

IVth European Speleological Conference (Lans-en-Vercors)

Report by Jules Barrett

Cavers: Jules Barrett (EPC), Toni Murphy (EPC), Bernie Maddison (EPC), Julian McIntosh (EPC) plus Joy and Rowan, Pete Pollard (EPC), Nige Strong (EPC).

The fourth European Speleological Conference was held in the french village of Lans-en-Vercors during the week of 23rd to 30th August 2008. A small group of Eldon members visited along with cavers from many other countries. The event is basically a continental version of Hidden Earth with a program of lectures, films, slideshows and workshops alongside trade stands, a cafe/bar in the evening and other random events like the longest rope zipwire in the world (over a kilometre and almost a minute of sliding). The big draw for me was the fact that the french clubs were rigging around fifteen caves for the event meaning that we could potentially get a lot of caving done in the week without the hassle of rigging them ourselves. I'd never visited the Vercors before and felt a bit like a kid in a candy shop all week. The weather was excellent with a brief rain storm on the first Friday evening being the only rain we saw all week. We stayed on the L'Oursiere campsite in Villard-de-Lans which was a great site with excellent facilities. From there it's a fifteen minute drive to Lans-en-Vercors where the conference was based. Details are at: <http://www.camping-oursiere.fr/fr/accueil.php>

Each cave had to be booked in advance and groups were given time slots which would ensure that congestion was minimised. Although some people found booking caves a bit of a pain the booking system did ensure that caves didn't get ridiculously busy. In general, places for the Berger were difficult to get hold of whilst everything else was easy.

In fact we hardly got to any of the lectures or events but went caving or canyoning every day. By the time we had got packed for caving, travelled to Lans in the morning, booked your cave for the next day, driven to the cave and done the trip there wasn't much time left in the evening for lectures etc.

Pot de Loup

Report by Jules Barrett

Cavers: Jules Barrett (EPC), Toni Murphy (EPC), Bernie Maddison (EPC), Paul Tarrant (CSS), Simon Mee (TSG)

Having taken care of registering and all the paperwork during the day we were keen to get a trip in on Saturday evening so went looking for the Pot de Loup – a short, straightforward and pleasant SRT trip. Pot de Loup is easily found a short walk along a good track from the parking. The cave is mostly vertical and has two entrances – an abseil descent down the open pot and a sort of 'adit' entrance which leads in to the base of the first pitch. Three of us opted for the abseil entrance whilst two went for the 'adit' entrance. The initial pitch-head and rebelay led to the bottom of the entrance shaft where we met a group of french children on a speleo-camp. From talking to the french instructor it seems that many of the french departments (presumably those which have caves) hold summer camps for children who are keen cavers. As they made their way back out up the first pitch we ascended a short section of rope to arrive at the top of a significant shaft with lots of calcite on the walls. Here a pitch-head leads to a rebelay just below and then a straight hang to the bottom. A scramble down over boulders leads to the top of the final pitch. We were surprised to find that this wasn't rigged but using a few spare hangers that I'd thrown in and the end of the rope we were able to rig it to the bottom. This last pitch led to a pleasant chamber where the water disappeared into a sump. The journey out was uneventful and we all exited out of the 'adit' entrance.

Scialet du Tonnerre

Report by Jules Barrett

Cavers: Jules Barrett (EPC), Simon Mee (TSG)

The Tonnerre was one of the two rigged caves that I was very keen to get into (the other being the Berger) so I booked it as soon as I could in case the weather deteriorated later in the week. The sump at the bottom is at -507m and the cave reacts quickly to rain. The Tonnerre is pretty vertical and you spend a fair proportion of your time on the rope. Simon and I drove to the parking which is in one of the ski car parks near to Lans-en-Vercors. From here an hours walk led to the small rift entrance which took some finding. Eventually we found it marked SGCAF and V18, the name that the original explorers had given it. In we went down some short pitches with a pendulum on the second pitch before arriving at the Meander Combivore. There's more loose rock here than you might expect to find in a classic Vercors cave and we felt very at home. A climb and a couple of pitches in the Meander Combivore and we heard voices up ahead. It turned out to be Geoff from SUSS who had tagged along with the french cavers who had just finished rigging the cave. They were on their way out and we continued past a couple of small climbs to arrive at the top of the first big pitch (Puits du Fada). The 55m pitch is an impressive place and from here the route drops another big pitch known as Puits de la Capuche (48m)

which is more broken by rebelays. The Puits de la Capuche dropped us into the Salle a manger (the Vercors equivalent of 'the Eating House') which quickly leads on to the Puits des Maries (54m) and then a variety of smaller pitches and traverses before arriving in the Collector at the bottom. Having visited the sump we had some food and started out back up the ropes. We were lucky not to meet any teams on the way out and arrived back on the surface seven and a half hours after going in. We were pleased to have bottomed the cave well within guide-book time and without any problems.

Brilliant cave! The french rigged it in two trips and had a lot of people along to carry rope etc. Rigging it yourself would be a fairly big effort so was great that the french rigged it for us.

Gour Fumant **Report by Rowan**

Cavers: Julian McIntosh (EPC), Rowan and Joy, Bernie Maddison (EPC), Paul Tarrant (CSS)

We set off down the Gour Fumant at 13:20. The system has two entrances – the Gour Fumant and the Faux Gour. We entered down a few pitches in rapid succession and came to a crossroads. At this point you can go up to the surface via the Faux Gour, do a loop to near the bottom of the cave or you can do a figure-of-8 down a pitch called the Letterbox. At the bottom another pitch meets on a crescent ledge and two pitches go down side by side then at the bottom you can carry on to the bottom of the cave or carry on the figure-of-8 and go up the other pitch and when at the ledge go up the pitch opposite to the letterbox. This route has some crossovers and I found it hard when you get to the crossroads you go up three pitches of the Faux Gour and into the open at 16:30.

Gouffre Berger to the Hall of the Thirteen **Report by Jules Barrett**

Cavers: Jules Barrett (EPC), Richard Tooley (TSG), Martyn Grayson (TSG), Gordon Fiander, Jenny Fiander.

The organisers of the conference had organised a Berger permit but only ten people per day were allowed to go to the bottom whilst thirty per day could go to the Hall of the Thirteen. This meant that to have a chance of getting a ticket to the end you had to bivi in the car park overnight outside the 'Explos' tent. I didn't much fancy that so settled with a trip to the Hall of the Thirteen. We drove to the car park at La Moliere and walked to the cave entrance finding the route well marked. We descended down the entrance pitches and down Cairn pitch to arrive at the start of the Menaders. Here we met some traffic and the pace slowed significantly. Some of the people in front of us obviously hadn't done a lot of SRT and were taking far too long on the ropes. All of the big pitches were double-rigged which helped to speed things up a bit. Eventually we passed another team who were on their way out and got going down Garby's, Aldos and under the boulder into the big walking passage. Lake Cadoux was totally dry and we descended down the Tyrolienne and Cascade. Eventually arrived at the Hall of the Thirteen which was even more impressive than it looks in photos. Every caver should see this at some stage in their caving career. From here we set off back encountering more traffic on the way out. On the way up Aldos a bolt came out of a Spit half-way across the traverse line between the two Y-hangs on Aldos but no-one hurt. Arrived on the surface to a dark but warm evening eight hours after going in to find the french bloke on the surface had a healthy fire going. The walk back to the car seemed to take for ever!

Pissarde (Canyon) **Report by Jules Barrett**

Canyoneers: Jules Barrett (EPC), Bernie Madisson (EPC), Toni Murphy (EPC), Nige Strong (EPC), Pete Pollard (EPC), Julian McIntosh (EPC) plus Joy and Rowan, Paul Tarrant (CSS)

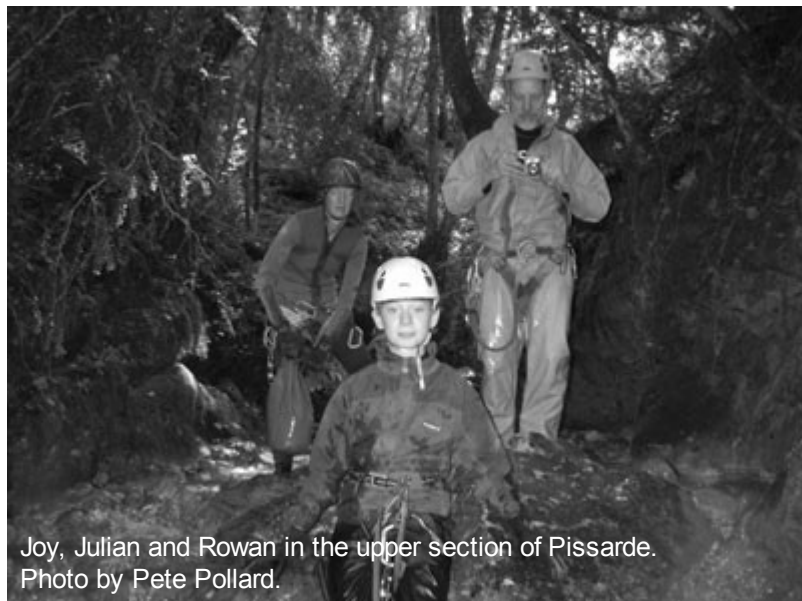
After a few days of caving and excellent weather on the surface Julian and family, Pete, Nige, Toni and I fancied doing some canyoning. I had picked up the local canyoning guidebook at Expe earlier in the week and found one called Pissard which seemed to fit what we needed. Ideally we would all do the small pitches of the first part before some would escape out whilst a few would go on to finish the 90m abseil down the Cascade d'Allieres. The conference guidebook said that this canyon (along with others) was 'rigged'. We assumed that this would mean that ropes would be left permanently on the canyon during the conference. With hindsight this would be a bit daft as you'd get all sorts of day-trippers and local nutters inventing their own methods of descent on the conference ropes. Anyway, we arrived, parked up and got changed before walking uphill to the likely top of the canyon. There was a group already in



the canyon and I watched them pulling their rope down and realised that the canyon wasn't actually 'rigged' at all. Pete and I went back to the car for a 50m rope that I'd put in just in case. Finally we all got into the water and set off down the gorge towards the first pitch. All of the pitches were rigged with double stainless steel anchors (either expansion or resin anchors) making the rigging very easy. The canyon begins with a few small climbs and pitches and then there are some bigger pitches up to 16m. Eventually we got to the pitch with the 'Epingle' a pointed piece of rock at the bottom and escaped out back to the car. I was annoyed that we hadn't been able to finish the descent of the Cascade d'Allieres and added it to my list of unfinished business.

On the Thursday Toni, Bernie, Paul and I wanted a steady day so we were able to go back to Pissard to finish it off. This time we went and stashed the ropes that we would need for the Cascade d'Allieres at the escape route and we descended the upper part of the canyon as before using a 50m rope.

Reaching the escape route Toni and Paul got out of the canyon leaving Bernie and I to continue with three large bags of rope. A few good pitches with a couple of deep pools led after a while to the top of the Cascade d'Allieres. This is a superb 90m pitch with a small stream tumbling down a wide sweep of limestone which drops steeply away from the pitch-head. I rigged a retrievable traverse line to the pitch head, threaded the ropes through the ring on the pitch-head, tied them together before throwing them down. Abseiled down slowly looking for some more anchors and found two more anchors 20m down on the true left-bank of the stream. Clipped myself to the anchors and Bernie followed. Soon we were both hanging on the anchors contemplating a 65m abseil down to the small lake at the bottom. Spent a bit of time re-rigging the rope and I set off abseiling down the steep, greasy wall. About 20m from the floor there's a lip and once past that we were hanging free underneath a huge roof. Eventually reached the ground and pulled the rope down to the floor. Fantastic trip!



Joy, Julian and Rowan in the upper section of Pissarde.
Photo by Pete Pollard.

Trou Qui Souffle to Saint de Glace Traverse **Report by Jules Barrett**

Cavers: Jules Barrett (EPC), Paul Tarrant (CSS), Tam and Leanne (Lincoln Scout Caving Club)

This is one of the classic Vercors trips and one that had been recommend to me. Tam and Leanne had already had a go earlier in the week and turned back when they weren't sure of the way through. It's usual to do it from TQS to SG as the Meander Francais is particularly hard work the other way. We drove to the entrance (which is a hole right next to the road) and descended. The cave starts with a few shortish pitches and then it's into a muddy crawl (which feels more like Derbyshire than the Vercors). There's an easy flat-out squeeze and then a bit of route finding trickery leads to the Meander Francais. This is a fairly deep winding rift that snakes around forcing you onto one wall and the the other. There are traverse lines in place most of the way and a number of short pitches break things up. It's surprisingly hard work and seems to go on forever. Eventually we reached a bigger pitch (20m) that drops into La Concierge. This is a decent-sized chamber that smells of piss and has a small waterfall. We didn't hang around here for too long and set off towards Saint de Glace. A short pitch leads into the Galerie des Marmites which is big PSM-style walking passage. There are loads of 'marmites' in here (circular pools of water in the floor) and soon leads to a short 5m pitch up into another passage. Arrived at a boulder choke and climbed up through this into another large passage. This leads after more walking to the huge Salle des Hydrokarst – probably the biggest chamber that I saw in the Vercors. We found the bottom of a rope leading up into the roof and made our way into Saint de Glace. Climbed up a Toboggan and continued following the red and white tape that had shown the way all through the cave so far. The red and white tape seemed to end at a tight rift so leaving the others behind I started traversing in the roof. Seemed much more necky than any other traversing that we had done and I was surprised that the French hadn't put a rope on it. Decided that couldn't be the way so returned and explored I the bottom. Didn't look very worn so came back. Hmmmm... Headed back a bit to try to find the way but without more information was difficult to figure out. Frustrating as we knew we were only 300 metres from the Saint de Glace entrance. With all options exhausted (or so we thought) I made the difficult decision to re-trace our route back the way we had come. This certainly wasn't popular but there was no way I was sitting there waiting to be rescued. So, we started on the long journey out which turned into a bit of a mission and we eventually surfaced eighteen hours after going in. It turned out that the tape had mis-led quite a few other parties and we needed to climb up into the roof well before the tape finished(!).

Other caves visited by various Eldon members were the Trou d'Ira and the Scialet du Vincens. Julian, Joy, Rowan, Bernie, Nige and Pete also took in the Grenoble via ferrata which sounded excellent.

Highlights of the trip for me were the Tonnerre, Pissarde, Berger and despite a few problems – the Trou Qui Souffle – Saint de Glace trip. Pete Pollard and Nige Strong got to the bottom of the Berger and Pete came out saying that it was the best caving trip that he's done so I suppose that speaks for itself.

A very successful trip all round!



Nige Strong relaxing in the Vercors. Photo by Pete Pollard.



Pete Pollard on the Grenoble via ferrata
Photo by Nige Strong.



Nige Strong on the Grenoble via ferrata
Photo by Pete Pollard.