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"...making your wedding a day you will never forget"

10upfront

After a quiet 2012, Stereophonics return with a brand new album. Similarly, after a quiet January Buzz returns with a brand new Kelly Jones interview, in which the first quote is him talking about wearing blackface

20film

This month I have been learning about 'social justice Tumblr', which in short is where the twin axes of political correctness and mental illness meet. Keiron Self's description of *Cloud Atlas* – Tom Hanks, Halle Berry etc "play various races, genders and even non-humans" – makes me excited/scared for the SJ community's reaction on its release

22food&drink

Getting a strong 'haves and have-nots' vibe off the respective recipes served up by Harry and Ruth this month. Reminiscent, to me, of slightly rosey 80s cartoon strip *Ivor Lott & Tony Broke*. In the hell of late capitalism that is 2013, are you an Ivor or a Tony?

30previews

Starting to wonder if, instead of having endless photos of presentable but frankly boring looking geezers on the clubs page, we should have groovy and hypnotic fractal graphics, y'know like you used to see when *The Chart Show* did its dance top 10

38reviews

I didn't have space to put everything I wanted in my review of the Welsh football book, so can I just add that although it's really good and all, the way it pays almost no attention to post-70s club football (e.g. not even mentioning Swansea being in the Prem) is a bit strange

44travel

If you are a Welsh person scheduled to be in Hong Kong on St David's Day, or know someone who fits this description, Rob McGovern has written a guide which caters to your every printable need

46sport

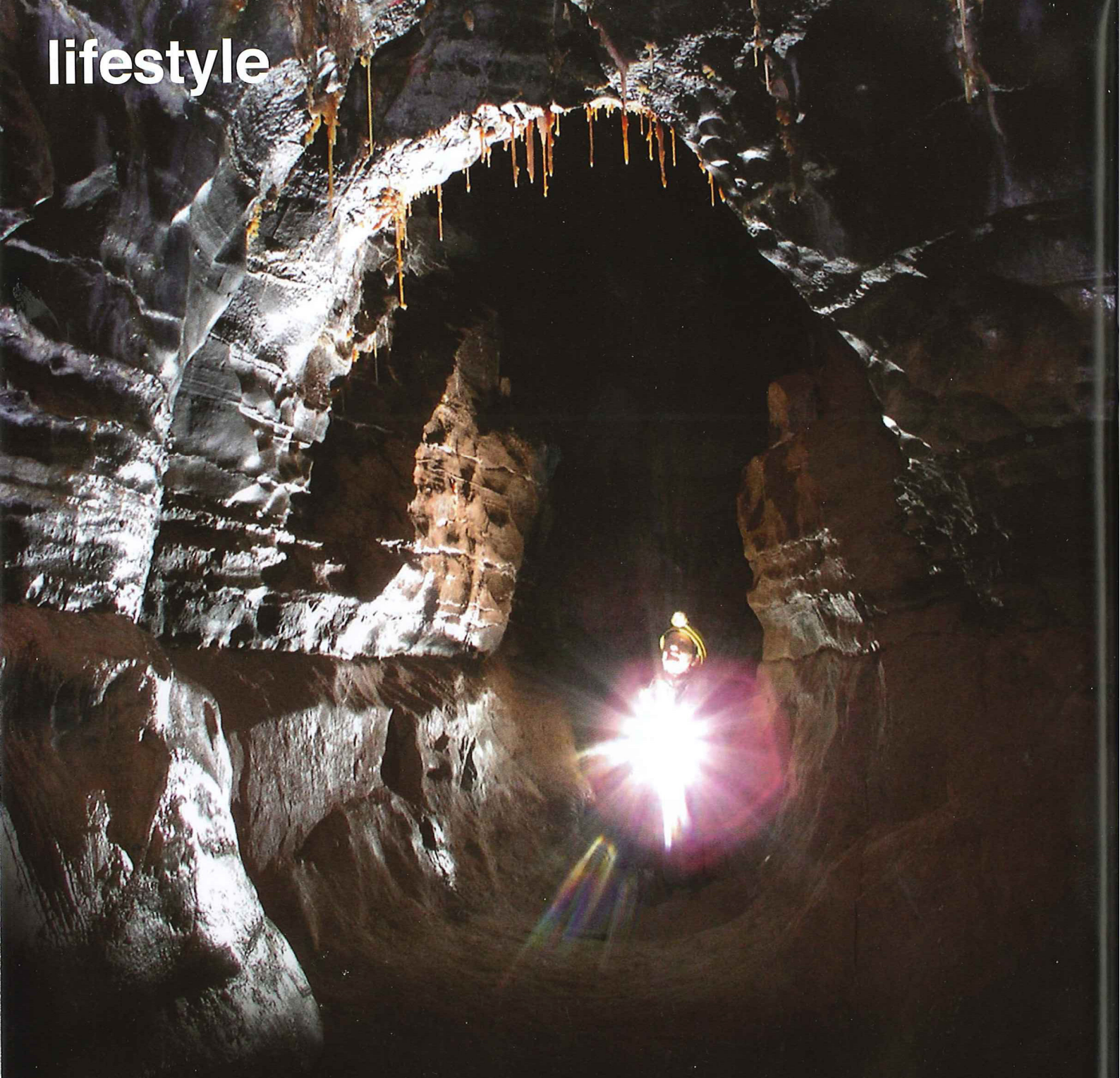
Trying to piece together a joke about someone confusing the South Wales Caving Club and Cardiff City FC, but maybe it's best kept on ice until May. In the meantime, read editor Gareth's account of his journey 308 metres towards the centre of the earth

49listings

I'm Really Excited About The Upcoming Abi & The Bomb Gigs In Dempseys, The Yard And The North Star

70competitions

Another 'free answer' to try and snare you into entering all our comps. Q. What was National Dance Company Wales' former name? A: Tom Gabel



THE WORLD BENEATH OUR FEET

Never afraid of a tight squeeze, **Gareth Ludkin** takes on the challenge of exploring one of the longest cave systems in the UK.

pic: PETER COLLINGS

Whilst it's hard to imagine quite what the world beneath our feet has to offer beyond mountains of mud and rock, South Wales actually holds some of the finest caving opportunities in the UK. Perfect for exploring a world of majestic caverns, winding river systems, beautiful rock formations and challenging traverses, caving has been popular in the area since the expansion of speleology (the scientific study of caves) in the mid-1930s. Today, the South Wales Caving Club offers fantastic opportunities for both loyal enthusiasts and adventurous new recruits to discover an entirely new world. Following an invitation from the club, I couldn't wait to find out exactly what caving had in store for me and a few friends. With 50km of beautifully formed passages, caverns and striking holes stretching unassumingly out under the hills of the upper Swansea valley, the Ogof Ffynnon Ddu cave system near Penwyllt is the third longest in the UK. At 308m in depth, it is also the deepest

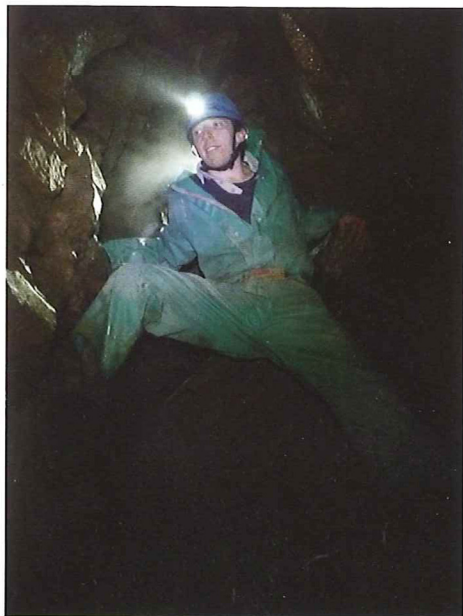
in the UK containing everything from waterfalls to rivers, lakes and huge caverns. The entrances to the cave system are all under the care of the South Wales Caving Club who have maintained, mapped, explored and looked after the cave system since establishing as a club in 1946 – the same year in which they first entered the cave.

Some 67 years on and the SWCC base camp, where our introduction to caving was to begin, is now made up of a string of old quarry workers' cottages; a hub for enthusiastic cavers with a passionate interest in the awe-inspiring cave system, its fascinating geology, and its ample opportunity for adventure. Our convivial guides for the day, Claire Vivian and Peter Collings-Wells, introduced themselves with a warm cup of tea and an explanation of what we could expect in the following four hours underground, and having roughly assessed our capability and enthusiasm for tight squeezes, a route was then planned.

Equipped with waterproofs, warm clothes, helmet and

all important head torch, we headed underground through a small, inconspicuous door in the hillside a few minutes' walk from the club's headquarters. Immediately plunged into darkness, we were unable to see our hands until the powerful beams of our head torches relieved us from the darkness to reveal the impressive first cavern just meters from the surface.

Initially unsteady on our feet, we were advised by Claire and Peter that it would take a little while to really discover our "cave feet" as we stumbled deeper into the cave over boulders and through small, naturally formed passageways. Described as an underground playground for adults, it soon became clear how true this was as we came across some impressive rock formations and challenging traverses over deep holes in the ground. Slithering down certain sections to then climb up others, we were challenged according to our ability and how far we wanted to push ourselves. For those less eager to crawl through confined spaces in the rock, there were also plenty of expansive caverns and



passages to marvel at which didn't require too much physicality or crawling on all fours.

Luckily, we all felt perfectly comfortable underground and the fact that we were many metres below tonnes of earth and rock was soon forgotten as we discovered exciting caverns and passages which were completely silent but for our echoing voices and stumbling boots. It was fantastic to sit in the dark and soak up the peace and quiet – there's surely nowhere quieter in the whole of South Wales. As Claire explained, the appeal of caving for many

comes in the great amount of variety that's on offer underground. "There's climbing, there's even swimming in places, traversing and walking. There's lots of variety, a lot that you can do, and finding your way around is a challenge. And of course, the team is a very important aspect to caving."

"I think people expect a bad experience or a grotty experience, but it doesn't have to be like that."

"I think people expect a bad experience or a grotty experience, but it doesn't have to be like that," adds Peter. "For sure there are places that you can make yourself do that, but there's lots of good honest clambering around, splashing along rivers. I'm amazed every time that these big chambers, waterfalls and rivers are all there underground all the time and it's just like you're stepping into another world. I come up here for the scenery and the camaraderie."

The camaraderie of the experience is certainly evident, and it's a lot of fun to help each other out, perhaps laugh a little when they get stuck or wet, and discover together some fantastic sights. Spending time with friends in the cottages afterwards, drinking in front of the fire or outside in the summer, away from internet, and away from any concerns of work or real life, seems a blissful image. As our confidence grew, we were able to challenge ourselves further with trickier climbs and tighter squeezes. The feeling of accomplishment was great, and covering ourselves in clay and mud was always worth it once we reached the other end. Swamped in the space of huge caverns, the natural history of the place is bewildering and it was fantastic to feel close to millions of years of history as it continues

to evolve.

The clay and mud of the cave's floor and walls are met with expansive and often beautiful calcite deposits. Stalactites, stalagmites and helictites also emerge from the, ceilings, floors and walls and the geology of the cave is fascinating to learn as Claire and Peter inform us of the structure of the cave and how the passages had been formed. After a few hours exploring, it was time to head back to the surface, and although backwards was by this point a concept I didn't quite understand, luckily for us, Claire and Peter didn't feel quite as disorientated as we did, leading us back without any problem. Emerging back into the light of day, we were hot, dirty, tired but thoroughly enthused. An eye-opening and truly awesome experience, it's stunning to be able to explore such a fantastic cave system so close to home.

"People are usually surprised that it is so big," says Claire once back at the cottages tucking into a slice of cake and a cup of tea after a much needed shower. "It's like a big adventure playground really, there's everything down there." All you need is a "sense of adventure and an open mind. You need to not mind getting your feet wet or dirty," adds Peter. A fantastic hands-on experience, caving is brilliant for anyone with even the most cursory taste for adventure or interest in geology. Cheap bunk accommodation is available for members and visiting clubs, and there's also a kitchen alongside changing room facilities and a social area for all members to relax in, socialise and rest after a long day underground. Welcome to new members, you don't have to be a seasoned cave enthusiast to join SWCC, and the club's provisional members' weekends offer the perfect opportunity to discover the best of what caving has to offer. To find out when the next provisional members' weekend is likely to take place, consult the clubs website. For an interactive virtual tour of the cave system, www.ogof.net offers a fantastic insight into what you're letting yourself in for. If you have any other queries about getting involved, contact the club directly.

Info: membership@swcc.org.uk / www.swcc.org.uk.

