



THE HOLE NINE YARDS

– Dr. Grant Gartrell

The grandkids were the official reason for the trip. In these days of global families for some strange reason their engineer dad can earn better money and do more interesting work living in Swindon, England than Sydney, Australia. At least it's on the same planet, just, and so, because they grow up so fast we thought that we had better get ourselves over there and see them all before he decides to shift the family to Mars.

Because it's such a long way to go to see the grandchildren, and because she's not that keen on the colour grey, my wife Merry doesn't like Swindon all that much. She thinks it's a bit of a hole. That's what gave us the idea of having a look at a few other holes on the way. While I will travel 20 km out of my way for a good bakery and 1000 km for a good cave, I had to compromise by including a few castles and some roman ruins into the itinerary as well. I like seeing them as well, but Merry knows that if I had to choose between seeing a cave or a cathedral I would try to plan my itinerary around one of the many hundreds of cathedral caves that must exist around the world.

We touched down in Rome and set up base camp in our little hotel, conveniently located close to a tube station. With cheap tickets and tube trains only minutes apart we popped up all over Rome and walked for miles. A great way to see a great city, and it was almost with reluctance that I walked to the Termini railway station on our last day there to pick up a hire car. Talk about leaping in at the deep end! After hanging about for an

hour waiting for a car that hadn't been returned, the manager finally got a lad to drive me miles across the city to a depot where they found me a lovely little black Alfa Romeo six speed diesel and pointed me out the gate. I have no idea how I managed to drive this back to our hotel up a succession of twisty little one way streets interspersed with giant roundabouts designed by Rafferty, but Rome is a city of miracles, so eventually we found ourselves and our luggage all together heading north along a motorway.



Gypsum flowers from Casteret's collection

Before too long we made a right turn. The plan was to drive towards Ancona on the east coast, and check out the Grotte di Frasassi on the way, and then cut back and head a bit further north. We were doing fine for a while, but the skies got blacker and the roads got twistier. When it finally became clear in the driving rain that we would most likely arrive at the cave some time after the last tour for the day had left, I shocked Merry and made the supreme sacrifice, for a limestone head, and turned left at Foligno instead. It was the right

decision. If you have not already done so you should check out the virtual cave tours available on the Frasassi Cave website. We could not have done this place justice in the time available and had better allow a bit longer when we next get the chance for a visit.

After a quick spin through Perugia we headed for Florence for the night. Not a bad city, Florence. Getting a bit old, though. After you've checked out the gold shops on the Ponte Vecchio and a bunch of other things we don't have in Mount Compass, it is obligatory, I was told, to visit a market, especially one that sells Italian leather. 'I'll just have a look along here and meet you up at the other end in half an hour', I said. A big mistake. I turned up at what I thought was the appointed place at the appointed time only to find that the market continued on around a slight bend in the road and ran for about another 500 metres, as well as heading off down numerous side streets as far as the eye could see, all crammed with people.

I really started to think there at one stage I might never see Merry again, but she's a smart girl, and I was so pleased to see her when she homed in unerringly on the credit card in my wallet that I really didn't mind heading out of town with a bundle of nice Italian leather under my arm. From Florence we headed rapidly west towards the coast, but when we got as far as Lucca, the steering wheel started to wriggle in my hands, and somehow we found ourselves driving up a valley to Galliciano and then up a pretty mountain goat track to the Grotta di Vento. You don't need an Italian dictionary to work out that means 'Wind Cave'. We pulled in to the car park right on 4pm to be told that if we hurried we might just get on the end of the English language tour that was then departing, so that's what we did.



Fido in the Grotte de Dargilan

Well, it wasn't strictly Pommy English that we heard. Instead, our delightful guide Monica engaged us all, Aussies, Germans and other nationalities as well, with a spirited explanation of the sights we were being shown in broad lilting Scottish. She explained later that although her father was Italian and she was as much at home hosting tours in Italian, her mother was Scottish, and she spent the first eight years of her life being raised in Glasgow.

Aven d'Orgnac section graphic



It wasn't the largest cave we visited, and it certainly wasn't the smallest, but it was well decorated, very interesting, good exercise, and quite breezy. The strong airflows in the cave were a consequence of multiple entrances at different heights up a mountainside, and this pretty much characterized the cave, with steeply plunging snow-melt water coming down the mountain taking the easy way down through the limestone instead of over it.



Wedding cake column in Grotte de Dargilan

After the first hour of the tour, some of the party, including Merry, returned to the surface, while I joined the remainder and headed on for the extended tour which involved a steep descent down many steps into a large chamber through a section of the cave that was once used as a sanatorium (in which sick people filled their lungs with pure, cold, air and either got better or died!!) and eventually to a stream sump. At several places in this cave we passed climbing ropes and electron ladders hanging out of some pretty lofty avens, and Monica explained that not only were cavers active in other areas of the system, but that some of these climbing aids were used on adventure caving tours.

Looking up the Padirac Gouffre



We pushed on through to the coast and drove in to Marina di Massa close to dusk, pretty much on the other side of the limestone mountain range we had been inspecting on the inside a few hours previously. We woke the next morning to find that I could hardly walk after the steps of the previous day. A walk up the jetty over a flat calm azure sea helped get a few of the knots out of my calf muscles and then it was back in the car. We set off west past mile after mile of great quarries and stone masonry establishments. We didn't have time to explore, but Carrara marble is famous the world over, and now at least we've seen where it comes from. La Spezia and Genoa are great and historic seaports, but they all look more or less the same from a motorway when you are trying to clock up the miles. I've never seen so many tunnels.

We were in and out of tunnels every few minutes, and it can get a bit wearing after a while. The traffic and in particular the big trucks don't muck around on that road. They are in a hurry to get to wherever they are going, and if you are smart it pays to match speed with them. The cops at home would have a pink fit, but the carabinieri seem to prefer that you just keep out of trouble and get on with it. We tried to have a quick look at Monaco, but there was a Grand Prix in full swing, so after getting stuck in a traffic jam halfway down a steep coastal road for an hour, we managed to pull a quick u-turn and get away, heading on further into France instead and diving inland in search of some slightly quieter roads.

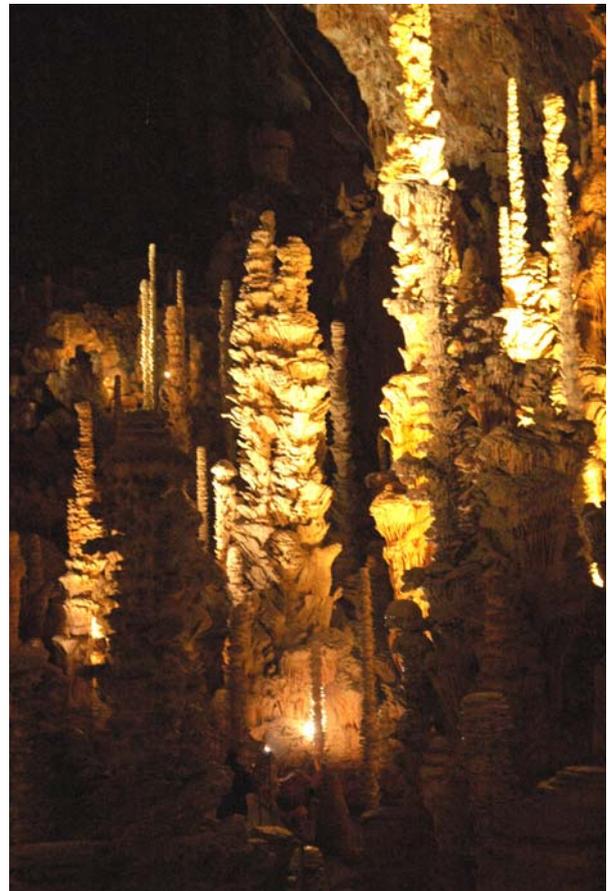


Museum entry Fontaine de Vaucluse

It is great having a car until you get to a city, when parking can be a real pain, so we tended to avoid cities. Better local knowledge would have helped. We drove into Aix-en-Provence and what

little of it we could see looked nice, but we couldn't ditch the car. We drove around again, and again. Just as we were about to give up, we saw a small sign pointing down a hole in the ground, and plunged in to find a large modern underground car park going down for several stories under the city. Quelle surprise! Once we were free to stroll and explore it turned out to be a very pleasant place. Belle France!

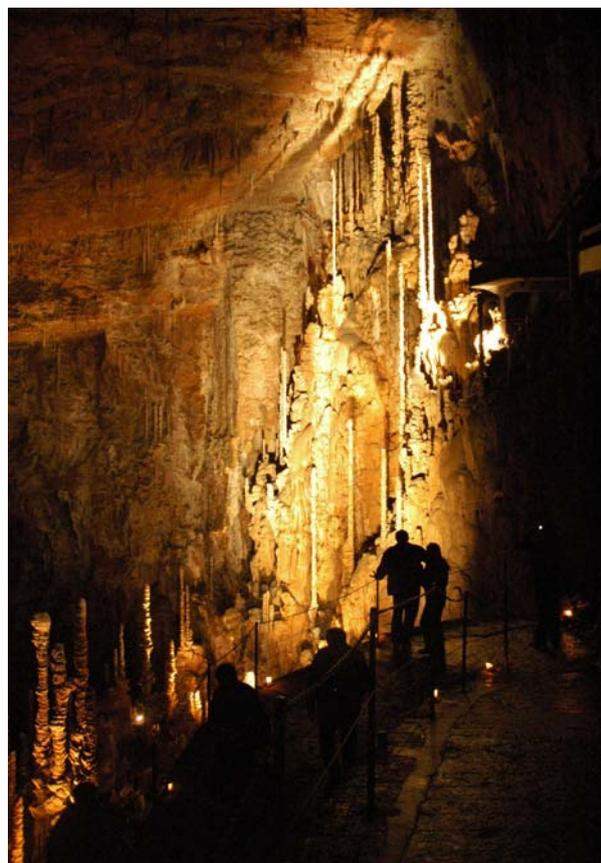
After being raised like many baby cavers on a diet of Casteret books, I had always wanted to visit the Fontaine de Vaucluse, and so we found ourselves looking for a parking spot in one of the world's larger car parks on the bank of the River Sorgue and then hiking upstream through increasingly dense knots of people until we ended up in an entire village dedicated to selling stuff to tourists that they didn't really need. I somehow had a vision of the two of us wandering up to the resurgence on our own and looking at it for a while. You probably couldn't even do that in the Flinders Ranges these days, but we shared our Vaucluse experience with an everchanging crowd of more than a thousand people.



Palm Trees in Aven Armand

Even when the river flow is relatively low it is still a very impressive resurgence. Holiest of holies, however was the Casteret Museum, including what is billed as Norbert Casteret's complete collection of over 400 crystals and other cave decorations collected in over 50 years of underground exploration. Times have changed, and luckily there are a few speleothems left in French caves even today, but it wasn't only the caves that Casteret left a lasting impression on, and there is no way I could have gone past the entrance of that museum without stepping inside.

From this point on, difficult though it may be to believe, I am continuing this report in abbreviated form. We had a wonderful time, but I can't possibly give a sip by sip and chomp by chomp report of all the cups of hot chocolate and croissants, not to mention other beverages and repasts, that sustained us admirably throughout France. Nor am I going to make odious comparisons between the caves we visited. All were interesting and worth visiting. Some were exceptionally impressive. Merry fairly quickly got to the stage where although she didn't mind walking through yet another cavern, she was about to scream if she heard one more time that stalactites come from the ceiling and all that jazz, and it didn't even help that we were told in French, because after the first hundred times she could understand that little portion of the French language quite well. One of the hazards of being my partner, I guess. I, on the other hand, was able to switch part of my brain off, and just tune in to the delivery, or else slip quietly to the back of the party and surreptitiously take photos knowing that our illustrious editor was demanding photographic evidence to back up the printed superlatives that he knew I would pour forth.



Long Mites in Aven Armand

Back to the journey, and the next stop. A short skip from the Fontaine de Vaucluse we called in to see the Grotte de Thouzon, just before they shut for lunch. Much of France, except for the restaurants, shuts for lunch, and it's quite a long lunch. It's a feature of the country that most Australians can relate to very quickly even if they no longer practice it at home. They used to say that if you wanted to invade Australia, you should plan it for Saturday afternoon when most of the Army was down at the oval watching the footy.

Shawls in Aven Armand



That probably explains why the French have never invaded us. They would have better things to do on a Saturday afternoon, even if it was just sleeping off a nice lunch. Of all the caves we saw in France, the Grotte de Thouzon was the most similar in feel to Naracoorte, in scale, style of decoration (lots of straws) and even in the relaxed and comfortable feel of a tour party size small enough for us all to chat with our guides.

Next stop was the Gorges De L'Ardeche, where once again we found ourselves spinning through in minutes places we could have easily stayed happily for weeks. It was school holidays and about one car in four carried canoes on roof racks. Life can be tough. Anyway, the Aven d'Orgnac called. Good carpark. Great infrastructure. Incredible cave. First discovered apparently by Robert de Joly, another famous father of modern French speleology, large parties of visitors these days descend a long gentle flight of stairs in a man-made tunnel. We entered a huge chamber, full of towering stalagmites commonly referred to as 'palm-trees', apparently formed by drips splashing after falling a long way from the ceiling.

High above us was a small roof window, the original entrance to the cave, with a stuffed speleo perpetually climbing. It must have been an incredible experience for de Joly and his friends. I got my money's worth even doing it the easy way. Our very large party slowly wended its way down through this huge chamber, eventually leaving it behind and weaving through so much decoration it was almost like eating too much ice cream. Finally we reached a large balcony overlooking a drop-off where we were entertained by a son et

lumiere finale on a majestic scale before all piling in to a couple of lifts and being whizzed back to the real world above, where we spent another educative hour checking out some excellent displays in the adjacent Regional Museum of Prehistory.

Back to the car and another relatively short drive found us at the Grotte de la Cocaliere where we strolled at a leisurely pace through beautifully sculpted gallery after gallery along a riverbed. I didn't know at the time that it was reputed to be France's longest cave system at 48km so far, but it didn't surprise me on account of the airflows and its look of not being in a hurry to stop in any particular direction. We popped out of a second entrance and caught a small train back to the main visitor area in the late afternoon sun, once again quite content that we had seen something very special. We never booked our accommodation ahead because we didn't know where we would be ending up each night. On this particular night we almost ended up sleeping in the car, but eventually once again fell on our feet and got last minute directions to a large rambling, very comfortable villa/motel run by nice people.



Aven d'Orgnac Palm Trees

The next morning we drove through Meyrueis to the Aven Armand on the north side of the Gorges de la Jonte. This huge hole, like the Aven d'Orgnac originally accessed through a roof window 50m above is now easily entered by a funicular railway steeply pitching down a tunnel decline leading to a landing high on one wall of the single great chamber. This chamber has so many limestone palm trees growing in it, it is surprising that room has been found to map out a pathway through them, but eventually it's back to the station and up to the surface, where we head for the opposite side of the Gorges and the Grotte de Dargilan.

I could have spent an hour or two at this vantage point just admiring the beautiful limestone gorge with a highway running alongside the river way below and large black holes visible in the opposite wall. I first visited France some years ago and got a taste for limestone gorges back then. Much of particularly south eastern France appears to consist of large limestone plateaus intersected here and there by deep meandering gorges. One needs to be a bit careful moving around the plateaus because of the occasional unexpected and often very deep hole, while the gorges are simply gorgeous.

Decoration in the Grotte de Lacave



One night on that previous visit, after our journey south had been interrupted by an unexpected collision with a happy Frenchman called Henri who shouldn't really have been driving after an office party, we ended up in a strange restaurant where we found that the French really like their dogs.

Some of them like their dogs so much they take them to restaurants, not in quite the same way as some Chinese do. Imagine that you are settling down for a quiet, perhaps even romantic, meal and the dog at the next table doesn't hit it off with the dog at the other next table. It is really not easy to keep the romantic mood going in the middle of even a candle-lit dogfight.

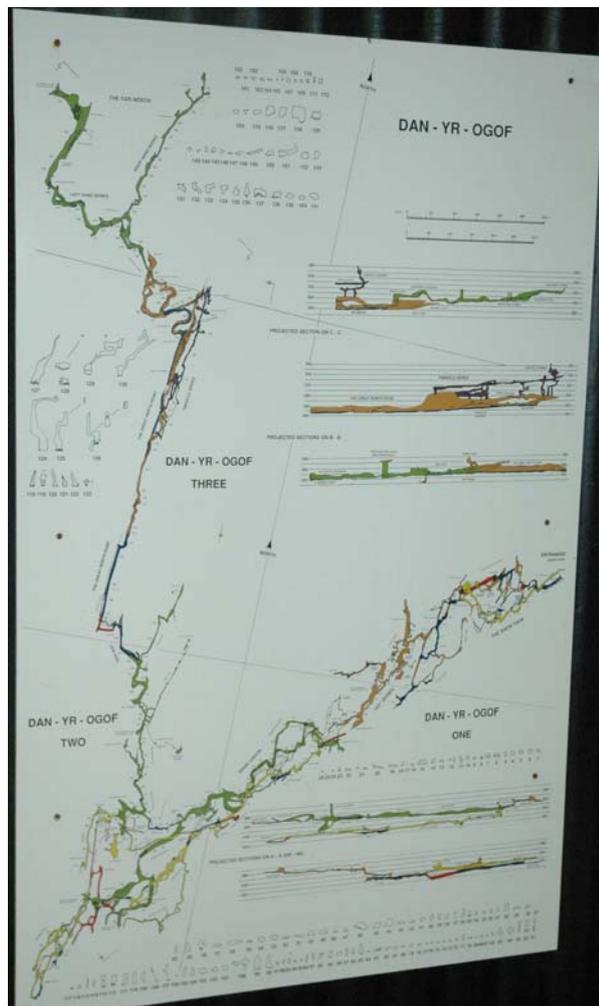
Anyway, back to the Grotte de Dargilan. The tour was departing, so I surrendered my ticket and headed in to what looked like a well decorated modestly roomy chamber. I can't remember the cost of a ticket, and never did find out how much it cost to bring Fido, but there he was. A well-behaved hound, he didn't cock his leg on even one stalagmite, I am pleased to say, but I'm glad I wasn't in there in the middle of a dog-fight.

Just when I thought that the Grotte was just a nice cave, we ducked down a flight of stairs and pushed ever deeper through lofty vaults away from the gorge wall, finally terminating our tour in a particularly impressive chamber with a singular giant 'wedding cake', and discreetly tucked behind the wedding cake a plain locked door beyond which, by all accounts there is much more of the same. Well worth a visit.

Back to the surface, and off for the night to Millau. Millau has recently become famous for its new viaduct, an engineering masterpiece. While the town carries on much as it always has, down at the bottom of a broad valley, these days the A-75 motorway no longer winds down one side of the valley and then back up the other, but instead runs smooth and level from one side to the other suspended from a string of huge but elegant concrete pylons 270m above the River Tarn.

From Millau we headed up through Rodez, Decazeville and Figeac to the nice little town of Gramat, in the heart of the Causse de Gramat. This is a region of Jurassic limestone containing an undoubted French classic, the Gouffre de Padirac. Although I had been there previously, there is no way known that I could pass by without another visit. I can understand why it is the most visited cave in France. Its record for most visitors in a single year stands at 460,000 in 1991, but I reckon that they could still pack a few more in.

What sets this cave apart for visitors is a leisurely boat cruise along 500m of underground watercourse to reach the spectacular Grand Dome. We only get to see a small fraction of the 40km total surveyed passage length of this system, but it is nevertheless an unforgettable tour. Even though we passed a dozen or more parties on our own cruise, there were at least several dozen more aluminium boats in reserve back at the landing area for the busy periods.



Dan-Yr-Ogof Map

Decoration Protection Dan-Yr-Ogof Style



Then on past the quaint and ancient cliff-side town of Rocamadour to the small and aptly named town of Lacave in the Lot valley. All aboard an underground electric train through a cut tunnel for an interesting walk through a series of galleries and past several lakes. Known as the Grottes de Lacave, this cave was accidentally intersected in 1902 while a tunnel was being pushed through from cliffs at the side of the river valley to provide easy access to a more distant known cave with an 85m shaft entrance, the Igue de Saint-Sol. For me the highlight of this tour was a 2000 sq metre section of the cave spectacularly illuminated with black light (soft ultra-violet) resulting in myriad crystalline formations phosphorescing in otherwise total darkness.



Above – Down to the Fontaine
Below - The pathway to the Fontaine de Vaucluse



From here we drove up the A-20 through Brive-La-Gaillarde and Limoges (our suitcases were already too full to load up with porcelain) past Chateauroux to the pretty little historic town of Loches, a great stepping off point for the famous chateaux of the Loire Valley and a very interesting place in its own right.

The Fontaine de Vaucluse on a quiet day



I was quite prepared at last to have a day above ground when we set off for the Loire Valley, and indeed I was feeling quite virtuous as we inspected Catherine de Medici's boudoir and many other fine features of the Chenonceau Chateau before moving on to admire the elegant formal gardens for which Villandry is noted. Alas, just down the road from Villandry, what did we come across, quite by accident, but the Grottes Petrifiantes de Savonnières.

I wondered where the white limestone evident in the Chateaux came from. Apparently some of it was quarried from caves such as this. Apart from some rather strange looking stone animals lurking in the middle distance in a number of the scenes, the highlight of this cave was undoubtedly large quantities of small cast or otherwise manufactured objects arranged under copious 'petrifying waterfalls' and being turned into relatively durable stone items in a surprisingly short time for sale back outside the entrance in the souvenir shop. Regrettably, my suitcase was already full to the gunwhales...

Surely that was the end of the caves, but still no! A few miles away we located the Chateau Ussé, better known as the inspiration for Sleeping Beauty's castle, and sure enough, in the limestone cliffs behind the chateau were old wine cellars enlarged out of small natural caves. There had to be a better cave somewhere, my radar was telling me, and this could not be it. Eventually I found it down in the dungeons under the castle, unfortunately behind a locked grille. My small torch revealed an inviting tunnel heading off into the hillside. I realised then I had seen so many fine caves over the last couple of weeks that I was having withdrawal symptoms.

A week zooming all over (or should I say under) Paris on the wonderfully efficient Metro wasn't quite the same, and catching the Eurostar under the channel to London was so effortless it felt as though we were experiencing an amazing engineering experience without even experiencing it. When you strap into a jumbo jet you feel the power of the engines on takeoff and when you look out the window the ground looks to be a long way down, and even if you've done it dozens of times you cannot help being amazed that what you are sitting in actually flies, but going under the channel all you do is sit in your armchair and read a few pages of the newspaper. By comparison, traveling on the underground in

London is much more exciting. It wasn't a bad service when it was working, but it was best summed up by the man in the ticket office at Bayswater when on our last day in London we had to get ourselves to Edgware to collect a pre-booked rental car. Edgware station was the last station on the Edgware line, so we naively asked on a Saturday morning for two tickets to Edgware. 'The train's not running to Edgware today,' he told us, 'You'll have to go somewhere else!'

We finally collected the car and headed to Swindon. Merry is always right, by definition, but this time she was also spot on. Swindon is a bit of a hole, and because it is not made out of limestone it didn't do much for me either, although it wasn't all bad and it did have a bit of culture. We took young Sam to see Fungus the Bogeyman at the Wyvern Theatre. It was a great show for adults as well as kids and it broke us up when he told us afterwards that it had been the best day in his life. Another redeeming feature of Swindon is that it is within striking distance of several notable patches of limestone, so after settling Merry down with the grandkids and doing a couple more family things, I left her to it and headed west down the M4.



The Entrance to Kent's Cavern

A couple of hours driving in atrocious weather found me in South Wales heading north from Swansea towards Dan-Yr-Ogof in the Brecon Beacons National Park. Once I was off the M4, there was not much traffic apparent. I left the severe weather behind in the south and was surprised to arrive at the caves and see several large car parks packed almost to capacity, although it is a normal state of affairs for the UK and particularly in school holidays. I headed straight for the ticket office, to find the shrubbery infested with dinosaurs of all shapes and sizes. Luckily they were made of concrete or some similar substance or had already eaten enough little children, and so I felt relatively safe. There were so many of them lurking in the bushes gazing at you with their beady chook like eyes it was a bit spooky even heading for the loo, so I was pleased when I finally got underground.. There were three separate show caves on display, all with a continuous stream of visitors sauntering through on self guided tours. The system probably worked well for most visitors and it suited me on that occasion as well, although I would have liked to find someone knowledgeable

to talk to. One young chap with an official looking shirt did his best, but my bad French beats my Welsh any day.

The Cathedral Showcave includes a chamber known as the Dome of St Pauls, in which two separate waterfalls plunge into a lake. It's a nice chamber in its own right, but apparently it needs coloured lights that would be more appropriate in the Devil's playground than a cathedral. Perhaps I'm old-fashioned.

The main Dan-Yr-Ogof Showcave had a small amount of decoration close to the pathway. I think I caught a faint glimpse of some through the truly industrial strength heavy duty screens that were presumably deemed to be a necessary precaution when self-guided is synonymous with unsupervised. By the time I completed my tours and visited the shop the rough weather had caught up with me, the power was out, and the staff were valiantly attempting to cope without lights or cash registers or EFTPOS.



The Wookey Hole Hall of Mirrors

I left them to it and headed out of this foreign land and back to England, making a bee-line for the Mendips and the lovely little Cathedral City of Wells in Somerset, home of Bat Products and one of the nicest cathedrals I have ever seen. Bat Products is a caver's shop run by a dedicated caver, Tony Jarratt. Tony won't mind me saying that he is not a high-powered salesman.

I felt immediately at home in his shop because it reminds me of something crossed between my study and my shed, neither of which are particularly tidy, but in which I know the location of every object, all of which are supremely important and irreplaceable. I was directed to Tony by a mutual old caving friend, Steve Milner. Funnily enough, I miraculously found a little room in my suitcase for a few books and bits and pieces from Tony's shop, and now my study looks even more like it.

As a dedicated cave digger myself, one of my regrets in life will always be that I was unable to take up Tony's kind invitation to join him and a bunch of other Mendip cave diggers for a pub meal the following Wednesday evening. Apparently a large number of these strange creatures assemble weekly in the one venue and stoke up for an hour or two before breaking up into a bunch of separate teams and heading down various nearby holes in search of even more

underground miles. It's the thought that counts, and I'll dedicate the next stick in one of my own digs to Tony and his merry mates. I wonder how many Wednesday night diggers I could entice down Sellicks Hill after a session in the Victory Hotel. I doubt that we'd fill a telephone box.



Tony Jarratt in his Bat Products Shop in Wells

In the bright light of day, I found myself heading for Wookey Hole and Cheddar Gorge. Just like Dan-Yr-Ogof, Wookey Hole became first known long ago as an extensive and challenging cavers' cave that gave up its secrets grudgingly, but it has long since become big business, with a capital 'B'. It too has been overrun by even more garish coloured lights and dinosaurs, but you can escape from them in the hall of mirrors, which is just next to the penny arcade, which is just next to....you get the idea.

Wookey Hole is a particularly interesting cave in that early exploration progressed in sections as several siphons were progressively passed, and although the tour now bypasses some of these siphons the easy way, they are a significant feature of the tour, which consequently manages to convey some of the sense of achievement that would have accompanied that early exploration.

And just as the Brecon Beacons National Park in which Dan-Yr-Ogof is located is pretty much a living community in a district with an all encompassing management strategy to protect various aspects of its heritage, so Wookey Hole manages to provide in addition to its historic and geomorphological attractions, an ideal environment for multitudinous cabinets for the slow maturation of traditional Wookey Hole Cheddar Cheese.



Cruising the Li River in Guilin

On the River Li, Guilin



From Wookey Hole I passed through the small hamlet of Priddy, home to a good cavers' pub or two, and other legendary caves such as Swildon's Hole. A quiet lunch there gave me the strength I needed to survive Cheddar Gorge. I thought that Wookey Hole was commercial until I got to Cheddar Gorge, which even made the Fontaine de Vaucluse look deserted.

The simplest way to describe Cheddar Gorge, a modest limestone valley that is nevertheless reputed to be the deepest gorge in England, is simply to call it a traffic jam. I very quickly worked out that I needed to park about a mile or more away from the action and start walking. No sooner had I locked the car but a chap with a leather pouch turned up to sell me a parking ticket. What a slick operation! How much? I think he said 4 pounds for a day ticket. I only want to be here for two hours, friend, so how much for a two hour ticket? Sorry mate. We only have day tickets. Come in spinner! Anyway I paid up, and it was just as well, because it helped to soften me up for the cost of the cave tickets. But just for that, I am only going to tell you quite truthfully that the caves were sort of OK if you like a cross between a self guided tour and the ghost train, but that the really amazing thing was just how much money the town of Cheddar was extracting from visitors each day. I could live well off 1% of it for the rest of my life.

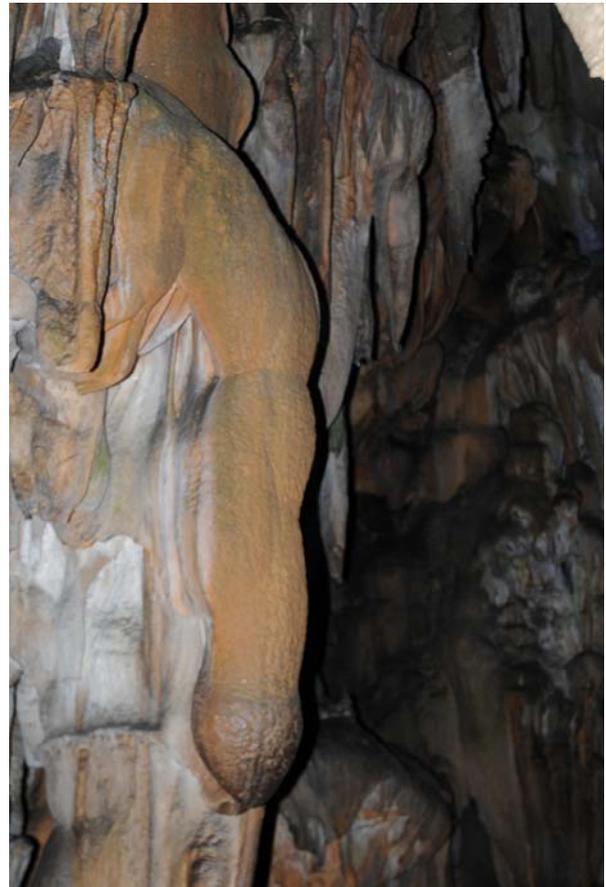


Blue Lagoon Reed Flute Cave Guilin with 5 people

Back to Swindon and more family stuff before we headed off for a brief but enjoyable visit to Cornwall, and on the way what turned out to be, for me at least, one of the highlights of the trip. Between Exeter and Bristol we decided to hug the

east coast and head for Torquay. Just north of Torquay is the small coastal suburb of Babbacombe, and right in the town and surrounded by houses is a cave perhaps unwittingly dedicated to our illustrious Journal Editor known as Kent's Cavern. It's not a bad little cave either, with labyrinthine and interestingly sculpted tunnels. It is also apparently one of England's more significant archaeological sites and this is the basis for an informative tour. To top it off, they run a nice café on site. A civilized establishment!

From Cornwall, we headed for Heathrow and home, but yet again the call of the limestone proved too strong, and we found ourselves halfway home, heading west from Hong Kong to Guilin in China so that we could max out on the surreal and seemingly endless vistas of tower karst that were revealed as we cruised along the Li River, every once in a while getting excited by beckoning dark cavities. Guilin City was a safe, friendly and very affordable city to visit, especially in comparison with the high cost of being an Australian in England, and we would happily plan a longer stay next time.



The formation they didn't highlight.
Reed Flute Cave, Guilin

We had booked our short China visit at the last minute as a mini-package tour. Normally we would avoid package tours because we prefer flexibility, but it all worked out exceptionally well. On this occasion Merry and I were the only members of our tour party, with the good fortune of an extremely competent guide, Mo, and her driver all to ourselves. Mo had lots of energy and lots of knowledge, a great attitude and excellent

English, and was an enthusiastic ambassador for her country.

Something Old and Something
New in Kent's Cavern



Our hotel on the edge of the river was a short walk from a small park containing the solitary Fubo Hill, a modest sized limestone tower with steps up the outside and caverns and shrines within. I slipped out early one morning to explore and followed a number of local people through the entry gate into the park. Although the locals seemed to have free access, my presence caused some excitement, and a lady fussed around and specially opened the ticket office up early so that I could be properly accredited to enter the compound also.

That was fine, and well worth the very modest entry fee to be able to go and watch a group of people enjoying early morning diving into the river from platforms near the Sword Testing Rock. I was able to converse with a man in his forties doing his morning push-ups hanging over the edge of a high observation deck, and a group of ladies who were climbing briskly to the top. I had more limited success chatting to the ticket lady while she was getting her paperwork in the right heaps, and yet I clearly made an impression, because when I returned for another visit much later in the day, I got a big smile and the royal treatment.

One afternoon it seemed as though most of the city turned out along the banks of the river to watch what were apparently only preliminary heats for dragon boat races. Preliminary they may have been, but with big drums and lots of fireworks even these heats were a wonderful spectacle. Too bad that we would not still be around for the finals. At night there were many family groups out for a stroll or visiting cafes and markets. One young man rode up to me on a bicycle, and because of my beard pointed at me and said 'Karl Marx', and asked me where I was from. 'Australia' was apparently the right answer, because he told me with some enthusiasm enough Australian statistics to demonstrate that he had done a good deal of reading on the subject. I got the impression that he had also read a fair bit about Karl Marx, and ranked him considerably ahead of George Bush. Merry's blunt and less flattering assessment of my popularity was that I reminded the Chinese of Buddha and that I should eat less.

After dark the city looked like a festival with bridges, pagodas and other features floodlit in pastel hues or outlined in red neon lights. Similar colour schemes are apparently also popular in the tourist caves, of which there are a number, although our short stay only gave us time to visit one. After the psychedelic purple lighting extravagance experienced in Mendips show caves, we were grateful for the generally more pastel hues we encountered in Guilin and we were still able to appreciate the immensity of scale and richness of decoration which have earned the Reed Flute Cave its must-see status. It must be quite difficult for the Chinese to adjust to the much more 'natural' hues that are the norm when they in turn visit our caves in Australia. I wonder what will be the trend in each of our countries over the next 50 years.

Finally, home at last, and back to the real world, or is it? It must be, because I can still hear the limestone calling, or perhaps it's the lawnmower.



Gorges de la Jonte, opposite Dargilan