

## 21 CAVING EXPEDITIONS

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Of the various possible types of expedition, cave exploration is one that requires specialist skills that can be developed only through experience. This experience should be gained by caving in the UK before launching an expedition overseas. It is therefore assumed, in the preparation of these notes, that at least some of the team members will have appropriate caving experience.

Other individuals who are not practised cavers should take all reasonable steps to perfect their basic skills before caving overseas. In most cases, membership of a caving club will provide the opportunity to gain a range of experiences, access to shared equipment and, often, a platform for expedition planning. Most experienced cavers interested in overseas activities will be members of both clubs and the British Cave Research Association (BCRA), the major body in Britain providing information and services for the overseas caver.

### OBJECTIVES

The best objective for most small caving expeditions would be a fairly remote limestone area not already explored by cavers, where a few caves or known entrances give a hint of discoveries yet to be made. Although such areas become fewer each year, there are still many opportunities within the scope of a small expedition. The increasing availability of cheap flights puts ever more remote countries within reach. Normally an expedition would be instigated in response to some research or the comments of an individual who has already visited the area. The BCRA Foreign Secretary is then an invaluable source of information about previous explorations.

A second type of objective may be the extension or further exploration of a known cave system. Many of the larger caves in France and Italy have not been visited enough to count as being fully explored, but it is often difficult to know which caves are suitable for an expedition, and previous knowledge and local contacts are thus essential.



Figure 21.1 *Stream Zero, part of the 2000 extensions to Cobweb Cave, Mulu*  
(© Andy Eavis)

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**There is no substitute for detailed preliminary research.**

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Once the area is selected, the expedition should aim to carry out appropriate underground and surface exploration, together with some scientific observation if possible. Biological collecting, geological mapping and water tracing are possibilities depending on the location and the skills of team members. In many developing countries local government agencies may be willing to collaborate to carry out basic research towards water supply or tourism developments. Such local links are important for continued good relations and also contribute to making the expedition more satisfying.

## EXPEDITION HANDBOOK

As a bare minimum, all discoveries must be surveyed. Make sure that the team can survey properly before leaving the UK – practise in a known cave where it is possible to compare your survey with the published version. Remember that the cave survey is the basic tool for all research and further exploration, so it must be accurate. If possible, get advice from an experienced expedition cave surveyor – essential to augment book learning in such a practical subject. Cavers are making increasing use of computers to record, plot and disseminate surveys and BCRA has a cave surveying special interest group to carry out research and provide advice on this issue.

For further ideas, and to make sure that your plans are realistic, go to the annual BCRA National Caving Conference (usually held in September; details are given on the BCRA website) to hear the lectures and check the displays. This will also give you the opportunity to network with other explorers. You should also read the reports of expeditions that appear in the UK caving press and foreign journals.

### PERMISSION

Be aware that in some countries specific permits are required to carry out a caving expedition. In most cases the permits are easily obtainable but without them you will be ejected by the police, or worse! If you intend to carry out scientific research, particularly biological collection, it may be necessary to obtain additional permits from the relevant host government agencies. Advice on such matters can be obtained from the BCRA Foreign Secretary.

Cavers are notoriously touchy about outsiders trespassing on “their patch” and you should make sure that no other group, British or overseas, is or has been working in the area that you intend to visit. If this is the case, it is essential that you liaise closely with them before setting out. Magazines, reports and the BCRA Foreign Secretary should be able to help clarify such information.

### EQUIPMENT

Your equipment will need to fit your objectives. Factors to be considered will include your transport/freight arrangements, likely depth of exploration, the type and amount of potential rope use, the surface and underground temperatures in your area, whether or not the caves are wet, rescue contingencies, etc.

Unlike British caves, large European caves may contain long lakes or canals, which may require specialist clothing or dinghies. In the latter case, a cheap beach-type dinghy will probably suffice but don't forget a repair kit and a long thin line to pull it back for the next person. Underground camping is normally only necessary on extended deep explorations or in very long cave systems, rarely on a small first-time expedition. However, if it's a likelihood, make sure that all your team members have

## CAVING EXPEDITIONS

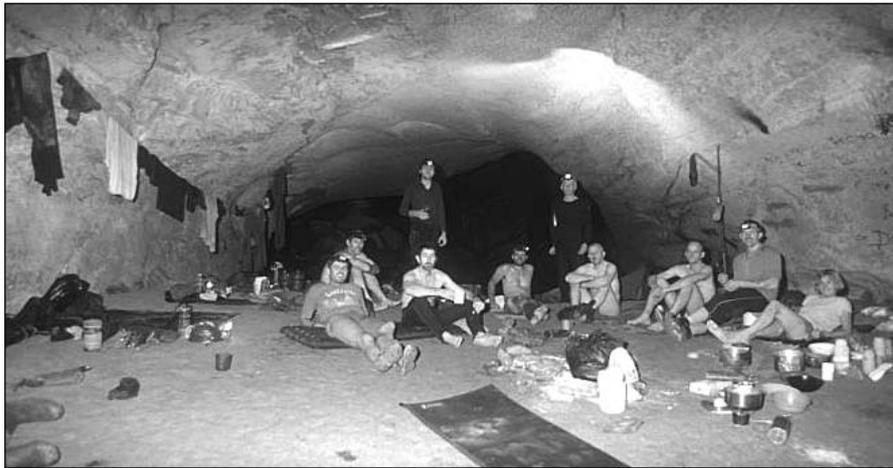


Figure 21.2 *Camp in Cobweb Cave, Mulu* (© Andy Eavis)

practised in a wet UK cave beforehand – so that they learn how to live and sleep in the most uncomfortable conditions!

Variations in temperature and water conditions in caves will determine your personal equipment needs. Alpine-style caving will require good thermal and waterproof protection and, if the cave contains long swimming sections, wetsuits may be necessary. In warmer climates and closer to sea level, wetsuits may not be required unless the trips underground are very long.

Once again, preliminary research is essential and nothing can beat the advice that you will get from other cavers who have visited your area or similar areas. Never hesitate to ask – most cavers are only too happy to talk for hours about their experiences and the advice that they give may make the difference between success and failure.

It is possible to hire specialist items of equipment for expedition use and advice on such matters can be obtained from BCRA.

## SAFETY

Cavers in the UK are cushioned both by the best cave rescue organisation in the world and by the relative proximity of our caves to easy means of transport. On an expedition you are much more on your own, so take care – a lot more care than you would normally. In some countries there will be no possibility of outside assistance and one broken leg in a small expedition team can require a monumental effort to evacuate the casualty from even quite a short cave: a relatively minor injury could easily prove fatal.

Your team members must be familiar with self-rescue techniques and systems to

## EXPEDITION HANDBOOK

rescue another person who is hanging injured on a rope. This is not a matter for book learning and must be learned through hands-on experience. There are a number of organisations and individuals now offering expert training in such techniques.

It is essential that the expedition is adequately equipped with medical supplies and first-aid skills. The medical kit should contain not only treatments for the normal range of disabling infections, such as diarrhoea, but also strong painkillers for use in the event of a major injury. One word of caution though – always check on the customs requirements for the import and possession of such drugs; failure to do so could result in arrest or imprisonment.

In many western European countries there are efficient cave rescue services, but they can take a long time to reach a remote area. Their services are not free, as in the UK, and you may get a massive bill for a rescue, particularly in France where helicopters are routinely used. Check to see whether any other expeditions are going to be working near you. If so, you may be able to make contingency plans for a rescue and share the costs of specialist items such as an underground stretcher.

Insurance against medical and rescue expenses is essential for any group leaving the UK. A number of brokers can negotiate appropriate insurance but the BCRA operates an expedition insurance scheme for cavers.

## FUNDING AND SPONSORSHIP

Besides the normal sources of finance that are available to all expeditions, grants are available specifically for caving expeditions. The Ghar Parau Foundation gives grants each year, with closing dates of 31 January and 31 August. The Foundation is linked to the BCRA and details of its grants are published in *Speleology* and on the BCRA website, together with other relevant sources of grants.

Commercial sponsorship represents an invaluable source of support for expeditions. However, caving expeditions lack the glamour of many competing activities and sponsorship is increasingly hard to obtain. Be clear about what you need and target your approaches accordingly. Be clear, also, about what you can offer in return (reports, photos, gear evaluations, etc.); sponsorship should be of mutual benefit and it is unlikely that you will be given something for nothing. Remember, if you promise something to a sponsor, make sure that you deliver or give a very good reason for not doing so. If you fail to deliver on your promise it will make it less likely that that organisation will sponsor any other caving trips in the future.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

### Further reading

The specialist magazines, such as *Speleology*, *Cave Science* and *Descent* are the best source of expedition

## CAVING EXPEDITIONS

reports and news. *Speleology* also reviews many significant independently produced expedition reports that should be available from the BCRA Library. The RGS–IBG Library, Map Room and Expedition Advisory Centre are also invaluable research facilities as are the unpublished notes of other expedition leaders – never hesitate to ask.

One significant publication is *Caving Expeditions*, published jointly by the RGS and the BCRA. It contains a series of detailed papers prepared by caving specialists on all aspects of expeditions from finance, through transport, science and photography to reports and medicine.

Pitkin, A. (2002) Caving expeditions. In: Warrell, D. and Anderson, S. (eds), *Expedition Medicine*, 2nd edn. London: Profile Books. Available from [www.rgs.org/eacpubs](http://www.rgs.org/eacpubs)

Willis, D. (1993) *Caving Expeditions*. Joint EAC/BCRA publication. Available from [www.rgs.org/eacpubs](http://www.rgs.org/eacpubs)

**Useful addresses**

British Cave Rescue Council. Tel: +44 1539 625412, email: [PeteAllwright@compuserve.com](mailto:PeteAllwright@compuserve.com), website: [www.caverescue.org.uk](http://www.caverescue.org.uk)

British Cave Research Association, c/o The Old Methodist Chapel, Great Hucklow, Buxton, Derbyshire SK17 8RG. Email: [enquiries@bcra.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@bcra.org.uk)

Current officers' addresses are at [www.bcra.org.uk](http://www.bcra.org.uk)

BCRA Library: Local Studies Library, County Office, Matlock, Derbyshire DE4 3AG. Tel. +44 1629 580000, ext 6580

BCRA Librarian. Email: [librarian@bcra.org.uk](mailto:librarian@bcra.org.uk)

BCRA Foreign Secretary. Email: [foreign-secretary@bcra.org.uk](mailto:foreign-secretary@bcra.org.uk)

BCRA Travel Insurance. Email: [travel-insurance@bcra.org.uk](mailto:travel-insurance@bcra.org.uk)

Cave Diving Group. Current officers' addresses are at [www.cavedivinggroup.org.uk/](http://www.cavedivinggroup.org.uk/)

Ghar Parau Foundation. Secretary. David Judson. Hurst Barn, Castlemorton, Malvern, Worcs WR13 6LS.

Tel/fax: +44 1684 311057, website: [www.bcra.org.uk](http://www.bcra.org.uk)

International Union of Speleology, UIS General Secretary, Dr Pavel Bosák, c/o Czech Speleological Society, Kalisnická 4–6, CZ-130 00 Praha 3, Czech Republic. Email: [bosak@gli.cas.cz](mailto:bosak@gli.cas.cz), website: <http://clik.to/speleo/>

National Caving Association. Current officers' addresses are at [www.nca.org.uk](http://www.nca.org.uk)

William Pengelly Cave Studies Trust. Website: [www.pengelly.org](http://www.pengelly.org)

Speleobooks, PO Box 10, Schoharie NY 12157-0010, USA. Email: [speleobooks@speleobooks.com](mailto:speleobooks@speleobooks.com), website: [www.speleobooks.com](http://www.speleobooks.com)

SpeleoLinks. Website: <http://clik.to/speleo/>

Spéléo-Secours Français (French cave rescue). Website: [www.speleo-secours-francais.com/](http://www.speleo-secours-francais.com/)

**Training organisations**

Dave Edwards & Associates, Buxton. Tel/fax: +44 1298 85375, email: [dave-edwards@lineone.net](mailto:dave-edwards@lineone.net), website: [www.dave-edwardsandassociates.net](http://www.dave-edwardsandassociates.net)

Farrworld, Crickhowell. Tel: +44 1873 811085, email: [martyn@farrworld.co.uk](mailto:martyn@farrworld.co.uk) website: [www.farrworld.co.uk](http://www.farrworld.co.uk)

Ingleborough Hall, Clapham. Tel: +44 1524 251265, email: [cave@ingleboro.co.uk](mailto:cave@ingleboro.co.uk), website: [www.ingleboro.co.uk](http://www.ingleboro.co.uk)

NCA Training Officer. The current address is at <http://www.nca.org.uk>

Andy Sparrow, Wells. Tel: +44 1934 741427, email: [andy@mendipnet.co.uk](mailto:andy@mendipnet.co.uk), website: [www.ascaveservices.demon.co.uk](http://www.ascaveservices.demon.co.uk)

SRT Indoor Practice Area: Inglesport, Ingleton. Tel: +44 1524 241146, email: [info@inglesport.co.uk](mailto:info@inglesport.co.uk), website: [www.inglesport.com](http://www.inglesport.com)

