

7<sup>th</sup> February '94

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Dear OUCC,

Firstly, I hope you are all well, not too many accountants I trust. Joan, I hope your new flat is going well; Chris, I'll try to move out properly on my return. Cheers to all who made the 'expedition' dinner an entertaining evening.

Well, what've I been doing the last two months? Visiting a country whose caves you can count on your fingers; well, you now need to use a few more of your fingers. This might not be the Picos or Mulu, (perhaps a Devon?), but the caving has been exciting.

This week, the project should have wound up its field work, most of our members having packed bags for home, but instead we've found ourselves with a whopper of a cave (by local standards) and needing to recruit a few new members

to be our survey sites. We also find ourselves with the logistical problem of having three campsites, an airstrip and a broken down land rover, all in the middle of nowhere.

Let's elaborate. Our newest cave is about as remote as you can get, exploration is real Indiana Jones stuff. It takes us a day to reach our main camp, at the long known Gcwikaba Cavern. There is a track for this part of the journey, however, it is merely a track, with deep pools (it's the wet season) and deep sand, and 4 wheel drive is essential. This camp is relatively luxurious, water is only 1 1/2 hours drive away, we have a large canvas shelter, and we have a fridge (for storage of essentials...

anti-venom, camera films, beer) From here, ... (a pause of a week while we survey, photo, explore etc)... it is a further day of driving to reach the Koanaka Hills, 3 mounds of dolomite standing proud of the desert sands, literally in the middle of nothing. The first and largest hill has yielded nothing, despite being 20 times bigger than the other two summed. The second has an impressive bone cave, full of

2 million year old fossils. The entrance was  
noted by a French archaeologist, but he  
never made it beyond the entrance chamber.  
We found a way down through the bottom  
of a boulder slope, (passing a few fresh  
leopard kills) into the true cave, one  
large low chamber (averaging  $70m \times 40m \times 2m$ )  
with little else but bats and bone breccia  
covering all walls and ceilings. However, the  
third cell is the most remarkable. It  
is the smallest ( $\sim 350m \times 150m$ ), yet contains  
within it the largest cave, over 1.5 km. It is  
made up of a series of parallel galleries that  
link to form large chambers, some of which  
have fallen in to give 40m high boulder  
ruckles that extend to the surface (giving the  
entrances). The caving is made more interesting  
by the large colonies of bats, the consequent  
organic floors, and the variety of life using  
entrances, (barn owls, snakes, occasional large predators).

Anyway, the best cave by far is the main  
cave we came to study and explore, Wo'-down.  
Although only a few hundred metres in length,  
it is unique amongst these caves as it was  
sealed to the outside world until its discovery.  
As a result it has had less of a sand infill,

leaving routes to deeper parts of the cave system open (dropping well below valley floor levels), and it hasn't been inhabited by bats, hence no corrosive guano, meaning formations are intact. And the formations, they are breathtaking. All the normal stalagmites, stalactites, columns, flowstones, cascades, straws, rimstones. Enough cave pearls to make your eyes water, wonderful sedimentary features for the specialist, (dunes, drip holes, etc.) And then there are the crystal growths; popcorn on the walls, huge selenite-quartz swords sticking out from walls, left behind when the dolomite dissolved, and delicate 'dinner plates' of quartz, like paper doilies, projecting out into passage ways. But best are the helictites, they get everywhere, on ceilings, walls, floors, other formations, each other... they seem to know no limit. In places they grow like lawns, unlike anything I've seen elsewhere. The cave is just serious soft porn to any cave.

Also, we have to keep the caves location secret for now; but it does have a very unobvious and outward entrance, I can say that much. And just in case anyone does get

that far, well we've put in a gate! - So  
we may be in the middle of the Kalihari,  
but we had good reasons. We need to  
keep bats out, (an unusual thing for cavers  
to do), and try to restore original atmospheric  
conditions to the cave. Even so, the gate has  
been over designed to be completely tamper  
proof to anyone but those who have keys,  
and positioned such that no brute force nor  
technological means would be immediately  
successful. Paranoid?... not vs.

Oh, I forgot to mention Wal-doums other feature,  
its high CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations at depth, (recorded  
levels so far as extreme as ~8-9% CO<sub>2</sub>, 9% O<sub>2</sub>  
... not very healthy. We have had mixed  
success penetrating this part of the cave, trying  
both standard scuba and rebreather apparatus. Bulk  
of equipment has been one problem, stopping us at  
a constriction. Another problem is the safety  
concerns of the back-up team, the cave has  
a habit of belching its foul air into some  
of the intermediate passages, stopping us  
from reaching our base, or forcing us to  
retreat fairly hastily. None the less, the  
pushing in this part of the cave, when conditions

allow, has been exhilarating.

Anyway, I'll wind up for now, (back to  
the bus this afternoon), SLG will see you all

in April

Good Spelunking.

Paul