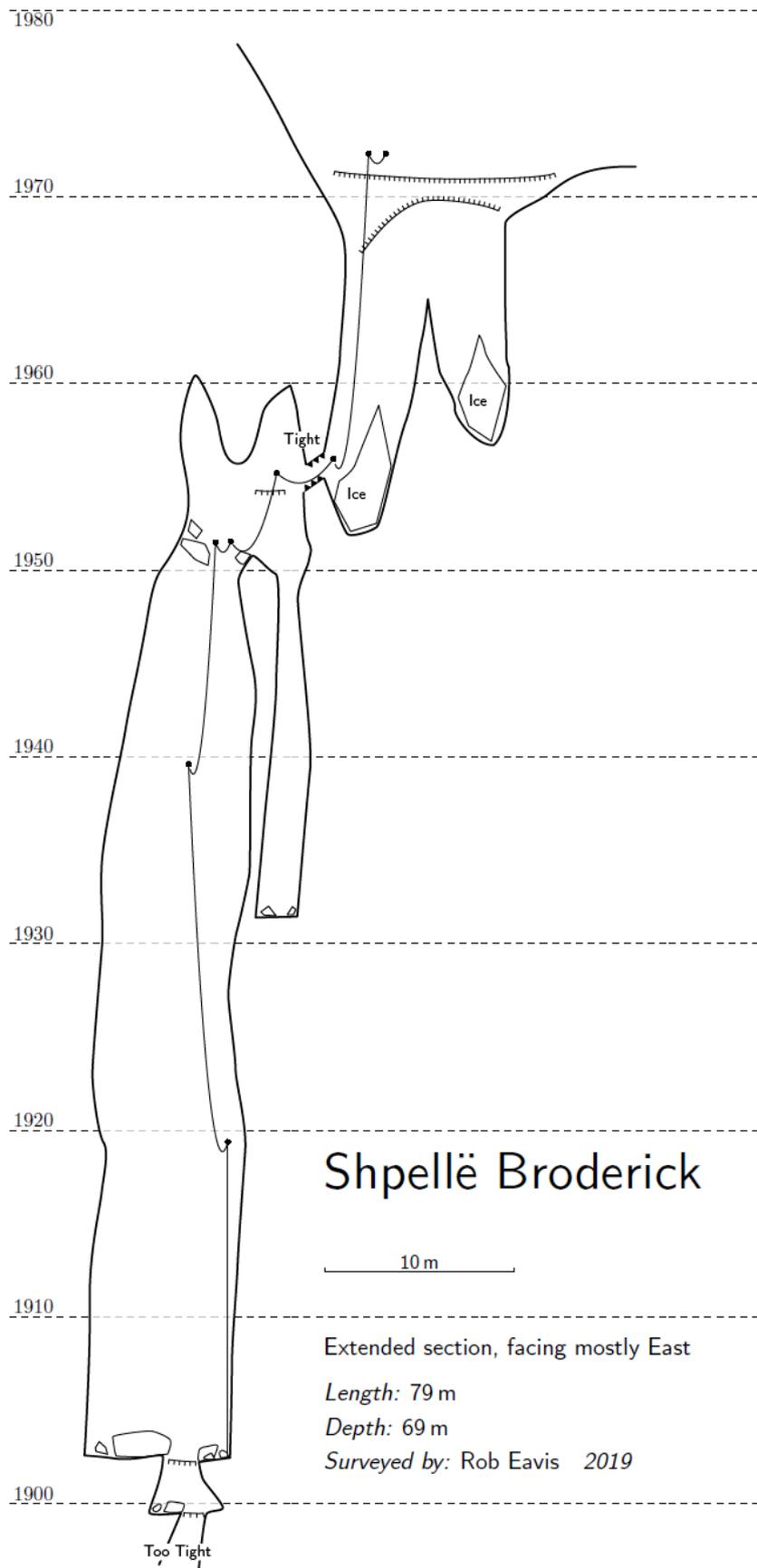
Rob returned this year with Jon who took the noble decision to freeze his ass off on the snow plug by the entrance, supposedly in case Rob needed help to get out, but possibly because he couldn't fit through. Indeed being 8 years older plus an increasingly lumpy Dad-bod hadn't made Rob's job any easier. Once through the route down was bolted (last time was all off naturals) and the bottom reached via a simpler and safer route than previously. The shaft really is an impressive sight, almost totally cylindrical and a very good echo.

The bottom consists of a mostly flat, boulder lined floor which is all very clean washed. At the western wall a slot can be climbed down 3m to a boulder restriction, and whilst there is open cave visible beyond it'll need a couple big boulders moving out of the way to get access. A small draught comes up this showing some promise for a very keen team.

A few photos and videos to show off the place, Rob then surveyed and de-rigged his way out, and had absolutely no issues getting out of the entrance, even on the fifth attempt.



***Rob stuck in the entrance – JRP***



## One Day at the Cwm

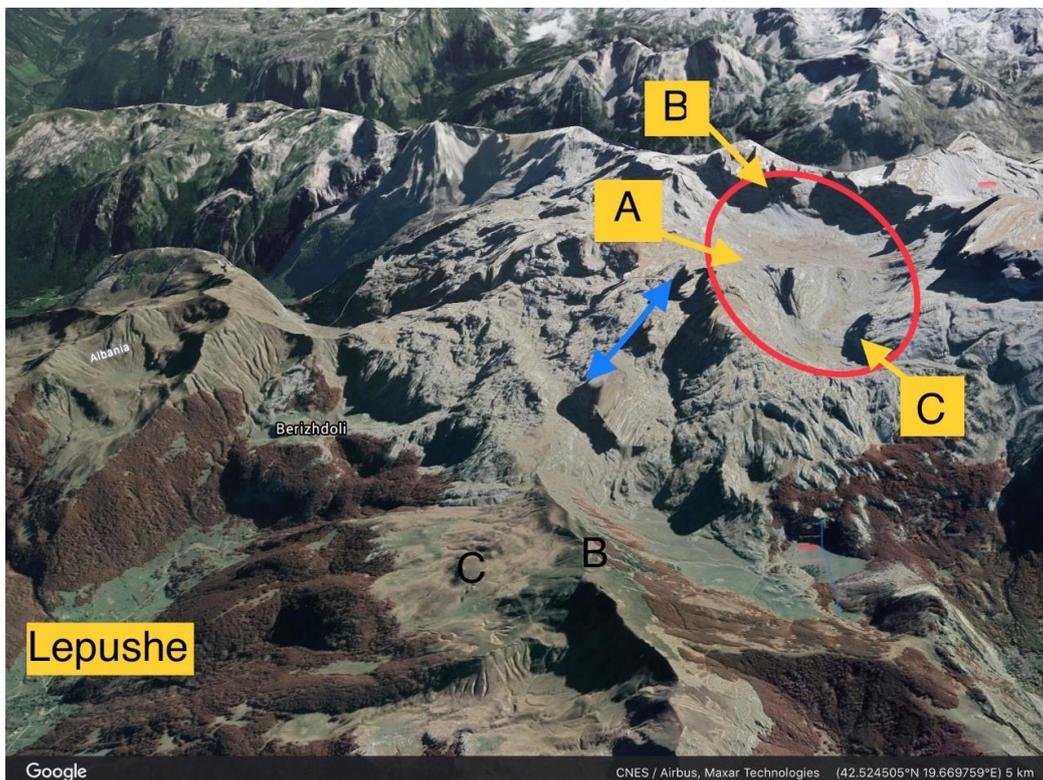
### *Exploratory walk in large bowl 'depression' and valley behind and to south-west of EPC19 (Dragon)*

Continuing up the rough shepherds' track which runs below the ledge on which the entrance to EPC19 'Dragon' is located, a col at the head of a number of valleys is reached. To the south-west of the col, a large bowl-like depression, some 1.5km in diameter is seen, the rim of which is outlined with dramatic limestone peaks.



*A view of the Cwm from the Col - DG*

An annotated image taken from Google Earth, shows some key features which are described below.



Note!! Can we use this image? Probably best to credit Google and plead innocent - don't want you getting sued do we ;-). ed. Ok...

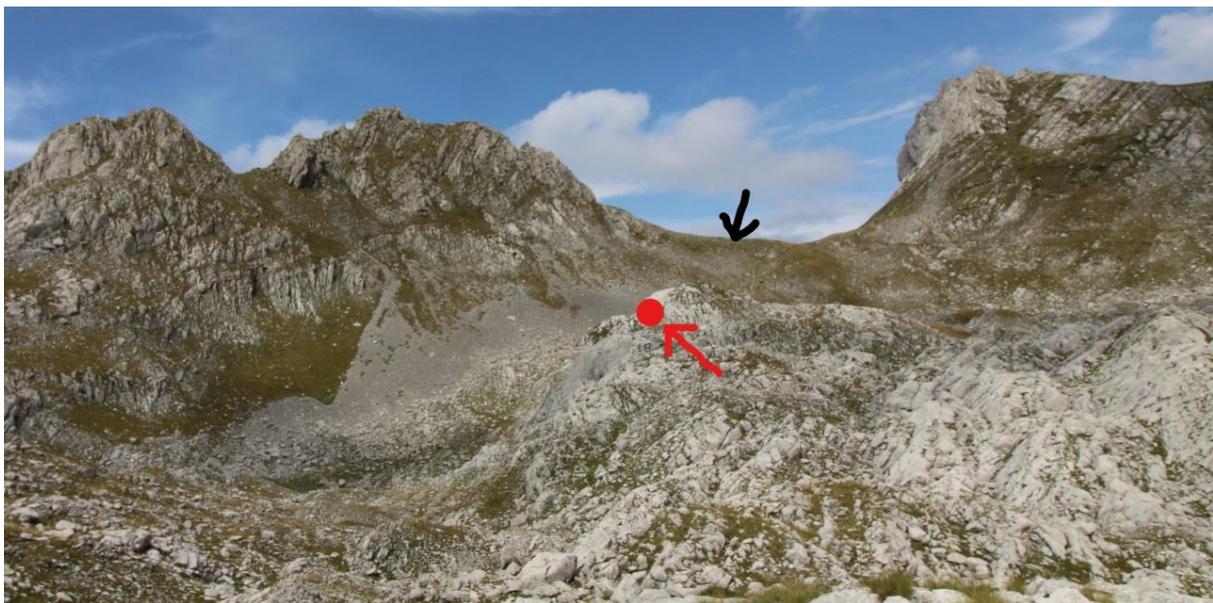
The expedition base of Lepushe is marked in the lower left hand corner - the general orientation of the image seen as looking south.

The blue arrow marks the general fault-line on which many of the discovered caves are found, including EPC19 'Dragon' as well as 'Wolf Cave'.

A rough and narrow shepherds' track winds its way up along the general direction of this fault.

The general boundary of the coombe is identified in red, with a 'blind' valley leading from it towards the area marked in yellow as 'C'.

The floor of the coombe is largely one of a huge number of blind shakeholes, invariably filled with limestone debris, undoubtedly originating from the rim of the coombe during the freeze/thaw of the winter months. It should be noted that the floor of the coombe is covered in snow for some six to eight months of the year. Indeed, in the September of this expedition, large areas of snow/ice still remained in some of the more shaded areas of the depression.



***Cwm Cave A (in red)- DG***

Venturing from the col, indicated by the black arrow, down toward the middle of the coombe, a raised area of fluted limestone stands proud above the general profile of the general debris on the coombe floor.

Just below the highest point of this raised area can be found a significant open rift - indicated in red on the photo and indicated in yellow as A on the Google Earth image [grid 42°29'18"N / 19°44'44"E / elev 2120m].

The rift was not descended, but its elevated position should have helped protect it from the worst of the limestone debris covering the large proportion of the lower sections of the coombe.

Also seen rising above the floor of the coombe was an intriguing hole, part way up a dramatic limestone tower forming part of the rim of the depression.



***highlighted in red Bat Cave 1 with 2 & 3 above, indicated in yellow as B on the Google Earth image [grid 42°28'54"N / 19°45'34"E / elev 2240m (approx)].***

As is evident from the photos, this particular hole appears uncannily reminiscent of the logo of a certain caped crime-fighting superhero, leading it to be given the highly unoriginal name of Bat Cave.

As before with cave 'A', as this was a lightweight 'looking only' foray, no kit to help enter any of the caves was carried, so Bat Cave remains as a tantalising question mark for a future expedition.

Continuing round the Coombe in a clockwise direction, a small 'lip' in the bowl of the main depression is gained and from which, a broad but steep sided valley is entered, heading downhill slightly but with the far end of the valley being blind - encompassed by a further ridge of limestone outcrop.



***Looking down the valley - DG***

Situated high up on the left hand wall of the valley (when descending) was a significant feature which had been observed by some members of the expedition some days earlier, when they had found themselves on the ridge of what was currently the right hand wall.

A very large opening which appears to be a cave entrance is prominent in the middle of the rock face, marked with a red arrow in the photos of the coombe valley. It is indicated in yellow as C on the Google Earth image [grid 42°28'54"N / 19°44'18"E / elev 1880m (approx)].

To the left and slightly below the large opening appears to be a smaller opening, circled in red.

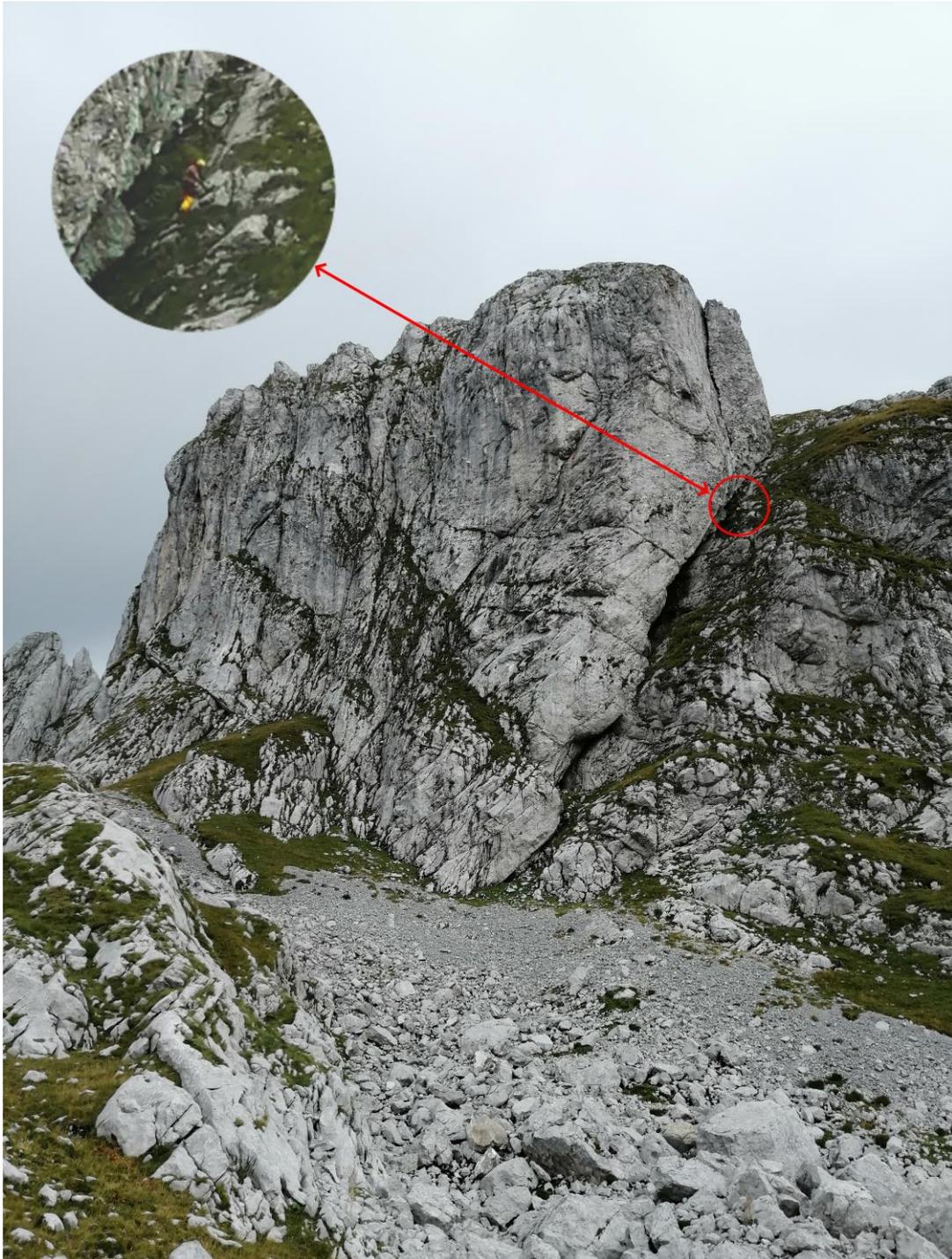


***Cwm Valley Cave - DG***

What is not readily evident from the photo is the steepness and nature of the terrain leading up to the opening. When viewed from the lower end of the valley \*(photo coombe valley cave 2), the red arrow shows the position of the opening in profile against the rock face. This gives a better idea as to the angle of the approach, along with the sheer volume of rock lying behind it. Due to the nature of the ground and as was the case with the previous two leads noted above, it was a case of recording the feature and to save it for a return trip with kit and numbers more suited to safely gaining access.

## **Abbing off the Dragon Peninsular**

Somebody suggested a cunning way to add depth to Dragon cave by finding a higher entrance in the rock spire immediately above the entrance, we had spied out a large rift higher up the face on the southern end, so we speculated that this could be part of the same fault system that had formed Dragon cave, seemed like a reasonable assumption that at the very least would provide some open air sunny caving with spectacular views, a nice change to the damp cold depths we had been experiencing, so the cunning plan was hatched.



***Ade abseiling down to the crack – Rob***

Myself and Dave decided to give it a go, which involved a steep grassy ascent through rocky patches, not too bad for me wearing new walking boots with good edges, but Dave struggled in worn wellies, he was looking decidedly concerned on a few occasions. We topped out on the shoulder above the fault line and decided to it would be rude not to top out, the summit plateau is perhaps 200m x 150m and consists of mainly sloping grass so not too big, and we built a summit cairn to claim the first grassy ascent!!

To our surprise just below the summit was a shaft, about 10 m deep and perhaps 4m wide, we rigged a rope off naturals and Dave descended to check it out but turned out to be blind and full of debris, it does make you think though that it's worth checking out the most unlikely of places for leads.

Back at the fault line, I bolted a belay out from the face and to avoid the scree, two re- belays later and just at the end of the 60 m rope I dropped into the rift, unfortunately Dave couldn't hear me call him so he didn't come down, the rift went in for about 10 m to a jammed block which I climbed over and squeezed through to the back, this proved to close down pretty quickly. On the way back up, I managed to swing into a second higher rift but again this closed down, oh well, I was getting great views of the impending thunder clouds rolling in!



***Ade abseiling down to the crack – DG***

Back at the top, turns out dave was perched on some dodgy scree and didn't want to risk moving and sending them down on me, we quickly de- rigged as it started to rain making the dodgy descent in wellies even dodgier!.

This little sideline trip turned out to be fruitless on this occasion, but finding evidence a shaft in area such as that made the effort worthwhile as it makes you realise what potential opportunities there could be in an easily dismissed area.

# **Medical Report**

## ***Background***

It had been recognised prior to previous trips to the area, that any illness or injury sustained whilst in the Kelmend region had the potential for developing into something altogether more serious than had it occurred in the UK.

There is no official medical assistance available in the area in which the expedition was based. Healthcare needs are invariably met by various members of the community using a range of self-taught skills, herbal remedies and 'trade' pharmaceuticals, often of questionable origin and vintage.

There is no emergency service of any description in this mountain region; indeed, the provision of a paramedic type service within the country as a whole has been described as still being at the 'concept stage'.

We had previously been shown a small but outwardly presentable looking hospital in the town of Tamare – now only around an hours drive from the village in which we were based, following the upgrading of the road surface to tarmac. The actual facilities within the hospital building are at very best, extremely limited and there is no form of trauma or A&E provision. The last time we called in when passing through, there were neither doctors or nurses, or even patients in the building - only two of the more senior members of the local community busying themselves in a game of cards.

The nearest hospital of any practicality is the regional centre in Shkoder, a town some two hours away, should a vehicle be able to be sourced.

There is no cave or mountain rescue of any description in Albania, particularly so in the mountains of the north.

Medications etc. taken included:

- Antibiotics (suitable for those with allergy to penicillin) to cover most eventualities, including respiratory, gut and skin infections.
- Analgesia including codeine, nefopam and tramadol were available, although stronger opiates were ruled out due to the logistics of carrying such controlled substances across international borders.
- Anti-emetics and anti-diarrhoea agents – plus electrolyte / rehydration solutions.
- Alcohol/chlorhexidine skin cleansers (although the local Raki would undoubtedly have been perfectly adequate).
- A good range of bandages, sterile gauze, non-adherent dressings and 'steri-strips' for wound closure.
- A number of sterile suture kits, should a wound not prove amenable to adhesive type repair. It had been observed during previous visits that the local suture needles which were available could not be described as 'single use'.

· There were also materials available for splinting / immobilising limbs should the need arise.

### **Review**

Previously, other than an instance of a head wound requiring a number of sutures, there had been little more in the way of trauma than the usual range of cuts, scratches and sprains which can reasonably be expected when exploring large areas of mountain karst and which were readily ameliorated with sticking plasters or strapping from individuals' first aid kits.

Earlier visits to the region had also given rise to a few cases of 'traveller's tummy', the cause of which was in all likelihood the result of the largely unprocessed dairy produce with which campylobacter proliferates in the area. These usually responded well to simple anti-diarrhoeal agents, although there had been a case of campylobacter which required further treatment on return to the UK.

It can be reported that the participants in the 2019 expedition were fortunate to experience nothing more serious than an occasional blister, easily remedied with an appropriate dressing



*Always time to admire the view - JRP*

## **Gear stashed**

### ***Luigj's (Hotel Alpini) eaves storage***

2x 100m of 11mm (white)

3x 100m of 9mm (white) in large tackle bag

"Hundreds" of through bolts M8 x75mm

Between 50 & 70 steel hangers

Approximately 50 maillons

### ***Wolf***

Approximately 100m of 9/10mm in short lengths used in Wolf Cave in bag

1 bolting kit in bolting kit bag

### ***Dragon***

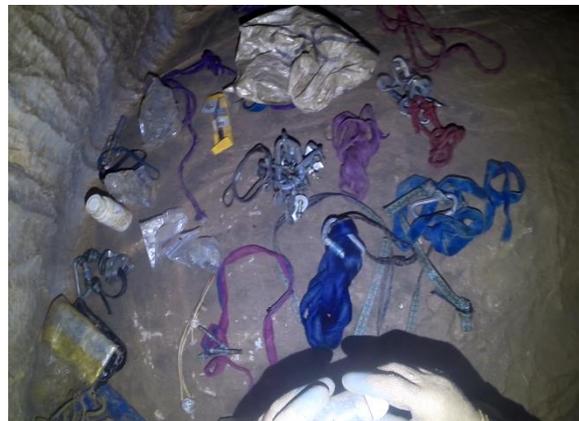
25m of 10mm (orange) entrance rift

50m of 9mm (white) in yellow bag - entrance rift

60m of 9mm (white) Friday 13<sup>th</sup> series (rigged)

60m of 9mm (red) Uneventful Horizon floor

Oodles of gear at the bottom of the last pitch, including slings, 2 survival bags, wire strops, spits and driver, krabs, hangers, drill bit (see photo)



### ***Snake***

100m of 9mm (white) in red TSA tackle bag – bottom of entrance pitch

## **Conclusion**

After a great week of concluding past projects we felt reconciled to know that things had finally been ticked off the “to do” list. We had reached limit of exploration at the pointy end of Dragon Cave ending at a terminal perched sump. Although this is definitely not the end as far as this cave goes it's our end. I highly doubt anyone will be stupid enough to drag or carry bottle there for a diver let alone dive here as the caves are just too cold to warrant being wet for any amount of time. The climb above the sump although question mark looks very uninspiring and not one for us in this lifetime. It's a shame as the cave was just starting to get big again. Higher up in the system we still have a couple of leads to check out including the pitch below Bubbles route on the Uneventful Horizon although we're pretty confident in predicting this will probably meet up with the stream lower down and the new Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Series which Ade and Dade explored using 60m of rope no far from the entrance. Although this feels completely separate to the other stuff below the likelihood of it being a separate system so close to big stuff below again unlikely.

Three more significant on-going caves have also been concluded including Broderick behind the back of Half Dome which ended in a draughting boulder floor. This came as good news as only one member of the expedition could fit through the torturous entrance squeeze. Wolf Cave, first explored in 2011 also came to a conclusion being too tight to warrant forward progress with no draught present. Our new find Snake Cave which lays much closer to the Summer Village ended at a snow plug.

There are still a few caves around the Half Dome vicinity which require further attention including Coca-Cola Cave which was found in 2016 and was pulled because of lack of gear but still on-going, also Barry which was found in 2011 and at the time ended at a snow plug, The big shake hole cave below Dragon would also warrant another look but looked to be plugged up this year and inaccessible. All of the above caves need surveying too.

Above ground we found a few more Caves, Ade and Dave had a fantastic excursion bolting down a large fault line on the Dragon Peninsula which unfortunately came to nothing but has now been ticked off and the whole area above thoroughly checked. Luke, Rob and I found a huge possible cave entrance from high up on the top Col heading towards Theth which would be a serious undertaking to reach let alone access then explore but food for thought never the less.

As for future expeditions the next expedition will predominantly be surface orientated “shaft bombing” and mapping out new leads in hope for finding the magic one which will take us below the valley floor and into some serious depth. There are still whole areas up there that have not been scoured.

Many thanks to Hotel Alpini, Luigj Cajek and his family for great hospitality as always during our stay and fantastic organisational skills with shuttle transport to and from Lepushe. The local shop which always let us go behind the counter to grab what we wanted and a special thanks to Lana at Bob's Bar for keeping us hydrated and cheesed up every day until we found peanuts. As cheese can only be life 5 days a week.

Until the next time...