



C.8 CAVING

Brian Needham *First draft 2006.*

Has there ever been a youth expedition overseas which had caving as its prime objective, or even as one of its aims? Caving is a very specialized activity, popular with a minority, and one which demands a high level of expertise before anyone should consider devoting an entire expedition to its pursuit.

Russell Gurnee (explorer, speleologist and author) writes: *Cave exploration presents problems which are unlike most expeditions, for the goal is sometimes undetermined. The explorer is continually faced with the unknown at each turn. There is no certain way he can predict a route; he must explore it. The mountain climber has the advantage of a clearly defined goal, namely the summit. It is true that he may not be able to achieve the summit by the route he has first chosen, but the summit is there for him to attain; the destination is clear. He can prepare his attack with the knowledge of obstacles quite clearly seen. The major part of his energies can be expended in reaching the top as gravity and mechanical techniques will help his return. The cave explorer must estimate half of his strength, for it is as difficult to return as it is to enter and in fact sometimes is more so should the entrance be made by means of a pit. There is no short cut out of a cave; one must retrace one's steps, climbing pout of a pit so easily descended, crossing an abyss so readily spanned earlier, and return to the starting point. No wonder the final aim of the fatigued caver becomes 'enough strength to reach the entrance'.*

Perhaps no wonder there have been so few (if any) youth overseas expeditions dedicated to speleology, as such, rather than scientific fieldwork (such as biology, zoology, geology) undertaken underground.

Russell Gurnee again: *Fundamentally, cave exploration is an individual study. It is not practical to provide a mass approach. There are mechanical aids which can be provided, but they usually are individual aids and extend the reach of only one person in his traverse through a cave. Each man must crawl, climb, wade and slither through the maze by himself, his companions able to provide only the back-up necessary incase of emergency. There is also the limitation of the route through a cave. The way to return is the way initially gone; there is rarely an alternative. Each caver must exert caution not only for himself but for the benefit of the entire party, as any injury which disables an individual can also cripple the entire team.*

It goes without saying that any leadership of a youth expedition exploring underground must be highly specialized, highly experienced, highly qualified, and highly skilled. The British Caving Association (see Links page on the YET website: www.theyet.org) has a training programme, and the Cave Instructor Certificate must be regarded as the minimum qualification level to take young people caving on an overseas expedition. The youth members themselves must be well-experienced; caving is not for all, and only devotees should consider joining a caving expedition. While many of the techniques used for caving are akin to mountaineering (ropework, belaying, abseiling, ascending), which means that experienced mountaineers can readily adapt to caving, these techniques must be practiced underground, in the dark, the cold and the wet. Once underwater diving becomes part of the programme, the danger element escalates, and probably should not be attempted by any youth expedition. In all likelihood, any youth expedition should restrict itself to known caves and known routes, not exploration of unknown areas, and use (in addition to UK leaders) local expert cave guides with their own national qualification. And whenever it rains, the expedition should resort to the mountain tops!

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