

## THE INSIDE OF TRIGLAV

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*August 1961*

After twelve months of planning and making a thousand feet of caving ladders, a party under the leadership of Clive Jones of the South Wales Caving Club got under way to find out something more of the caves and pot-holes of Yugoslavia.

We drove independently from the French Coast, through the Black Forest, into Austria, then for the sake of scenery over the Thurn Pass, Gross Glockner and finally the Werzen Pass into Yugoslavia. Five camps from Birmingham and nearly 1,000 miles away, we pulled into the lakeside tourist town of Bled. The scenic route had been chosen in vain as most days near the Alps were wet or else the high places were hidden in the clouds. Not until the last few miles did the spectacular great walls and towers of limestone show themselves through the mist as we passed to the north of Triglav, which at 9,400 ft. stood somewhere in the clouds. In the hope of seeing the top we stopped for a brew-up; the cloud was lifting but it still shrouded the Queen of the Julian Alps. As we had not come to climb but to cave, our Yugoslav caving colleagues Dr. Ivan Gams and Dr. Tarman had recently heard of a new deep pot-hole on the southern slopes, and at noon we were to meet them in Bled and drive within a short distance of this virgin pot-hole.

By mid-afternoon we were driving through the forest on the southern slopes of the Julian Alps. The weather was now clear and sunny and we were refreshed after swimming in the lovely warm lake at Bled. We parked our vehicles at a forester's house beside a barracks and sorted out the kit to take with us for the next three days. In the evening a long straggling line of tired British trudged onwards and upwards to Vodnikova Dom, a mountain hut. We took caving clothing and tackle with some 600 feet of ladder, 2,000 feet of rope, sleeping bags, three days' food and cooking gear. Our packs were pretty heavy; far too heavy. On and on went the path, up through the woods, above the tree line, and still on and up. The glowing sunset was brief but there was Ivan, another thousand feet above us. Now and again someone would sing a few lines but give up breathless. Packs and boots got heavier; a brilliant moon made the surrounding mountains shine so white that they seemed to dazzle. Each step became an effort, followed by another effort to straighten the leg for the next. A swear for those setting the pace—slow, but not half slow enough, and another swear at those lagging even further behind. Thoughts run on: Oh why in Hell do we do this? For fun? How much further is this damned Hut? We're just not in alpine training! Too true, we were well practised in ladder climbing and crawling but Big Hill climbing with packs equal to half our own weight was

something we had not bargained for. Better to try and encourage those behind: "We are over the worst: get a move on, have another rucksack if you can't keep your feet on the ground." "It's downhill when you get to the top," (but we were too tired to reason that out.) Then it *was* downhill, but muscles just ached in different places and packs jolted and rubbed in more places, and it was just as bad! Or was it? We weren't so breathless and we could grumble better. "On your feet, you, not stopping here all night to freeze to death—pick up his sack".

The path turned into moon shadow; then a light glimmered across the next scree slope. A mountain hut silhouetted itself against the sky, hands came and lifted my pack. "Dump it in a heap at this end of the room", someone said, "there's some tea coming". Just about exhausted, we had made it, and made short work too of the herbal tea. We felt better after some hot greasy soup, but then I went to bed, shivering cold, without drinking my beer.

*Rupa V Toscu (Approx. 6330 ft.) Friday August 25th 1961*

With us to show their recent discovery of this pot-hole on the mountain Toscu was a shepherd and his wife. A short traverse back over part of last night's path until we overlooked Velopolje followed by less than one hour's climbing took us to a slight trench over a fault or major joint line. Some mist and cloud still hid us from the surrounding peaks. There were sporadic patches of mountain fir some 3 ft. high, and on the almost bare patches of limestone were edelweiss in profusion. Here was the first "pot" we had come to explore. A large stone was dropped and 15 pairs of ears listened intently as it banged and crashed against the walls far below, then to boom and thunder more from further depths. A number of snake-like fir branches were tied together to make a secure belay for the ladder, and a rock belay for the man working the lifeline. The first descent was offered to Gams but he insisted that as guests the honour should be ours. I pretended I wasn't champing at the bit, but moments later I was on my way down the ladder which curved out of sight some 50 feet below. At 80 feet we found a scree-covered ledge, a fair stance and space to work the next pitch which carried on downwards with increasing width. A natural belay in the corner was brought into use and some loose stones were kicked down to prevent them being pulled loose when working the lifeline down the next pitch.

A second man next came down, with more ladder and a bag with pitons and a hammer. The belay in the corner was not in the best place as the ladder down the next pitch would have hung in the narrowest part and also where small stones dislodged by our feet were falling. A peg was driven home in a better place, but still the ladder lay over loose stones in spite of our gardening, so we joined the new ladders



on to the end of the ones we had descended and used the peg only to belay the second lifeline. I went down the next pitch which soon became vertical; 150 feet down I could not see the bottom. The pot widened and broadened during this pitch, and a small ledge nine inches wide made a convenient resting place. Small stones whizzed down from above, smashing against the walls; I expected one on my helmet any moment but was surprised when a small one hit my stomach. I descended another fifty feet, but for me after the gruelling portage of the day before a 200 feet pitch on lightweight tackle was enough. I came back up to the 9-inch ledge for a short rest, then up to join my second at the 80 foot stance. The third man came down the first pitch to the ledge, then I went up to the surface to describe the situation to Clive Jones whilst my place was taken by Gams.

The second man went down to about minus 280 feet but there was still no sign of the bottom or a ledge wide enough to break the pitch. Life lines had been knotted together for this descent, but after some manoeuvring his place was taken by Gams.

Gams is as much a demon on ladders as he is on a mountain, for he went down 380 feet. Shouting down this far from the first ledge had become impracticable due to the echoing of the voice in this otherwise dry and silent shaft. Whistle blasts only were intelligible down the second pitch although voices could be heard between the ledge and surface.

Up on the surface, soup and coffee had been brewed; it was after midday, and the biologists with Dr. Tarman had been catching shiny black salamanders that scampered amongst the alpine flowers around the entrance. A noise of crashing and rumbling far louder than our initial test came from below. The ladder jerked; something had "had" it. We shouted down anxiously. More stones crashed somewhere below; then, "We're OK. Gams is below—send down more help! More rope too," I wasn't the freshest but I was the nearest and that noise was pretty stimulating.

Down on the first ledge or what was now left of it, Phillips was holding a large block at the edge of the second pitch with Birchenough tying a rope around it. Gams yelled something from far below; we couldn't understand but at least he was still alive. He whistled for the line to be pulled up but we were all intent on belaying that block and with every movement we made a shower of small stones went over the edge to crash about Gams. The block was eventually tied back and two of us worked the lifeline. Gams climbed slowly but steadily up a pitch deeper than Gaping Ghyll main shaft. We kept a tight rope; Phillips the anchor man, belayed from the peg, was nearest to the edge and applied most of the tension. Next to his I drew the line from him keeping it away from the loose stones whilst Birchenough paid

the growing heap of rope on to a safer part of the floor. Gams arrived at the top of the pitch, carefully avoiding the poised block, and joined us on the rotten ledge, unhurt and grinning. He had been to the bottom but there was no way on. It would have been risky to deladder the pitch from beneath the poised block, so after untying it we let it thunder to the bottom. Better that it should smash the ladder than one of us. A descent of only a few feet enabled us to pull the ladder clear of obstructions and relay it to the others on the surface. The damage amounted to only one crushed rung. Soon the last of us surfaced, and once more with loads on our backs tottered down the scree slopes to the hut and another welcome brew of "chi".

#### *Triglav (Saturday August 26th)*

With no more than our pockets full and with anoraks tied around our waists we set off once again behind Gams. Uphill of course, but without the loads of the previous days our feet hardly seemed to touch the ground. Some two or three hours later we were puffing and blowing again as we passed a hut on the col and gazed upon the limestone all around us; sheer walls a thousand feet high and miles long, and dazzling white scree slopes nestling up to massive buttresses. Beyond the col a snow-field descended to become Triglav glacier, the only one in Yugoslavia. The morning sun was hot and the white limestone as dazzling as the ice. The ridge to Triglav's peaks rose sharply and steeply from the Col. As the exposure increased so the iron spikes and carved footholes of this "Tourist" route became more numerous. I decided I was a tourist and used them; the alternative warranted a rope. The fresh wind on the summit curtailed our sunbathing but not before we had all exclaimed that we had never seen so much limestone—as far as the eye could see it was all limestone.

We went down again to the col where we ate at the hut, then with a length of ladder and a rope we kicked our way across the snow-field and down the little glacier to a strand of rock bisecting it. Gams climbed down the bergschrund into a dark chamber, soon to be followed by us. After the bright sun on the ice outside we could see nothing in this gloom for some minutes. The steep ice floor would not yield to kicking footholds but nature had provided just enough. Across the chamber Gams crawled into a passage; unfortunately there was too much ice and the Triglav Ice Cave was still closed. A lucky Westminster party three years before had found it open, but descent to the bottom had been stopped by insufficient ladder.

#### *Mirror Cave.*

Almost beneath the hut on the col and at the top of the southern scree slope was another ice cave, though not one having a glacier



flowing into it. A small frozen lake inside a large chamber maintained its ice throughout the summer. We shuffled across the slippery wet surface of the ice into the darkness of the chamber beyond; the name of the cave was then apparent when we saw the entrance and first chamber mirrored at our feet. We explored a ledge opposite the entrance; above was a steeply inclined tube passage. Urash, a third Yugoslav, knocked in a peg for a running belay as he climbed up but we found no further passage.

We descended again to our base at Vodnikova Dom and packed up our sacks and frames ready to go back to the cars in the morning, but not before we had found an intriguing natural pit quite close to the path; at 20 feet down it was blocked with eternal ice. The recession of the glaciers is slower almost than the calculation of the hut bill for the party; "beds without" and "beds with" (I never found what with) 68 cups of "chi" and 115 pieces of "brod" were included in the charge.

*Sunday 27th August.*

Our loads were shared and packed more carefully. We covered most of the way back to the cars in the cool of the morning, but it became pretty hot through the forest. During the last three days we had got a great deal fitter. The hill climbing had caught us all unprepared but had welded us into a team where limitations and capabilities became known to each other and somehow opposites matched up quite naturally. We left the mountains for the caves of the Postojna Area and later in Slovenia a more difficult pot-hole proved to be relatively easy work.