

# Slovenia

**16<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> May 2009**

**People present – Chris Scaife and Mike Sweet**

**Weather: Warm and sunny all week**

I remember when I first started caving, seeing photographs of people on boats in huge river passages, gigantic formations and bizarre underground creatures and thinking how much fun it all looked. I waited a long time for my trip to Slovenia, but I'm glad I got there in the end. As there were only 2 of us, we decided not to take SRT gear, as we couldn't really have taken much away with us, and except for the really massive pitches (which Slovenia certainly has – Vrtoglavica is currently the world's deepest shaft at 603m), it seemed that the most interesting caves were accessible without ropes. Anyway, there's plenty of SRT in Yorkshire.

Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> May

We flew with Easyjet from Newcastle to Stansted, then to Ljubljana. We had hired a car for the week and I got to experience driving on the wrong side of the road for the first ever time. This was probably the scariest part of the week for me. The enthusiastic Slovenian drivers are not the most welcoming to incompetent boobs unsure of the speed limit and accidentally punching the door every time they go to change gear, so it was a steep learning curve. After stalling about 13 or 14 times and driving part of the journey on the pavement, we eventually arrived at the cavers' Mecca of Speleocamp, where we had booked an apartment.

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> May – Planinska Jama and Rakov Skocjan

Our first cave was Planinska Jama, which is only a mile or so from the Speleocamp. All trips in this cave must be with a guide. This was an incredible cave. Starting at the downstream end, the first 1km is a walk through a huge passageway, alongside the river. At the confluence of the 2 rivers, we headed right down the Pivka branch. There then follows 1.6km of river to be tackled by boat. This is a great way to get through a cave.



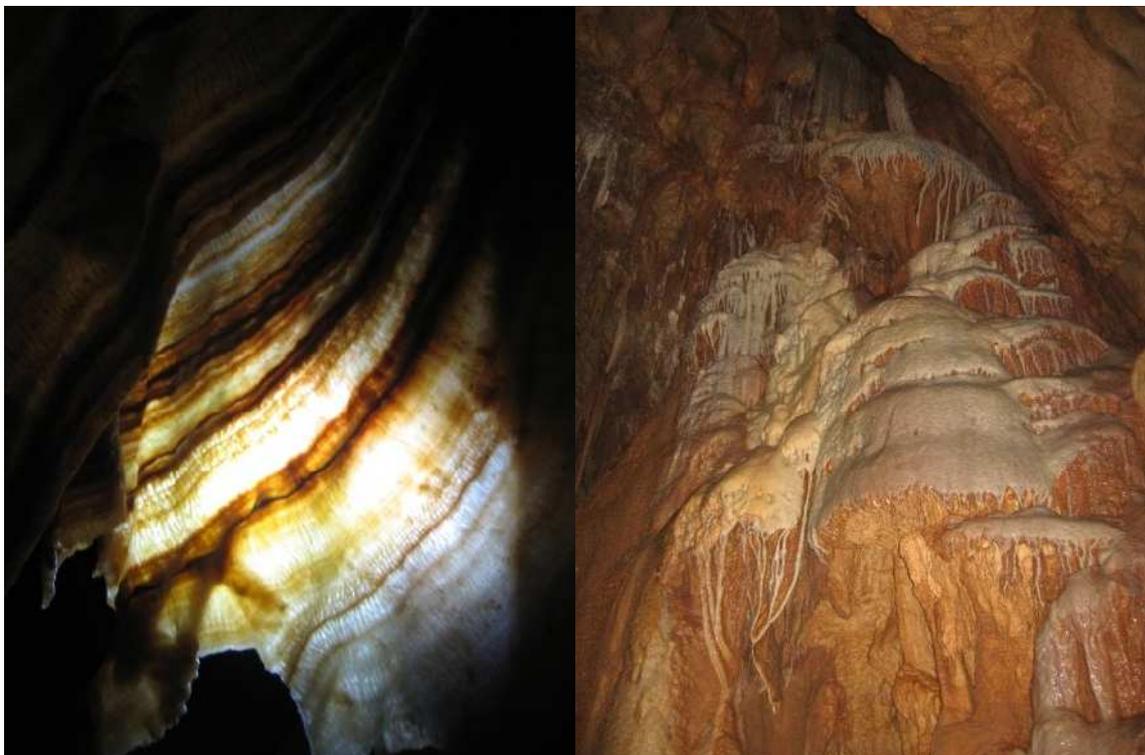
Throughout this journey, everywhere we looked, we saw an amphibian known as *Proteus anguinus*, or, as the Slovenians call it, 'Human fish'. These animals are white, with tiny legs, and about 30cm long. In this cave we saw hundreds; in one 5-minute spell, Mike counted 30.

When we reached the end of the river, we entered a part of the cave appropriately known as Paradiz. This part was again easy, mostly walking, with a few low bits and scrambles.





In this section there were excellent flowstones and gour pools, as well as some enormous curtains.



That afternoon we went for a walk in Rakov Skocjan. This is an area known for its natural rock bridges. We had a little wander into the wide entrance to Tkalca Jama while we were there too.



Monday 18<sup>th</sup> May – Postojnska Jama and Krizna Jama

In the morning, we went to Postojnska Jama, which is one of the most popular show caves in the world. This was the first time I had been to a show cave since I started caving, but the lure of a train ride through a cave was just too strong and we had to do it. The train is faster than I would have liked, but goes past some outstanding formations, and finishes in an absolutely enormous chamber, from where the guide took us for a walk around. I think this cave probably has the biggest array of decorations I have ever seen.



On Monday afternoon, we went to Krizna Jama, another guided trip, described in the cave guide to Slovenia as one that must be done. This was a truly spectacular cave with formations at least as good as those in Postonjska Jama, plus we had the serenity of having the cave to ourselves. The cave is known for its series of lakes, separated by calcite barriers. We travelled by boat as far as the 13<sup>th</sup> lake. A section known as Kalvarija is particularly well decorated and we got out of the boats here for a very enjoyable walkabout.



Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> May – Lake Bled and Slap Savica

Even God takes rest days and, while he had the decency to wait until the 7<sup>th</sup> day, we decided in an undignified manner to stay above ground on only the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of the trip. We drove to the famous Lake Bled in the morning and walked around the lake as well as rowing across to the island like the gay couple most people seemed to think we were. There were some colossal catfish in this lake. In the afternoon we went to Slap Savica, which is in a book called 1001 Natural Wonders of the World. It's certainly a mighty waterfall but compared to the dramatic caves to which we had become accustomed, it was nothing special and we spent the rest of the day in tears.

Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> May – Skocjanske Jama and Croatia

Skocjanske Jama was our second show cave, but another that really had to be done. Described in the Underground Atlas as the most impressive cave of all, this is a gargantuan river canyon, well over 100m high and several thousand metres long. The tourist trail is cut into the rock halfway up the wall and a well known feature of the cave is a bridge crossing the canyon 45m above the river. Inside the cave we saw large colonies of Lesser Horseshoe bats and Alpine Swifts. The cave opens out into an amazing doline, with limestone walls 165m high all around.



After this cave we nipped across the border into Croatia to find a beach and some coffee and treats. Poor old Mike stood on a sea urchin and I accidentally wandered onto a nudist beach.

Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> May – Cave walk

The cave walk is a signposted walk just outside Laze, the village in which we were staying. It heads through mixed woodland and takes in several caves, most of which require SRT gear. As we didn't have any, we could only do 2 caves – Vranja Jama and Skednena Jama.

The walk itself was very nice, with impressive woodland. We saw several roe deer and quite a lot of scorpions. Vranja Jama is entered through a large doline and has such a high entrance that clouds gather inside the cave. A short walk straight down the slope led to a small pool with a healthy

population of Proteus. Wandering around in this cave revealed some good formations, and a short through trip can be made, by climbing a fixed ladder up into daylight.



Skednena Jama was a very simple walk through cave, with lots of animals to be seen, such as bats, beetles, spiders and crickets.

Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> May

Our last full day was really quite a lazy affair. We went for a short walk in the continually impressive and heavily forested Slovenian countryside and tasted some wine. In the early evening we thought we'd go for a short walk into Laze to see if the pub was open. It was, and we ended up staying there for the next few hours. At closing time, one of the exceptionally drunk locals said he was going to an open air rock gig and we should come with him, so we foolishly got in his car and he seemed to drive forever and ever. When we finally got there, we found out he was really quite stingy and wouldn't pay the few euros to actually get in, but was instead happy to stay right out in the distance drinking with his friends, who I for some reason thought it would be funny to start rugby tackling repeatedly. Mike showed no such disrespect and saved his shameful display for the endless vomiting out of the car window on the long journey home. Our erstwhile Slovenian friend seemed to show us less fondness by this stage and pretty much threw us out of the car when he returned to Laze. That'll learn us.

Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> May

We spent most of the final morning playing shit head and trying not to be sick. We then ate all that remained of our food and it was not until about the 5<sup>th</sup> slice of courgette I ate that I noticed an unwelcome bitter taste, which was to cause mild disruptions to future events, not to be discussed here. Our flight and train journey were sadly uneventful and before too long we were back at home. This was a great holiday. We did no difficult caving but the caves we were in were fantastic. In Slovenian caves I have seen the best formations, the most impressive passages, the most imposing entrances and an abundance of wildlife that occurs nowhere else.