

Course Report: GUE Cave 1, July 2010

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“Every trip involves two paths – the one taken, and the one travelled.”

When I took my open water course the goal was simple, learn how to visit an alien realm, see cool stuff and return safely. The obstacles to overcome then were developing basic skills to a safe standard and adapting to the aquatic environment. I remember a distinct feeling of claustrophobia as the neoprene compressed and I struggled to control my breathing through the oppressive demand valve. I was still at the surface...!

I now found myself some years later 18,000km away from home, floating in a river about to tackle a new diving course and realise a long held goal. I was about to embark on my first cave dive! Amazingly although the goalposts had changed shape and moved much closer together the objective and obstacles remained the same – visit an alien realm, see cool stuff, return safely. Having had some experience of dry caving in the UK and being exposed to pictures, videos and stories of cave diving, I already felt the lure of the environment.

Fortunately I was better prepared than I had been on my open water course, having spent the last two years building the dive skills required to make it to the kick off. It started with a GUE fundamentals “rec” pass and since then I had been improving the weak areas in my skill-set, motivated by the need to gain a “tech” pass in order to join cave training.

I flew into Toulouse from London on Saturday and met up with Jamie who would be interning on the course. We were staying at the Moulin de Lantouy just outside of Cajarc, a complex of rural gites in Dordogne – the heart of French cave diving country. This served as a fantastic base with great facilities, easy access to the caves and town, and a very peaceful setting for learning. Throughout the day we were joined by more students, six in all, split between two classes taught by Chris Le Maillot and Tom Karch. My team-mates would be Dusan (Dule) from Bosnia and Bert from the Netherlands. We would be with Chris, while Tom would have students from Belgium and Russia. After a brief meeting with Chris, preparations got underway for the rest of the week, as the schedule would be intense. Food supplies for the duration had to be obtained and kit had to be ready.



Sunday morning started at a leisurely 10.00am with Chris easing us into the week with the introductory lecture. This focused on the need for proper training, diving within the cave 1 limits, propulsion and communication techniques. The cave environment is very seductive, incredibly beautiful but potentially deadly. Chris left us with no doubt – although he would need to see a high level of skill and understanding from us, it was the environment that would ultimately demand it. The background reading I had done before the course, learning from the experiences of Sheck Exley, Martyn Farr and others had reinforced his comments and with Chris’ experience as an exploration diver and training council member our team was in a good position to learn.

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After lunch we headed out into the gardens to start our land drills and to take advantage of the fine weather; blue skies and 35 degrees. Chris talked through line protocol and then each of us had an opportunity to run the line and “tie in” to the mainline. It was here we first discovered that each new skill was never as easy as Chris managed to make it look! The numerous trees and obstacles made for a great route to test our blind line following ability.

With our initial line work completed and an overwhelming need to cool off, the swim test could not have been more welcome and we headed through the field to the river Cele. Even having practised the underwater swim, I still struggled with the lack of visibility in the river, which made it hard to control depth. Hopefully this would be a skill I would never require! The day ended with homework being set to keep us on our toes and final preparations being made to equipment for the next day.

Monday was another hot day and an 8.00am start, with the team excited to be heading off for our first cave dive. After a quick stop off at the boulangerie we arrived at Emergence du Ressel, one of the most famous caves in the area. The cave flows into the river Célé and the entrance is hidden just a few metres below the surface. You know when you’ve found the right place because the temperature drops from 21 to 12 degrees and the brown river water changes to very clear cave water. An early start is good here as the site gets busy and the heat intensifies as the day progresses. We assembled the gear and trekked down the steep slope to the riverside. Chris was concerned that maybe my jandals were not up to the job. They were sweet as!



Taking shelter under the shade of the trees we worked through all our equipment piece by piece, discussing the reasons behind everything before heading into the river. Once in the river the usual format was adopted, with each of us taking it in turns to be team captain. The first dive would be an open water shakedown with S-drill and valve drill practise at 3m. This should have gone far more smoothly and I was regretting not becoming familiar with my thicker undersuit prior to the course. Everything felt different and together with the borrowed tanks I was unable to comfortably ditch air from the drysuit. Reaching my left post was near impossible.

The second dive would be our first cave dive, with the plan being to tie off outside the cave and then use our reel to lay a line to the mainline, check out our comfort levels once in the overhead environment and perform the four propulsion techniques – flutter, modified flutter, frog, modified frog. It was fantastic and even though we hadn’t gone very far due to time spent installing the primary reel, everyone surfaced excited by what we had seen.

The third dive saw us enter a bit quicker, with the plan being to penetrate for either 10 minutes or on gas consumed after tying into the mainline. On the way out we all experienced primary light failures which the team had to deal with. Upon surfacing we debriefed and noted weaknesses in referencing the line, team position and general awareness. These would be areas for improvement throughout the week.

To finish the day with we did another open water dive, following a line course solo, first with a mask and then without. We then repeated the drill as a team, again with and without masks. Another run through S-drills and

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valve drills brought the session to a close. We had been in the water a long time and I can not imagine trying to do the course without a p-valve! Back at the ranch we ran through valve failures on land before calling it a day, although with more homework questions set.



Tuesday morning took us to Landenouse, a beautiful cave in the Lot Valley, with its entrance in a farmer's cistern. At this time of the year the water level is low and entrance is via ladder – but not before cooling off with a jump from the top. Our dives followed a common pattern; on the way into the cave we referenced the mainline and worked on our kicks, awareness and passive communication. Dives were usually turned on gas and then the fun started, with Chris throwing a mixture of light and valve failures at us, plus a bit of entanglement for good measure. After each dive we debriefed and Chris would ask questions - what we had seen, what were our pressures and times at different points of the dive, especially as the failures occurred. I could now see the

importance of having your skills squared away. The cave requires you to retain a high level of awareness and always be thinking about the team, equipment and environment. If you are task loaded by the basics you cannot maintain enough awareness.

We then had more S-drill and valve drill practice before heading home to practice the lost buddy drill on land. The thought of losing one of your team is a sobering one. The drill establishes a procedure for a search and how to recalculate your gas. Again we were left with no doubts - this is an incident you always want to prevent. Lectures finished the day off, with cave formation and accident analysis being covered. The evening was spent as usual, with the team finishing homework and discussing points from the day in order to improve for the next dive. This often led to late nights, especially as Dule, my Bosnian team-mate sometimes found it hard to understand what we were saying and follow Chris' lectures. His determination to succeed however was legendary and using recordings of lectures and some help from the team and friends back home we were able to negate this to some extent. I gained so much admiration for him and his dedication to cave diving.



Wednesday took us further away from base camp with an earlier start required. We had hit the sack at gone midnight and were leaving this morning at 6.45am. I was suffering from an illness picked up earlier in the week and having been unable to eat I was finding it harder to make the start line each day. Today I was on the edge of throwing in the towel, but I hadn't gone through so much effort and sacrifice to not get up again now. Fortunately the last couple of days had seen me feel better once in the water and in the cave, hopefully today would be the same. Maybe it was escaping the heat or the concentration needed in the cave, either way I was grateful.

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After filling tanks we arrived at Truffe. It was my kind of place – off the beaten track and with a kind of peacefulness that seemed to give a clue to its beauty. The entrance pool was shaded by trees and once through the small cave entrance the passage opened up and started to reveal amazing fluted passageways. The plan was to dive to the first sump before turning. Again the light and valve failures ensued the first dive did not go entirely to plan, but a breakdown in team communication meant that our team order was not correct. After a dressing down from Chris we re-organised and repeated the dive, this time correcting the mistakes and executing an out of gas exit towards the cave entrance with light failures.

After debrief we decided to move to Fontaine St George as other divers had arrived. This would be an open water session again, but whilst kitting up Bert's neck seal ripped apart ending diving for the day. We took the opportunity to refill the tanks and use the garden to carry out lost buddy and lost line drills. The lost line drill demonstrated well that it is not a position you want to find yourself in. We were led to different points blindfolded and then left to tie off and search for the line. Just tying off with thick gloves was a painful process and time consuming. It was enough for me to appreciate that you never want to lose the line – ever! A line protocols lecture ended the day with homework to finish off and more discussion.

Thursday took us back to Ressel. It was certainly a cave I was keen to see more of, especially as we wanted to get past the 'T' junction. The plan was to do four dives today to catch up from yesterday. Amazingly Bert had managed to get his drysuit neck seal replaced the night before as someone staying at the gite had all the necessary equipment. Top job!



The first dive would be a penetration to the T where we would each drop a cookie and head right into the deeper tunnel. As number 3 I had a great view of my team dropping down the large rock gallery in front of me, everything feeling quite normal and comfortable. We were cave diving. On the return we picked up the cookies and managed various failures making sure to slow our communication down and establish good positioning, with reference to the line and correct team order. Rotating team order we carried out more dives, negotiating the T to the left and taking the shallow tunnel. On this dive we simulated lost buddy, lost line procedures and blind out of gas exits.

As Ressel was offering the best conditions we returned on Friday for the final day. This was a chance to show what we had learned and how far we had progressed. There was also an opportunity to dive without failures just to prove that it does happen! Again after each dive Chris quizzed us on our referencing. We also did some more open water S-drills and valve drills and unconscious diver completed the session. Back at the gite it was final exam time before class debrief where Chris could review our performance and highlight areas to work on.

Overall the week was a big challenge, made more so by my less than ideal equipment and physical preparation. It really is important to be on top form for any GUE class, but I have certainly found cave 1 the most demanding so far. I was delighted to come away with a pass and more importantly the knowledge I gained to be able to dive within the cave environment. Just as after fundies, it is important to build on what I have learned, keep the skills fresh and increase my awareness. That means plenty of cave diving!