

# DACHSTEIN 2002

**This Summer Eight Students from Southampton University went to Austria to take part in a five week caving expedition to explore the caves of the Dachstein plateau of Austria.**

Hoher Dachstein is a massive limestone mountain, which rises out of the ground around Hallstatt, South East of Salzburg. Traditionally there have been British Caving expeditions organised by the Bristol Exploration Club (BEC) going there for almost twenty years. In recent years however large number of cavers from different clubs all over the country have been taking part. SUCC were returning for their second year and the expedition promised to be extremely successful.

The expedition returned to its old home - the Weisberhaus, an Alpine hut complete with bar, restaurant and amazing views! At 1883m the walk from the valley was higher than Ben Nevis but far less sparse. After converting the old cable car shed into a store room/cook house and clearing out the wood shed for caving kit, we were all settled in.



The region is absolutely swarming with caves, many explored on previous expeditions but just as many completely untouched. Much of the time in the first two weeks was spent surface prospecting. This meant re-finding caves from previous years, finding and marking new caves and building up a map of the surface area. It was in our first week of prospecting that we found one of the success stories of the whole expedition. C55, a cave discovered several years ago but not explored was re-found and exploration began. It boasted a strong draft, which is always a good sign.

The caving was hard though and there was a trail of cavers returning with ripped oversuits. Due the tough conditions progress was slow and work began on several other caves in the mean time.

G7 - was explored to a depth of about 250m in 1998 but left with several unpushed leads. We returned this year and unfortunately connected these leads into the original end of the cave.

C18 - A small meandering cave, which produced several small pitches but unfortunately, became too tight after 70m.

Phat Shaft - A large shaft in the East side of Ochsenkgler, the summit behind the Weisberghaus. The cave was explored to a depth of about 90m but then became ice filled and too tight.

However amongst these disappointments we had many successes:

G25: In the same area as G7 this newly discovered cave was explored for about three weeks and was on going when we left.

Hidden Hole - In 1990 several members of NCC found a cave and explored it to a depth of 250m. The difficulty in locating it, gave it the name Hidden Hole and also meant that it stayed lost for ten years. This year we were armed with the map and notes of the original explorers and after a week's work we tracked down the entrance.

Gowling Hole - On the East side of Ochsenkgler, not far from Phat shaft we found a strongly drafting entrance blocked by a boulder. After doing a bit of boulder fettling we managed to clear a small entrance.



*Mike Alderton in G7*

After three weeks we were in the unusual position of being too successful. We had more on-going leads than we did cavers

and our kit was being very thinly spread over all the ongoing projects. The Caving trips were also becoming increasingly long and arduous. Ten hour plus caving trips were normal to reach the limit, get into new cave passage and survey it.

I remember doing my first trip in Hidden hole, a typical long and tiring Dachstein trip. Although the entrance itself was roomy enough, at the bottom of the first pitch was a series of S-bends. A tight meandering body shaped tube which ran on for about 10m. However the tight corners restricted all tall cavers because they couldn't get their knees round the bends. This meant that Hidden Hole was left to be done by the sub 6ft team. Two of the expedition members spent about a week caving every day, rigging the cave until they reached the 1990 limit of exploration. Then they dropped three more pitches and stopped in a small boulder floored chamber with two ways on.

With the Expedition leader I was the next one to be put on a Hidden Hole trip. Although I'd heard a lot about the S-bends I knew that if others bigger than me had been through then I'd have no trouble. In U.K. caving the kit carried is usually minimal. At the most it will be two tackle sacks for a big group or one light one between two people. In Austria one tackle sack each was considered light. As a pair between us we carried a drill, bolting hammer, rigging gear, lots of metalwork e.g) bolts, hangers and mallions. About 100m of rope, surveying equipment and lots of food to keep us going.

It took us about four and a half-hours to reach the limit of exploration. The cave was made up of lots of short pitches connected by meandering rift passage. At the bottom of the fourteenth pitch we entered brand new cave. To the left the water went down a short pot series and then disappeared into a crack where the bedding plane intersected the cave. However to the right there was a dry route where the water used to go which was now filled with mud. I lead the way; free climbing down slippery mud channels cut in the rock. In several places we put down ropes because getting down is always easier than getting back up. We pushed into several new chambers, found the main water flow again and even found

some very undeveloped formations. After seven hours underground we turned around in a small muddy chamber with an inlet on the right. The mud had caked our hands, SRT kits and anything we had tried to take out of the bags. However we still had to survey what we'd found. Joel described it as the most miserable conditions he'd ever had to survey in. I held the tape and Joel worked the instruments and for two hours we clambered tired and cold around the mud filled tunnels at the end of Hidden Hole.

After some much-needed marzipan (good source of sugar & energy) and a whole bag of peanuts (blame Joel) we headed out with scarcely lighter bags. It took us five hours to get out from there and the fourteen hour long trip was easily the longest I'd ever done.



*The View that greeted us every morning*

When we left Austria after five weeks C55 had been descended to about 350m and 1km of cave passage had been found. 75m depth was added to Hidden Hole and 100m of horizontal distance, taking it below 324m whilst Gowling also crossed the 300m mark.

The expedition was incredibly successful. Not just finding these caves but even the small finds, which closed down were all important. Plus we have now built up excellent surface maps of the areas, which will prove invaluable, when we return next year...!



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