

**People Present:** Neil Brammer, Brian Cullen, Danial Jackson & Alex Ritchie

**Weather:** Ranging from 32C and brilliant sunshine – 21C overcast with one or two small thunderstorms

**Trips:** Pene Blanque – Scouting to the wire traverse. All present, trip length 7 – 8 hours.

PDG – Rigging. Brian & Dan rigging, me and Neil portering 4 hours.

PDG – Scouting, photos and dropping wet suits. All present, trip length 5 – 6 hours.

**Trou Mile to Pene Blanque – Big through trip. All present, trip length 14+ hours.**

PDG – De-rigging. Brian & Neil, trip length 2 - 3 hours (We carried rope to Gouffre des Pyrenois)

Pene Blanque to Gouffre des Pyrenois – Exchange trip 3 hours. Neil and Brian rigging, me and Dan de-rigging + *About 10,000 blood sucking flies that joined us in the cave!*

I could write a long and boring document about all of the above trips, but I thought it would be best to concentrate on the big exhilarating through trip. I am not saying that the other trips were not exciting or interesting, but the through trip was why most of us came to France.

All the scouting and rigging trips were finally finished, we were all set for the big trip. We would enter at dawn and exit after dusk. After a false start the previous day due to an uncertain forecast I was keen and nervous to get this great trip on the way.

An early start and a hearty breakfast saw us setting off at 7am up the mountain to the Trou Mile entrance (Alt 1325m).



*The team, from left to right: Danial Jackson, Neil Brammer, Brian Cullen & Alex Ritchie (Me)*

We entered and were soon presented with a few climbs and short pitches that brought us down to the stream way. A passage that would take us the next two hours to traverse. The stream was a long and twisting meander on a steep slope. Constrictions often forced us out of the water for a few feet before widening passage allowed us to drop back down again. Various short drops also blocked our way all of which required careful climbing, quite tiring stuff already. Towards the end, the passage thankfully took on larger dimensions that we had come to expect from our previous trips to this cave. It was at this point a pitch with in-situ gear loomed into view, which we descended with ease.



The passageway now became a muddy affair which signalled it was time for us to leave the stream as it shortly would sump. We would rejoin it later. We had now dropped 235 meters since we began. The way on now was a muddy slot that looked like it belonged more in an Derbyshire cave than a massive French system!



After the hole a muddy tube led us up by a slippery slope which was quickly followed by a long, broken and a rather awkward climb up a slippery rift taking us up 20 meters or so in total.

After a left turn we entered passages of bigger dimensions "Grande salle du TDV". As always with caving the way on is not the big open passage to the left it was instead a floor level breezy slot at along the right hand wall. This opened out onto a fantastic pitch "Puits Danielle" 25m?.

A few more pitches followed all rather spectacular including a 28 meter pitch that caused some confusion as it looked a lot shorter than it was. After a bit of





miscommunication between me and Brain we found we were both standing on separate ledges part way down the pitch. You see I had abbed down to hear what Brain was shouting about, to find he could not reach the floor due to not giving him self enough rope and was stranded on a ledge below me! After relaying messages to those above we got it all sorted and carried on to the next pitch which was dry and 60m deep, the biggest pitch we would be descending on the pull through. Thankfully there was a big ledge that broke this up otherwise our 60m pull through ropes would not have reached the bottom, unless tied together.



*Half way down the 60. "Are we sure the rope is long enough this time?"*

Another pitch followed and we have now descended a total of 378 meters but the way on was once again up and not down. We climbed up where the water tumbled down a 10 meter pitch known as "Marie Casteret". We entered the grand passages of PDG akin to the large tunnels found in caves such as Ogof Dreanen.



Travelling through these was easy, except for route finding. But this did not last as the floor dropped away down deep holes to the stream way far far below. At one point this was quite dramatic, the only way cross was a very exposed in-situ traverse line that skirted this big, deep monster.



*Lean on me if you are feeling blue...*

We were now finally in familiar territory at the fantastic chamber “Elisabeth Casteret”. This chamber was the size of a football stadium. The floor once again dropped away into blackness and beyond, the far wall was covered in thick brown calcite as if a raging torrent was frozen in time that dropped into the hole. We felt like we were in a man made cathedral, dedicated to the under-god. The pictures below do not do this place justice.





*The calcite falls. See the boulder on the left that is about a person's height*



*Looking across the chamber, the calcite of the previous picture is on the left out of shot.*



We traversed along more large passages that were big enough to easily fit an Airbus a380 and leave space for several double deckers to boot, until we reached a hole in the floor “The funnel” at the bottom of which our wetsuits lay. We had strategically placed them here on an earlier trip into PDG. This was about the half way point of the trip. Our thoughts turned to the perils ahead, deep water, large pitches and more traverses awaited us as we donned our gear.

We dropped down through a maze that resembled Swiss cheese before entering the water. Waist deep, not so bad. Downstream about half an hour of slippery and wet going saw us to a pitch where the water and floor dropped away. Again the way was not to follow the water but instead follow a traverse into dry passage. This passage dropped us down several short pitches and climbs, bypassing a wet 60m pitch.

We rejoined the stream and quickly realised why the wetsuits were needed the water here was deep, and in several places was more than chest deep. To make matters worse the floor was covered in moon milk meaning that the many cascades we had to negotiate were slippery and dangerous, so much so that my feet did fail me at one point though I quickly righted myself and landed on a ledge no worse for wear.

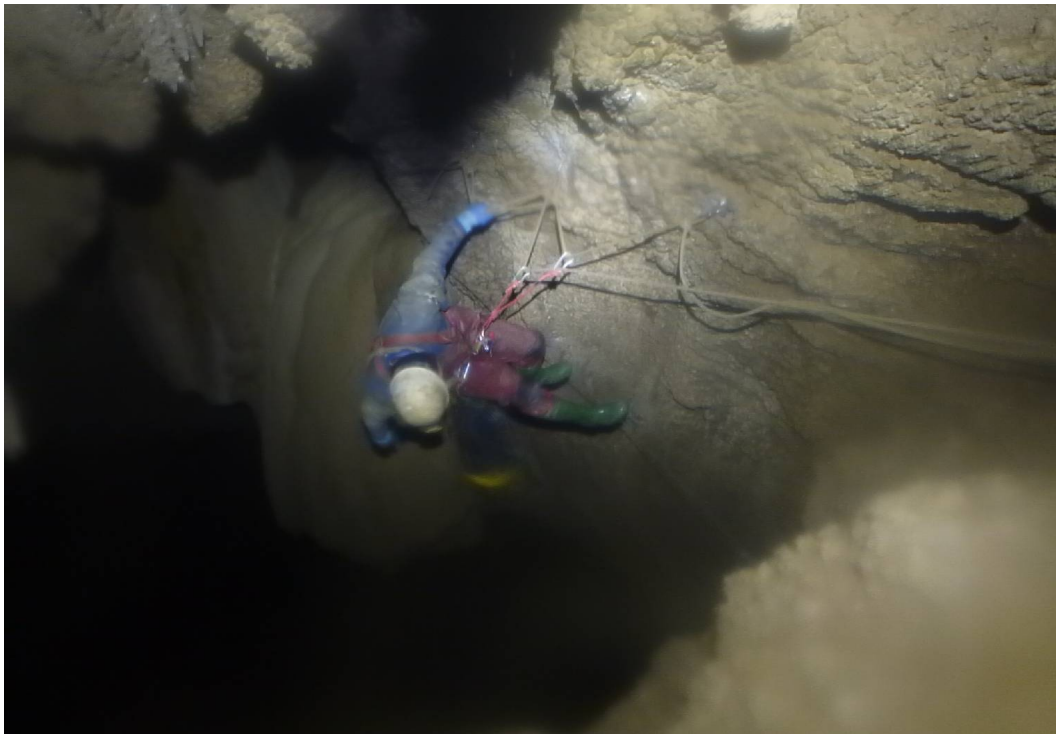


After lots more clambering and wading the floor once more dropped away. This was the first of several more large pitches that dropped us down ever deeper. Each pitch required the use of exposed traverses on in-situ ropes to get to the ring hanger where we could rig and descend from. Many of these traverses lacked foot holds so smearing and simply holding onto the rope was the order of the day.

With the low water conditions this extra traversing seemed pointless, one wonders how badly this place can flood if the rope needs to be descended so far away from the waterfalls.



Eventually after more pitches than we expected we spotted the wire traverse or as I called it the “The traverse of death” that we scouted to on our first day underground. At this point Dan sounded as if he was giving someone a baby as he loved it so much, Brian found his cow tail was now long enough after problems last time, Neil had done it all before and I was as nervous as a badger on bonfire night for some reason.



*"So where is the floor then?"*

The traverse starts off with a knotted rope climb out of the stream, you then follow a very frayed rope and wire above the stream until you come to a corner. At the corner is a 4ft gap that needs traversed with no wire to help you. The stream at this point is now 15 meters below you. With a bit of effort you can just about bridge the gap. Beyond this is a small alcove that provides shelter from the vast blackness below, before a steep climb lands directly on the steel traverse line about 30 meters above the floor. I found you just had to clip in to the rope half way down the climb and just hope your feet land on the thin strip of bendy metal. A miss and you would fall onto your cows tails with the wire between your legs!

The actual wire traverse was not that bad once you are on it, but the last manoeuvre to get round the corner required you to step away from the safety of the line onto well nothing. There is no choice but to hang by your cows tails and then pull yourself around the corner, by now however this was a manoeuvre we were familiar with.

We were now as deep as we would go more than 600 meters down from Trou Mile. Just two hundred meters of ascent would see us in daylight I mean moonlight as a gruelling 3 hours of uphill caving, climbing, clambering, prussicing, traversing and even a bit of crawling still lay ahead.

We decided to take a quick break before we started on this familiar route. The journey from there was slow. Still





there were some more nice big passages at which to gaze at while catching your breath.



*Fantastic formations just before going up the letter box pitches.*

The punishing trip was near over. Near the exit I lost sight of the others but assumed they were not far ahead, my memory of the mazy passages proving flawless even in my tired state.

I exited the cave into a warm night air at an altitude of 950m. It must have taken me 5 minutes to realise Neil was not there, he was ahead of me so should have already exited. Brian had to confirm several times that I was not joking when I said Neil should have exited first. Thankfully before any of us got back up the entrance climb and into the cave Neil appeared. He had taken a wrong turn without realising and then waited for me in that passage, until he realised he was in the wrong place as I of course did not turn up.

All that was left was a 40 minute trudge back to the car, that was worse than anything in the cave. The walk was a 200 meter scree ascent straight up the mountain side, before dropping back down more gently for 300m. It was like completing a marathon only to find you had a 20 mile bike ride to get home.

We arrived back at the cars well past 11pm after starting out at 7:20am. We had completed a full 14 hours+ underground with an hour and a half of mainly uphill walking to boot. Suffice to say we were knackered but pleased with our selves for completing this grand trip.