

Cupcake to Big Meanie – Not a piece of cake.

People present: Pete, Dan J, Not Scaif Chris & Me (Alex)

An exchange trip was the plan with two down big Meanie and two down Cupcake exiting vice-versa. Strangely despite knowing what it was like I volunteered to go down cupcake removing the option of an easy exit out of Notts 2 as we would have to de-rig the rope in Deaths head.

Only me and Pete knew the route, well bits of it, so I took Dan in via Cupcake while he took our new member Chriss (yes another Chriss!) down big Meanie.

On a trip 3 months ago we had pre-rigged bits of Cupcake and were told by Dave our ropes were still in place. With only the entrance to rig me and Dan quickly started along the journey. Cupcake starts off nice and easy and is well decorated despite there being lots of mud. This easy caving lulled Dan into thinking it was going to be an easy trip and it was, well for the first 30 minutes.



Progress was made by stooping crawling and lots of up and down via short pitches. The crawling was made interesting as at first it was past very delicate formations, great care was required. One slightly awkward pitch head being the only obstacle, its a pity this side is so easy to access I can see the formations being damaged, though all the thick squalid mud would put most off. We reached the Slither Aven pitch (16m). This was the point where me and Pete had to turn back at the bottom due to there being no rope leading upwards.

At the bottom the real fun of cupcake begins. It starts off as slippery rifts forcing you up frictionless chimney climbs, some of which were quite tight, before eventually depositing you in a large chamber. At the end of the chamber two short pitches take you up, the bottom of which we rigged

from the other side last time. Easy crawling at first degenerates into squeezes, sharp rock and muddy floor. Nearly all of this passage is crawling height the only relief being a climb and a short bit of stooping. After at least a good half hour of this we finally reached the pitches down to Notts 2. (Count Lazlo Stroganoff's aven). See the report <http://www.brcc.org.uk/reports/pdf-north/notts2Cupcake.pdf> for more info about this passage

To say these pitches are loose is like saying the sun is really hot. You don't even have to touch the rock for it to fall away and clatter and bang below you in the mist of shouts of Below! Thankfully there was no one below, and thankfully the stuff Dan knocked down on me, missed. I stopped shouting rope free and made my way to the bottom before I let Dan come down.

We stopped for a quick break here. At this point we had been going 2 and a half hours according to my watch. I would have expected to see everyone here if all had gone well by this point as we had taken a while negotiating what I thought was the hardest part of the trip. With no sign on them we pressed on into the Lost Johns connection.

This consisted of yet more crawling and then clambering up narrow climbs all the time being bashed and bruised by the jagged rocks that made up the floor. Our already bruised limbs were protesting from the punishing bouldery scaffolded crawls. Finally near the end we met the others and were told a few things, such as the duck's air space, which route to take through the dig and an apology for the rigging. Which puzzled me slightly.

We negotiated these extra obstacles (Pete and Chris) and made our way onwards. It had taken us at least another 20 minutes to progress this far in the dig, just imagine doing all that and then digging for 5 hours!

The calcite squeezes were next, as we did not know what to expect we had left our SRT kits on. That turned out to be a mistake as these were not only tight but vertical as well as lacking in holds, meaning that a great effort was required to pass these three buggers. It certainly would have been far easier without SRT kits! We entered larger passage and after a scramble down between boulders we reached the Lost John's upper stream way.

From here it was pretty easy going walking passage led to a pitch down into Lyle caverns and after a climb a mile of stream way was ours to walk. It was great relief to walk after all that crawling we had done up to this point, even if some of that walk was neck deep in water with at one point only 6 inches of air space. It had rained recently.

Resembling drowned or at least half drowned rats we exited the stream by a short 3m pitch and de-rigged it as it was our rope. We then headed along another easy passage to another short pitch. This led up to a boulder slope which gave way to an impressive shored shaft right in floor of the Death-head main chamber. The shaft was rigged though I free climbed most of it.

We climbed the 20m pitch up to the passage linking Big Meanie. The journey out from here to the pitch up Deaths-head was largely uneventful. Dan struggled a little in the squeeze that exits the crawls but I found it easier than the calcite squeezes, however that smugness would soon be wiped from my face.

I volunteered to take two bags of rope up the pitch, stuffing some in my personal bag leaving Dan an empty bag to de-rig with. I passed the first re-belay and shouted rope free only to be shortly greeted by a knot in the middle of the rope and what a knot it was! From where the first rope entered the knot to where the top rope existed must have been at least a 2 foot gap. It was so long, I could not get my hand jammer high enough, to pass the knot, so the proper way of doing it was out.

I had no choice but to swing across to a narrower part of the rift and climb past the knot on the rock. Unfortunately the said rock was not too stable and a chunk of it came off the wall in my hand. Thankfully the lump crumbled into small bits so Dan was more showered than bashed. The warning I shouted also enabled him to dodge most of it so the bits pelted his legs and not his head. Seeing he was okay I climbed a few feet more and was now high enough to clip into the higher bit of rope.

I reached the squeeze at the top quite tired from the days caving and bag hauling, I remember it not being that bad last time so I went at it without thinking, as it should be easy. Before I knew it I was squeezing up the rift facing the wrong way (away from the anchor) with no room to turn around. There was nothing for it I would have to force my self through facing this way despite the rope twisting my chest jammer sideways into the rock, turning it into a ship's anchor. A struggle ensued.

At one point during between me and the rock the struggle Dan thought I was dying when I roared breathless with great effort unable to communicate. Heave after heave I scraped upwards in an attempt to break through, forcing my chest jammer almost through the rock or it through me, which ever would break first.

Finally I came through and me and the two bags of rope rested precariously at the top. I admired the single anchor rigging while panting like a mad dog on steroids. Eventually I got enough breath to shout rope free to relieved Dan below.

With a combination of my help and facing the right way Dan made it through the squeeze with a lot less panting than I did. A hint for anyone no matter how small you think you are (I am skinny) you need to face the anchor on tight pitch heads, thinking "small" does not always work lol.

Pete and Chriss exited Notts2 instead of cupcake, though they did pop in Cupcake to see it from the other side.

An entertaining trip with variety with I think 17 pitches, it was let down by the monotonous crawls. Not the hardest trip I have ever done by a long shot but certainly it would be worth NTFH status.