

The South Wales Caving Club Expedition To The Franche Comte (The Jura and the Doubs)

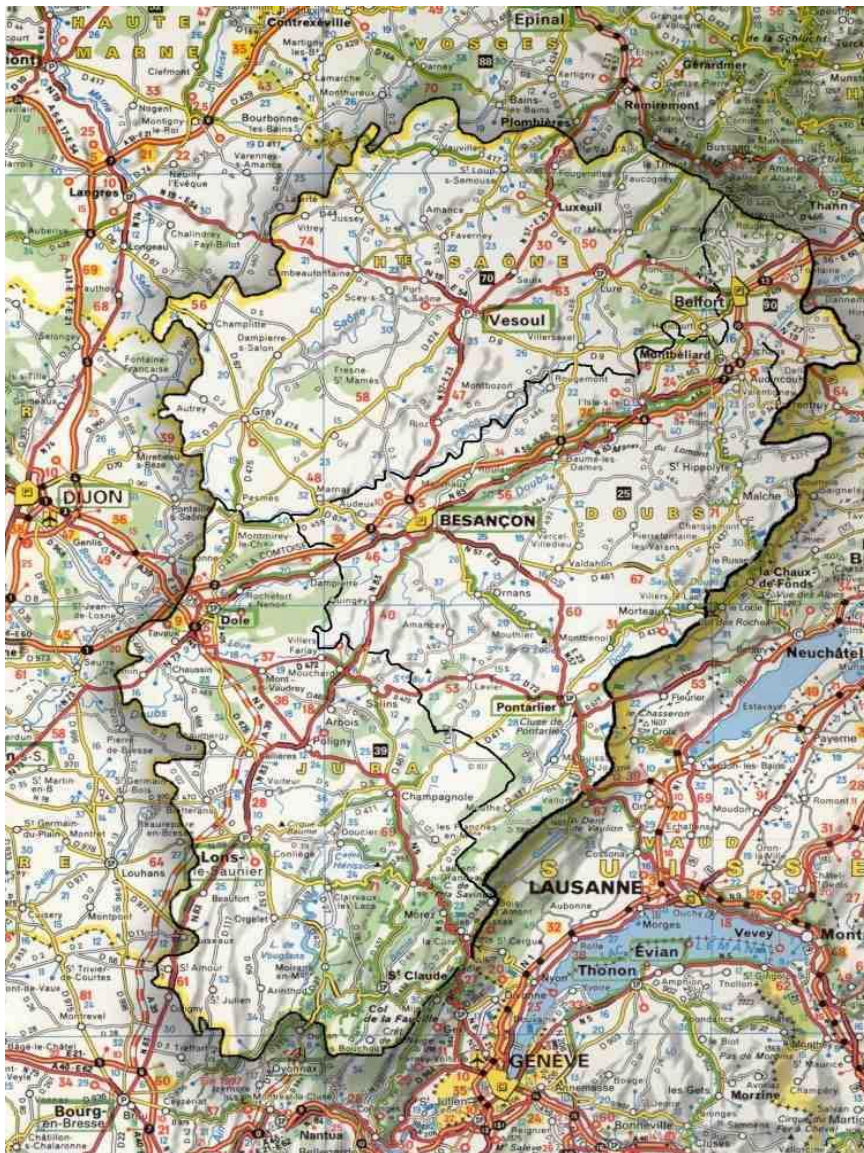
27th July - 10th August 2019

Dear South Wales Caving Club Member

This is the first circular for the SWCC expedition to the Jura in the summer of 2019. The trip is open to all SWCC members regardless of caving experience or ability.

Franche-Comté is the name given to the vast area of woodland which lies to the north of the French Alps in Eastern France, and stretches southward along the Swiss border for 250km, from Vosges to the Jura. The region is divided into four different départements, the Haute-Saône, Doubs, Jura and Territoire de Belfort, the first three of which all contain important cave systems. The Franche-Comte is brimming with sites of outstanding natural beauty, including Alpine meadows, lakes, cirques, waterfalls, thick forest and some of the most beautiful rivers in France. Glaciation, high rainfall and copious Spring snowmelt has encouraged plentiful erosion on the predominant Jurassic limestone landscape, resulting in a full range of karst features, including of course, several thousand cave systems.

Where is it?.....



As you can probably appreciate from the map extract, the area is quite a large one. It nestles up against the Franco Swiss border immediately east of Dijon. We will be based roughly in the middle in a picturesque little town called Ornans which is located on the D67 about 20km south of Besancon. The area is probably best reached using the Dover – Calais or Folkstone – Calais crossings. A route is available which cuts south east around Reims and Dijon which negates the need to get tangled up with Paris. An alternative more elongated route swings up into Belgium and down across Luxembourg to drop back into France at Nancy. The auto routes are all free of toll on this route but it does take a little longer.

A little about the local geology.....

The region can be divided into three major zones, the Mountains, the Plateau Ridges and the Lowlands. The mountains are located in the east and follow a NE-SW axis along the Swiss border. They are quite small mountains for the area, the highest peak being Cret de la Neige, at 1718m high. A few Alpine style shaft systems can be explored in this zone. Parallel with the mountains lies an extensive series of Plateau Ridges, which range in height from 900m to 400m, stepping down gradually from East to West. These gently undulating agricultural regions, are home to the majority of the caves (including most of the major systems), particularly around the spectacular river gorges separating the ridges. The final region, the lowlands, occupies the north of the region, but includes only a few notable caves, formed in isolated ridges. The waters drain North-West from the eastern mountains to the Saone valley. To get there they have to cross the plateau ridges, for which there are only two possible options, via Cluses (narrow gorges cutting through the ridges) or via caves, which is why the majority of cave systems are found within the Plateau Ridges region.

The whole region has been subject to quite severe folding and faulting, and this has had a powerful effect on cave development. Underground drainage is predominantly directed along the axis of the folds. Since the dip is generally shallow, underground streams can travel very large distances and the separation from sinks to resurgence can be considerable (*the longest positive trace is from Seignes de Passonfontaine to Source du Maine, a distance of 28km over a vertical range of nearly 500m*). However, the narrow widths of the synclinal folds acts as a limit on overall catchment areas and consequently many major systems consist of single streamways, albeit of great length. The resurgences are often large and impressive, but almost invariably flooded for a considerable distance. The feeders to these *Collecteurs* are predominantly vertical, simple shaft systems, of not very great depth (*commonly between 100m and 300m*). Most peter out in mud chokes and impenetrable cracks, but a few utilise tectonic fractures to connect directly into the *Collecteurs*. There are probably many more of these, hidden beneath a blanket of alluvium. A third type of cave passage is found in ancient, fossil remnants, located in the higher beds. Due to the relative youth of the Jurassic formation, these are quite scarce, but typically feature large, dry tunnels, often adorned with huge, muddy formations.

So what are the caves like?.....

The caves of the Franche-Comte are generally simple in plan, with a series of vertical Dales like pots feeding long, linear streamways. This is partly due to the geology and partly due to the relative youth of the Jurassic formations. The caves are commonly wet, muddy and well-decorated, often with large formations. Jurassic limestone can be thinly-bedded and brittle, so care should be taken when climbing or traversing. The weather is generally sunny, but punctuated by sudden and severe thunderstorms. This can create real problems, for the water tends to flash through the caves very quickly. Pitch heads should be rigged as far out of potential flood water as possible and long trips into streamways are best timed to avoid the late afternoons. The vast majority of caves in the Franche-Comte are prone to flooding of one degree or another, so it is best to take some food and survival kit on most trips. On the plus side, the water is likely to drop as fast as it rises, so a few hours wait will

normally allow for a safe exit. Choice of personal kit can also be difficult. Many of the dry caves can be very warm, requiring only the lightest of clothing. On the other hand, the wet caves often require full wetsuits.

Over 5000 caves have been mapped, the majority of which are horizontal systems. Approximately 100 caves exceed 1km, 50 exceed 2km, and no less than 15 exceed 5km in length. No very deep caves exist, but of the vertical systems, three exceed 300m in vertical range, and more than 50 exceed 100m. The region is equally famous for cave diving and includes some of the most extensive submerged networks in Europe.

Here is a short list of the sort of thing available.....

Reseau de la Verneau Traverse (Bief-Boussets to Baudin) – 9km long, 345m deep. One of the classic French through trips. Big stream, very flood-prone. 12 hour + trip. 4th longest cave in France (30km). In same class as PSM, Dent de Crolles, Diau, Felix Trombe i.e about as good as it gets. Includes pitches up and down and a 5m free-diveable sump (don't worry, can be bypassed).

Grotte de Chauveroché – 6 km to sump with lots of swimming (204 pools !!!). Then 6 km back out. Julian Walford, who found Claonaite and Pollballiny reckons it's the best stream cave he's ever done. A wet-suit trip. Another French classic. Hard.

Gouffre de Pourpeville – 9 km long. Entrance pitches drop into big well-decorated galleries.

La Borne Aux Cassots – 15 km horizontal cave with good formations. Combination lock. Part streamway, part big pretty stuff.

Gouffre de Granges-Mathieu – 25m pitch to bizarre gate (climb over) then lots of pretty passage to fantastically decorated final chamber.

Gouffre de la Baume St Anne – Basically a big 85m deep daylight shaft much like Alum Pot. Not much else (much like Alum Pot). The Dutch think it's fab.

Gouffre de Montaigu – Deepest cave in area. Impressive pitches.

Gouffre de Vauvougier – Sporting. Over 200 meters deep, its pits and meanders provide numerous surprises. No pretties or big passages though. 10 hr+ hard trips.

Baume de la Faviere - Basically Vertical to –229 metres

Caborne de Menouille – Through trip from Gouffre du Cernon possible – but very polluted. Vertical round trip possible from resurgence, including 60m shaft.

Gouffre du Mont Ratey – Superb cave. Beautiful and deep but very flood prone.

Grotte du Cul de Vau – 4 km long. Underground river. Lots of swimming.
... which should be enough to keep everyone going for a while.

Plus – **Via Ferrata** adjacent to Verneau resurgence.

Camping..... Le Domaine Le Chanet, 9 Rue du Chanet, 25290 Ornans, Doubs, Franche Comte, France.



Mr Clipstone has kindly carried out a reconnaissance of the site and informs us that the Domaine Le Chanet is the better of the two campsites in Ornans offering better shade than the newer site where

trees have yet to establish themselves. The site has been tried and tested by SWCC. There is a vast array of accommodation available from mobile homes to bunkhouses to camping pitches.

The next bit is very very important.....

THE SITE IS NOW ACCEPTING BOOKINGS ONLINE. BOOK EARLY TO AVOID DISSAPOINTMENT.

The url for the site is <http://www.lechanet.com/> . The swimming pool has had an upgrade by all accounts. This is a very tidy site with loads of amenities including 'Le Snack Bar' and of course La Piscine. Camping on the site gives you complimentary access to the Piscine Municipal which is a few hundred metres up the road.

I shall not be making a collective SWCC booking on behalf of the club this year as I have not been able to engage the site in e-mail discussion. I have myself booked one of the Chalets already through the site online booking system and I can report that it works perfectly fine. When we stayed on this site in 2005 we block booked pitches in and around 168 – 128 which are at the end of a cul de sac. It would be great if SWCC members seeking to camp next year could snaffle these pitches up as best we can and try to establish an SWCC enclave at the head of the cul-de-sac. You never know, after Brexit we may have to install border control outside of pitch 198 ! 😊

If members could keep me updated as to who has booked what that would be very helpful for keeping track of things. As well as regular updates by SWCC e-news I intend to use the SWCC 'Un-official' Facebook group and the Jura 2019 Facebook Group to keep everyone informed and joined up.

I'm a bit pushed for time tonight but I hope to get a second circular out soon with further information about teambuilding weekends and expedition objectives.

Any further questions answered free of charge on 07836 727131 or at 'gary@dorsetland.co.uk'

Gary Vaughan,

10th December 2018